A Century of Margaret Mead

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Born in 1901, influential by 1928, engaged by public issues for the next fifty years, and a continuing focus of admiration and complaint since her death in 1978, Margaret Mead is a display board for the twentieth century. This paper analyzes Mead’s contributions and contradictions in her ethnographies and in her work on learning. Her first published papers critiqued intelligence tests for Italian children in the U.S., and she insisted always that the children of the world could learn a startling range of skills without suffering the pains of contemporary schooling. Mead had little good to say about American education, but she liked to think that we could get it right, and that school could turn out to be a sturdy foundation for trying on American culture.

She had known for half a year that she had cancer, but she came to help. So much of what is being remembered about her seems to have that theme: She came to help.

Dell Hymes

For the half century between 1928 and 1978, anyone coming of age in America had to deal with a world directly influenced by Margaret Mead. From the publication of *Coming of Age in Samoa* (at the near-coming-of-age age of 27 in her own life) to her death in 1978, Margaret Mead relentlessly pounded away at whatever she thought did not make sense in American culture. She traveled the world, living for months to years at a time in eight different cultures, always in search of cultural patterns that would put into high relief the arbitrariness of the life Americans considered natural and plain good sense. She was particularly incensed by the foolishness of American gender arrangements and child rearing. In the tradition of her teacher, Franz Boas, she was present in the fight against racism; and, in the long run, she would resist the arms race and the violation of our ecology. In none of these battles was she alone, nor always right-headed, but she was often predominant. In the early years, her writings made the difference; but, for the last twenty years of her life, she was a highly visible media event on the pages of *Redbook* and the talk shows of late night television. When anthropologist Robert Murphy was asked what he thought about Margaret Mead, he said it was difficult to have an opinion, for she was like the air we breathe.
America has not had a Margaret Mead for the past twenty-three years. James Boon says it directly: “There’ll never be another Mead.” She is an elder sorely missed. She was a moral force who gave direction and guidance to all, whether they wanted it or not. As she traveled through America, she asked her audiences to write down questions; and the hundreds of articles she did for Redbook offered the answers. Most questions required more information than she had available, but little deterred her from expressing an opinion. The following examples are Mead at her Redbook best, disrupting the common sense categories of middle class America:

**Are young people more realistic about love than their parents?**

“Young people today are typically the children of their parents. . . . Far too few people in these two generations have thought very intensely about the seriousness of taking responsibility for another person’s happiness or of the mutual responsibility of parents for the happiness of children.”

**Will men get over feeling threatened by women’s liberation?**

“It isn’t really a question of men’s ‘getting over it,’ but of men’s and women’s finding a new balance in their relationships.”

**In other cultures, are women valued for their appearance?**

“Why just women?”

**Should fathers share kitchen chores?**

“There is very little to be said for letting fathers ‘share the kitchen chores’ or, for that matter, do any work at home defined as chores. It is denigrating not only to the man who is asked to do them but also to the woman who defines homemaking tasks in this way.”

**Are you a cautious person or a risk taker?**

“Caution and risk-taking are not paired opposites.”

She was always in search of a new angle. Her popular writings taught a way of thinking. It is not enough to answer the questions given by our culture. It is necessary to reformulate the key terms of the culture. It is necessary to get a new place to stand, to get a fresh point of view, to get not just a solution to a problem but a way of erasing the problem from its place in the culture. Should men help out with kitchen chores? “No!” she said. No one should do chores. People should do serious work. Kitchen work is serious and should not be denigrated. Margaret Mead did things for a reason. In her wonderful memoir, Mead’s daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson, has a description of their nightly dinner ritual; everything in their kitchen was
done seriously, with a purpose, to get the best for the human relationships
at hand. Activities and values inherent in either the private, intimate
kitchen or the exposed, public lectern validated, informed, and made good
sense in terms of the other. She did serious work, not chores.

