



## An American Social Psychologist (1934–2019)

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### Abstract

This brief essay is written to honor the memory of Edward E. Sampson, an American social psychologist. His work emphasized many things, among them that social inequalities and context and, language and action go together; metaphors and symbolic acts can extend the meaning of things. Various texts are produced, critical and discerning questions are raised (or not raised), and ongoing discourses enable (or suppress) certain remembrances and help to co-construct our social existence. Sometimes, language and action reveal contradictions and conflict. Decisions for good or ill must be made. The individual always participates in multiple and often contradictory systems. Systems, in turn, indwells personal reality.

**Keywords** Edward E. Sampson · Discourse · Forgetting · Interactions · Memory · Metaphor · Ongoing discourse · Redemption · Remembrance · Social existence

“...More than the mere reflection of a pre-discursive reality, texts and talk constitute a form of ongoing collective practice that operates in tandem with individual behaviour. Within discourse analysis, ‘talk’ is seen as ‘constitutive of the realities within which we live, rather than expressive of an earlier, discourse-independent reality.’

(Edward E. Sampson (1993, p.1221).

[Talk, and texts are] “...forms of intellectual dishonesty. [They are frequently displayed]...where cultural and ethical decisions are made... Academic [or intellectual] dishonesty presents ethical challenges for the disciplines of psychology and social psychology. Further challenges are implied for the teaching of pastoral psychology, where ontological judgments about human nature are inferred.

Edward E. Sampson & Archie Smith Jr. (2015).

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Ed was better the day I visited. He was somewhat more related than in the recent past, he might have known who I am, he responded to your names, I could occasionally understand what he was saying, and although soon he would start hallucinating I could see the connection between what I asked and how he responded. All in all, the visit still filled me with sorrow, but it was much better than the previous two or three months.

-Email to author, April 26, 2019.

Edward E. Sampson was influenced early in his career by Martin Buber, especially “*-I and Thou (1970)*”, by George Herbert Mead, and by Herbert Blumer’s brand of social interactionism. Social existence is remembered and known through metaphoric and social interactions, personal and private encounters. Sampson is here remembered and known as guide, best friend, and colleague. He made major contributions to the field of social psychology and beyond. He died the morning of April 30, 2019. We shall soon see how *remembrance* of his death can open doors.

I first meet Edward E. Sampson, social psychologist, in 1970. He taught in the Psychology Department at Brunel University, London, England 1969–1970. He had just been appointed as chair of the Sociology Department, Clark University, Worcester, Massachusetts. His task was to rebuild the sociology department, provide leadership, and continue to publish. He had just returned from teaching in London, England, and was a former member of the psychology Department at the University of California, Berkeley, (1960–1970), where he taught and was active with the Black Panther Party of Oakland.

I was the only Gentile, and the only Black Baptist clergy in a secular sociology department with about six faculty members. I was also a Ph.D student at Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, at the time. Chairperson Sampson became my best friend.

Sampson welcomed me to teach undergraduates in the Sociology Department and, supported me in my role as one of six deans at Clark University. We co-taught a course in the Family Medicine Department at the University of Massachusetts Medical school. He further supported my tenure process when I joined the graduate (Master’s and Ph.D) faculty at the Pacific School of Religion and the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California.

Sampson later served as a dean at the Wright Institute (a clinical psychology graduate school) in Berkeley (1982–1986), and later, at Saybrook University of San Francisco and California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. As before, he became and a respected faculty member of the Psychology and Social Sciences Department, at California State University in, Northridge (1986–1996). Sampson retired from Cal State, Northridge in 1996.

The four of us, Edward and his wife Marya and, I and my wife Geraldine spent vacations and weekend get-a-way time together in various parts of New England, London, England, and later in California. We also, spent much time around the dinner table, talking about scholarly endeavors and next steps,— over a period of close to 50 years. Edward Sampson provided excellent advice and was helpful in suggesting connecting chapters for my first book, *The Relational Self: Ethics and Therapy, from a Black Church Perspective (1982)*.

