

## Artist's Statement: Framing "Sample"

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The word "sample" has multiple meanings and connotations. In Dewey's words, "a sample" stands for typicality, for "one of a kind in general" (184). Yet he warns that much is lost through describing our ever-unique perceptual experiences in ways that sap their vitality and meaning *as* experiences. In this sense, to label anything a sample renders it a categorical token of a seemingly static normality. In a related vein, "sample" also refers to a representative subset of people—that is, a group of selected or enlisted persons who possess attributes of interest to the sampler, and who, when taken together, are considered statistically typical of that category, class or population. The political, marketing, and identity applications and implications of such "representative" sampling are well known, and it is not my purpose to detail them here.

Digital sampling across time, frequencies and micro-divisions of sonic waves and visual space has enabled the wholesale reproduction of formerly analogical creations such as music, films and photographs into easily stored and transmitted digital forms. Meanwhile, in this newly taken-for-granted context of information technology, "sampling" now commonly refers to the contemporary practice of digitally excerpting, appropriating, and re-inserting instrumental sequences, vocal performances, and sonic patterns from other songs and artists into a performer's own compositions. In many ways this practice resembles scholarly citation, although perhaps without the established conventions for crediting others' work. Even so, we may want to re-reflect scholarly citation itself as a form of sampling in the contemporary manner just described. We might see scholarly citation itself as a conscious attempt to place strange discourses and diverse world-indicative performances in close proximity with each other to create new meanings and experiences for readers and audience members. As an example, I sample APA style citation conventions in the script of this piece in order to perform and call attention to the "drive-by" citation pattern characterizing much social scientific inquiry. Indeed, every feature of this piece wants to be understood as samplings and manifestations of performative choices.

A "sample" also may be a small portion of a product or product line presented as a commercial enticement—the pieces of cheese and cookies offered to grocery store patrons, or an excerpt from a new novel or musical release available as a free download. What is the meaning of SAMPLE ironed on my T-shirt in this perfor-

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mance? Does it merely reproduce visually and thereby remind the viewer of the title of this performance? Does it label a commodity and/or state an imperative? SAMPLE labels me as a sample, but of whom? Or what? By proxy, does this sign encompass anybody on the planet, including viewers? Am I standing in as a sample of any one of us who might share characteristics with me? Human beings? Middle-aged persons? Males? Performers? Critics? Does the word perform an injunction or imperative to sample me, or to sample period? The world is your oyster; go sample whatever you desire. Does the shirt invite each member of the audience to recognize him- or herself as a (potential) sample, too? And if so, of what and for whom? Or is it merely a label on my T-shirt marking the shirt itself reflexively as a sample of itself? Will it now go viral on the Internet and then I will need to secure a reliable manufacturer and distributor of SAMPLE T-shirts? However fanciful my musings, in this instantly labeled, packaged and reproduced world, sampling always holds the potential for the commoditization of people and their experiences.

Finally, *Sample* might denote the italicized title of a section of a published empirical research report and thereby occasion an examination (like this one) of its possible meanings. In fact, most of the discourse performed in the second segment of this piece originally appeared under this very subheading.

This piece has several aspirations. I offer only a sample of them here in the interests of opening a conversation with audience members. Most work in social inquiry still privileges the written word and essay form in rendering its understandings and images of its participants. Although words also figure significantly in the present piece, "Sample" explores its words as embodied in storytelling with an interviewer; as performed in a mock convention presentation of empirical research; and as sung and musically accompanied by a guitar. As such, this piece invites audience members to experience the juxtaposition, crossing, and interpenetration of differently embodied discursive orientations toward representing other persons' lives and activities. As self-professed students of the human condition, we should further expand our repertoires for rendering other persons' lived experiences.

To accomplish this piece, I have sampled a poignant story from an interview with an older man and excerpts from an article addressing related issues in the *Journal of Gerontology*. I then sample from both in composing and performing a song about their interrelationships. My purposes are to juxtapose discourses and orchestrate dialogue—just as the older man selected from his experiences in telling his story and the author of the empirical research report sampled from an elderly population to serve his research goals. While there does not seem to be any trace of irony in the latter's reflections on his own sample, irony looms and grows as a synthetic figure in my piece, even as I attempt to observe restraint in parodying his discourse.

My song, "Sample," both challenges and draws upon reflective thought. The song depicts relationships among these discourses—their qualities, themes, tonalities, insights, knowledge claims, and versions of humanity. Both the older man's words and the article's words show up voiced by me as a way to actualize their subject matter through another human body. Each segment of the performance wants to speak

for itself in the presence of each other. I also explore the inherent musicality, the intonation and rhythms of these discourses through putting them to music. While music itself involves indefinite reference(s), music manifests as a tangible, sonic, often visceral, texture of communicative experience. How do non-linguistic voicings and refrains, such as the "oohs" here contribute to the meanings made? What happens to the words we use as scholars to describe our own inquiries or others' lives when they become lyrics to a song? How does music qualify the meanings of concepts rendered as lyrics? How, if at all, do you see your own or others' preoccupations performed in "Sample?" What does "Sample" lead you to recognize and potentially rethink in yourself and your scholarly and personal commitments? Composing the song "Sample" found me discovering and highlighting the rhythm and musicality of social scientific and critical writing. What happens when social scientific and scholarly discourses are sung?

Despite my observations above, I composed and perform "Sample" primarily as an invitation for audience members to experience their own reactions and draw their own conclusions about any aspects of the performance.

### Work Cited

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Perigee Books, 1980.



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