There are three roads to a new angle on issues of the day. First, look at
the world until it releases new patterns for analysis; some call this science,
others literature, but all agree it is a slow way to proceed. Second, for a
quicker pace that takes courage, make change, keep track of how the world
resists, and develop a new angle of vision along with the kicks in the shins.
Mead opted mostly for a third road to reformulating our shared world: She
crossed into other cultures, discovered the arbitrariness of our way of life,
and brought the news home. In Samoa, she found a different way of orga-

nizing adolescence; in New Guinea, different ways of organizing arrange-
ments among genders (three of them, at that); and, in Bali, different ways
of organizing one’s body. Between 1928 and 1942, she published eight
volumes reporting on life in eight cultures, and in each case she had the
same news: We do it this way, they do it that way, sometimes it seems they
have a better handle on life. In what Clifford Geertz calls the “Us/Not-us”
school of anthropology, from Jonathan Swift to Ruth Benedict and Mar-
grat Mead, “There confounds Here.” From Lilliput to Zuni or Samoa, “There
confounds Here. The Not-us (or Not-U.S.) unnerves the Us.”

By age 27, Margaret Mead was unnerving us. Her wisdom came quickly
and easily, and her conclusions were sometimes wild and without warrant.
She was a good fieldworker, not the best and, recent controversies aside,
certainly one anthropologists have felt free to ignore. She was a good
enough fieldworker to bring home important news. It is increasingly pop-
ular for commentators to make Mead look bad, and extensive quotation
from her work can make things worse. Still, there is much to be gained
from her work and especially from an examination of her life of trying.
Both the positive and negative literature on her work has exploded over the
past twenty years.

The United States that made Margaret Mead possible provided a lan-
guage of democracy, modernization, and science for self-reflection, each a
positive development, and each also an efficient cover for the country’s
aggressive capitalism and colonialism. In this paper, the term America refers
to a slightly larger level of analysis, covering not just the United States but
the America that was alive at its borders, gobbling up other cultures for
exploitation and explanation. The America that is now without Margaret
Mead includes, in various ways, the Samoa, New Guinea, and Bali she not
only brought home, but for which she found a market. In the years from
the Depression to the end of the Vietnam War, America needed a Margaret
Mead to locate what it could hardly imagine being. Her take on public
issues like adolescence and learning emerged from an effort to define
cultural differences that could circumscribe what was intrinsically American. Not only does her world of the middle half of the century no longer exist, it perhaps never existed in ways she presumed. Certainly, it should have never existed in the ways she presumed. As much as she fought for cultural relativity, she rarely doubted that American democracy—by which she meant also Western capitalism and science—was in practice the yardstick by which cultures might measure their progress. She helped to build that yardstick by defining its edges.

This paper offers an analysis of Mead’s contributions and contradictions in two sections, one on her ethnography, the other on her legacy applied to the problems of contemporary America, particularly her rarely noticed contributions to a theory of learning.

MARGARET MEAD, ANTHROPOLOGIST

It is difficult to imagine starting a career more dramatically than Margaret Mead. *Coming of Age in Samoa* was her first book, and it captured the popular imagination immediately with its account of a Samoa that allowed young girls more freedom and access to sexual experience than most Americans thought possible. This was not the first such news brought home by anthropologists, but Mead made life in Samoa appear so sensible, so emotionally soothing, it became, with reservations, a recommended way of life. The book was warmly greeted in academic circles. Franz Boas was the most influential anthropologist of the time; and he praised its dual contribution to anthropological theory, first for showing the influence of culture on what had been thought to be a universal, biologically induced, and socially suffered stage of life called adolescence, and second for showing so thoroughly the “personal side of the life of the individual” normally “eliminated” from anthropological treatments “of rigidly defined cultural forms.”

Two years after *Coming of Age*, Mead published a technical volume on *The Social Organization of Manu’a* from the same Samoan fieldwork, and a second volume designed for a popular audience, *Growing Up in New Guinea*, this time from her fieldwork with the Manus in the Admiralty Islands. The New Guinea volume received a negative review for its version of the kinship system; and, four years later, she answered the complaints with a more technical monograph on *Kinship in the Admiralty Islands*. In 1935, she published the still popular *Sex and Temperament* (in three cultures, but starring the Mountain Arapesh); and over the next fourteen years she added five volume length technical articles with the Arapesh data. This pattern of doing everything twice, once for the public and once for the academy, lasted for the first half of her career, but gradually gave way to a more total concern for the American public. Stephen Toulmin has fashioned a generous parallel:
For Margaret Mead, anthropology was thus what ethics had been for Aristotle: a field less for theorizing about abstract issues than for practical wisdom in dealing with concrete problems.\textsuperscript{15} She had to give answers. She had to have solutions.