### **Selected books, journal articles, and book, chapters:**

Edward E. Sampson was a very private person and lived a life governed by ideals of justice and rational rules, productivity, integrity, and faithful living. He was also a prolific writer. His-books and other scholarly contributions (beyond the academy and classroom) included the

following: “Contemporary Problems and Social Psychology” (1964); *Social Psychology and Contemporary Society* (1971); *Ego at the Threshold: In Search of Man’s Freedom*, (1975); “Psychology and the American Ideal”, (1977); “Personality and the Location of Identity,” (1978); *Introducing Social Psychology* (1980); *Group Process for the Health Professions*, with Marya Marthas, (1981); “Cognitive Psychology as Ideology” (1981); *Justice and the Critique of Pure Psychology*, (1983); “Justice Ideology and Social Legitimation”, (1983); “The Decentralization of Identity: Toward a Revised Concept of Personal and Social Order,” (1985);

“The Debate on Individualism: Indigenous Psychologies of the Individual and Their Role in Personal and Societal Functioning” (1987); “The Challenge of Social Change for Psychology Globalization and Psychology’s Theory of the Person” (1989); “The Democratization of Psychology”, (1991); *Social Worlds/-Personal Lives: An Introduction to Social Psychology* (1991); “Identity Politics: Challenges to Psychology’s Understanding” (1993); *Celebrating the Other: A Dialogical Account of Human Nature*, (1993); “Justice and the Neutral State: A Postmodern, Feminist Critique of Lehning’s Account of Justice”, (1994); “Establishing Embodiment in Psychology” (1996); *Dealing with Differences: An Introduction to the Social Psychology of Prejudice* (1999); “Unconditional Kindness to Strangers: Human Sociality and the Foundation for an Ethical Psychology” (2003); ““Dialogic Partners and the Shaping of Social Reality: Implications for Good and Evil in Milgram’s Studies of Obedience.” (2015); “Contrasting Ethical Challenges,” with Archie Smith Jr.” (2015).

In 1997, rabbi, therapist, and professor Phil Cushman, along with many others, including Kenneth J. Gergen, gathered in Chicago at an American Psychological Association meeting to honor the many contributions that Sampson had already made across several disciplines.

## A memory

By 2013 or 2014, Marya was in a memory-loss, senior care facility. Sampson was home alone, and one day he fell. He had somehow cut off part of one of his ears in that fall. He was in trouble. I insisted that he go to a medical emergency room (Kaiser Permanente). He said, “No!” I did what I believe a friend should do. I took him anyway, stayed with him, talked to the doctors, made certain that his ear was sowed back on and that he had plenty of pain-killers, and then took him back home. I ignored his “No!” He thanked me afterwards.

Looking back, Sampson did the best that any of us could. He invested in people and highly valued his students. For example, one Sunday, after I had attended worship, I briefly stopped by my Sociology Department office to gather a few items. The university was “closed”- i.e. there were no classes or other activities on a Sunday, and no other faculty were around. I was surprised to find the door to Sampson’s office unlocked, and behind the door was Sampson meeting with a group of would-be sociology students. He was willing to meet with interested students any time. If actions speak louder than words, then Sampson was speaking loudly!

As a social psychologist, Sampson was keen to show how groups impact our social perceptions, interactions, and choices. He also knew that our understandings of the surrounding world can be enriched when we better appreciate how our relationships influence individual attitudes, perceptions, choices, and functioning. In these ways, certain doors were being opened and, ideals were being shaped by gender, ethnicity, social class, and different cultural groups, among other influences.

Sampson was able to show a connection between certain social inequalities, historical memories, social movements, and their products: discourse, texts, beliefs, and actions; the

current activities of individuals and society, and the emerging structures of social reality. His care was also shown in other deeds he performed.

## A dangerous memory

Sampson applied for a job somewhere in California and listed me as a reference. I received a call from a committee member who was following up on Sampson's references. I do not know for certain, but I believe that the caller was Black and male, like myself. He said, "You have been listed as one of the candidate's references. In your letter, you identified him as a minority. He is a White male!" I responded, He *is* a minority, and, as a Jewish person, he has had anti-Semitic experiences!" The caller rejected my emphasis on Sampson's minority status. I would not backdown. The caller hung- up. My colleague did not get the job. The felt rejection was unmistakable. It was as if I could hear certain words from a spiritual, "I was way down yonder by myself, and I couldn't hear nobody pray." I felt all alone. Sampson felt all alone, too.

What was going on, and what is on-going (i.e., continuous), in this 'discourse' or in this particular exchange? Was it metaphoric and symbolic (i.e. -pointing beyond that particular exchange)? On-going were certain forms of prejudicial thinking, cultural and intellectual dishonesty. What social realities were being carried and played out? We (Sampson and I) talked about this form of anti-Semitic aggression. Sampson wanted to know how 'discourse'—words, images, language, context, and information, helps to constitute small interactions. To use his own words, these are "...the realities within which we live, rather than expressive of an earlier, discourse-independent reality." "I believe this interview exchange was indeed constitutive of rudiments of larger co-constructed realities. If so, it helped carry forward even larger and more complex realities.

Would such small and larger co-constructed, complex (and, seemingly invisible) realities, be of interest to pastoral psychologists and theologians? They help shape human destiny. Certain ideals, discourses that help determine social existence, and values are among the on-going traces that Sampson leaves behind and wants us to pick-up and develop. Therefore, one way to re-member and honor him is to struggle with his ideals and values, and apply them in our time. Historical memory, remembrance and recollection, and particular context are important here. They can open doors and help constitute our shared and social existence.

Sampson and I experienced and talked about racism, anti-feminism and pro-feminism, and anti-Semitism. These reality expressions were often located in personal decisions, certain institutional power arrangements, language, and academic and religious ideologies. We talked about our experiences of these realities. I was pleasantly surprised when he read and quoted certain feminist theologians in his serious writings. He was willing to open doors and explore unfamiliar territories. The interview (described above) is haunting because, we (the interviewer and I) were unwilling and unable to explore something that was both familiar and unfamiliar. Such unwillingness and inability can limit thinking promote ignorance, destroy relationships, and contribute to closing doors by hanging up on complex conversations.

Typically, things are *far more complex* than they may at first appear! Maturity, patience, and wisdom are needed if justice is to be served in a changing world. Sampson and I needed to talk in order to better understand the discourses that predetermine and help co-construct our shared social reality. His interest in certain forms of oppression, the acting out of prejudice and identity politics, can be seen as redemptive and are reflected in his writings.

## Forgetting, Remembrance, and Redemption

I am remembering the sentiments expressed in Ecclesiastes 1:11:

The people of long ago are not remembered,  
nor will there be any remembrance  
of people yet to come  
by those who come after them. (NRSV)

I am also remembering the biblical Rachel,  
A voice is heard in Ramah,  
Lamentation and bitter weeping.  
Rachel is weeping for her children;  
she refuses to be comforted for her children,  
because they are no more. (Jer. 31:15 NRSV)

Haunting words! Rachael refused to be consoled because her children (and ideals) were no more. Edward E. Sampson lived in anamnesis solidarity with many, many others. We (you, the reader, and I) may now be in a similar situation in relation to him. How will his private and public sufferings be acknowledged? I believe he was about opening doors, pushing and exploring boundaries, and clarifying what persons ought to be about in their time. His activities were metaphoric, i.e., multi-layered and symbolic- pointing to meanings beyond specific concrete expressions. In this way, “*remembrance*” can be acts of wisdom and redemption. They can help to address certain inequalities, heal breaches, make streets safer, and make things better for other who are suffering. Therefore, what is remembered and how people respond matters. Sampson would often say to me, “We do not know what a thing or *web of events* means until they are responded to, interpreted and narrated, or ritualized over time.” So, we must ask, ‘What forces help to shape memory?’ We may also ask, ‘What gain is there in Edward. E. Sampson’s death if we remember nothing from his life?’

In September of 2014, in a private communication, I shared with Sampson a eulogy that I had written for someone else. Sampson responded: “Thanks for sharing your sensitive and meaningful eulogy. It rang true for me on many levels. The relational person you always are shone through the many ways you have of expressing your understandings of both life and death. The sting metaphor was especially helpful. Given what you have shared about family tensions and divisions, I wonder how this was received...”. “Thanks again- (and thanks also for last night’s dinner; it was greatly appreciated). E.” I share this now because it shows the kind of private, sensitive, and intuitive person I knew Sampson to be.

Sampson was a complex and deep thinker, prophetic (and sometimes annoying) maverick, and a kind, generous, and challenging colleague. He appreciated my status as an ordained Christian minister and pastoral care provider. I was fortunate to perform wedding and remembrance ceremonies for members of his family, and to make hospital calls (pastoral visits) on him; I also was fortunate to share Ph.D dissertation committee defenses with him. Sampson made a public statement at my 48th Ordination-to Christian Ministry celebration (May 17, 2011, McGee Ave. Baptist Church), “I am not a praying man,” he said, “but you came to hospital to visit with me- and you prayed with me after reading [selected and relevant] parts of the Psalms [psalms 90 and 23].”

On the morning of April 30, 2019, I lost a mighty good friend and spiritual ally. “What language shall I borrow to thank you, dearest friend”? (The words are from the hymn “O

Sacred Head Now Wounded.” Edward E. Sampson’s mother, his older brother, (psychologist Hal Sampson, PhD), and his wife, the late Rev. Marya Marthas, EdD, did not have funeral or memorial services. Six month’s after his death (to my knowledge), there has been no public memorial or “remembrance” service for Edward E. Sampson. Words from the Hebrew wisdom literature- continue to haunt me:

The people of long ago are not remembered,  
nor will there be any remembrance  
of people yet to come  
by those who come after them. (Eccles. 1:11, (NRSV))

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