Although attention to the public eye made her academic anthropology’s ambassador to the wider world, it also contributed to a declining place for her work within the discipline over the second half of her life; and she has not been essential reading for graduate students in anthropology for decades. Some of her preoccupations within the field did not help matters much. Her strong emphasis on the cultural patterning of mother-infant relations had her making large generalizations from tiny experiences among the tiniest of people. She thought nothing, for example, of explaining her own success with an account of her being a wanted and properly, on-demand, breast-fed baby. She even claimed that “the temporary advantages or political preponderance of one tribal group in a new nation over another, as in Nigeria or Indonesia, may be likewise attributable to the repercussions in early childhood of differences in historical experience.”\textsuperscript{16} Even a good idea can be pushed beyond usefulness; and, in a discipline of “real men” studying the “real stuff” of life in other cultures—kinship structures, power relations, and economic strategies—Margaret Mead became disparagingly known as a “diaperologist.”\textsuperscript{17} Attention to children was not the only problem. During WW II, she stretched anthropological good sense beyond its limits, even by national defense standards, by organizing projects on “studying cultures at a distance”; and many people in the world’s most powerful nations were made a little less by her stereotypes.\textsuperscript{18}

Strangely, Mead’s best fieldwork—in Bali, with a strong supporting team of husband and natural historian Gregory Bateson, artist Jane Belo, musician Colin McPhee, and some extraordinary European aficionados of Balinese culture\textsuperscript{19}—has been mostly ignored. Steven Lansing wrote recently that Bateson and Mead’s \textit{Balinese Character} was interesting but irrelevant, and that seems to summarize the book’s place in Balinese studies.\textsuperscript{20} Although a handful of the most prominent names in anthropology—Clifford Geertz, Hildred Geertz, James Boon, Fredrik Barth—have worked in Bali in the decades following, until recent criticism there has been surprisingly little discussion of \textit{Balinese Character}. Like a number of experimental ethnographies from the early 1940s, Bateson and Mead focused on the details of the personal and interactional order in search of the logic that guided relationships inside a culture. In most cases, what was won by detailed attention to the behavioral environments in which people lived their lives with each other has been overwhelmed by complaints about what was left out. The complaints are not completely unjustified, particularly for descriptions that moved too quickly from surface behavior to depth psychology for an expla-
nation of a national character. It is certainly true that an analytic focus on the orifices of the body as the key not just to child rearing, but the whole drama of people living with each other in Bali, can certainly look silly without a corresponding analysis of the politics of the family in the wider social structure. This is particularly true, warns Tessel Pollmann, in the context of a colonial police state with an explicit agenda of showing off a traditional Balinese culture devoid of political intrigue, of which, says Clifford Geertz, there was a great deal. Hildred Geertz (1994) is typical of modern anthropology’s impatience with a strong diaperological version of analyzing children to gain a prediction of what they will look like as adults:

Bateson and Mead . . . present a complex hypothetical model of the character of the Balinese, based on the premise that the people of every nation, ethnic group, or culture have common personality configurations due to commonalities in their early childhood experiences. This premise, popularly held among many still today, has been rejected by anthropologists since the 1960s.

When phrased in terms of psychological character gained early in life and maintained without circumstance and variation through adulthood, the theory is worth not taking too seriously. When phrased in terms of a patterned constancy in how people relate to each other, as a constancy newly experienced by youngsters and old timers alike across multiple settings, data from child training appears more interesting. Although Bateson and Mead sometimes wrote as if they were analyzing the behavior of toddlers only in search of the psychological roots of the next generation’s adult behavior, methodologically they were attempting much more: They were trying to describe the ongoing organization and maintenance of character types in terms of the behavior of many people within and across various scenes inside a frame they called culture.

So there is much to complain about, but much to admire as well. Balinese Character is written in two parts. The first is an essay by Mead describing Balinese culture primarily through the lens of child rearing. The second is a photographic tour de force by Bateson in which he delivers sequences of behavior for readers to share his impressions of the play of life in Bali. Bateson was an excellent photographer and natural historian. For every statement made about Bali, Bateson and Mead wanted pictures and ideally sequences of pictures best to make their point. An example should help us appreciate the method. Under the heading of “Stimulation and Frustration” (Plate 47), they offer us a sequence of nine photos of a mother and her toddler covering about two minutes of interaction. First, the mother brings the child into a stimulating interaction, then she lets her attention wander until the child gets refocused, then the two of them look out together into space. This is a particularly interesting sequence. Bateson and
Mead had a strong sense the Balinese often arranged ways to be together but unengaged, to be in each other’s presence but unavailable. Bateson and Mead called this “awayness.” Potentially, “awayness” is a messy category for analyzing a people’s behavior. From the ethnographer’s sense of how behavior might work to a written description of an attitude is an analytically treacherous road. Bateson and Mead limited the treachery by describing how the Balinese could teach each other to do “awayness” across a lifetime. They tried to display the behavioral shape of “awayness” in photos. The last photo captures “awayness” on the faces of the mother and child. The previous eight photos show how it is orchestrated by the participants. Just what “awayness” might be, how it connected to the rest of Balinese life, and how it should be interpreted, all that remains unsettled; but something has been described and must be attended to in future accounts of the society. That was their intention, and it is still worthwhile.

Bateson’s picture of Bali was built up behavior by behavior, scene by scene, and stood in marked contrast to Mead, who offered Bali in broad brush strokes. Her picture was easier to read and easier to attack; his was easier to ignore. Together they present a seldom acknowledged breakthrough in how to do ethnography and how to worry about its adequacy. Despite a focus on socialization to the exclusion of politics, economy, and colonization, Bateson and Mead delivered enough documentation that they should still have influence on debates about the nature of culture, learning, and behavior analysis more than a half century later.

After Bali, Mead’s focus on fieldwork gave way to a concern for public duty, initially in the war effort of the early 1940s and then in a more dispersed effort to straighten out everyone for the next thirty-five years. Ethnography, but for revisits to old sites, particularly to the Manus, gave way to policy, but anthropology was still her calling card. Whatever anthropologists had to say about Margaret Mead privately, and however much they said less as the decades passed, publicly, she spoke for the discipline. Even if they did not read her, anthropologists had to know her opinion. Dramatic to the end, she passed away during the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association. The drama was returned, and the Association dedicated an issue of its journal assessing her influence—the only person ever accorded the honor.

Mead’s legacy hit an unfortunate low in early 1983 with the announcement of a forthcoming volume on Margaret Mead and Samoa by Derek Freeman. The book claimed that Mead’s Samoan ethnography was terribly flawed by her own naiveté, her desire to find a paradise with great sexual freedom for all, including women, and her theoretical bias in favor of culture being more important than biology. Where Mead saw free love, Freeman counted rape; where Mead saw generosity and detachment, Freeman found jealousy and aggression; and where Mead saw cooperation,
Freeman found hierarchy and ambivalence. The book was announced on the front page of the *New York Times* weeks before it was available to reviewers, and Mead’s scholarly virtues were dragged through the mud, momentarily without redress, in the public press.\(^{34}\) A great debate ensued, and, while there is reason to thank Freeman for some correctives, anthropologists have been overwhelming in their support of Mead, her fieldwork, and even some of her overly enthusiastic conclusions.\(^{35}\) The Freeman volume was mean spirited and filled with its own biases.\(^{36}\) In addition, because Mead and Freeman worked mostly in quite different parts of Samoa (under the control of different colonial powers) and did so separated by at least fifteen years of intense social change, many of the comparisons revealed less about her work than would be implied by all the variants of Samoa being called Samoa.\(^{37}\) Perhaps most importantly, the restudy of Mead’s own Samoan village by Lowell Holmes has been overwhelmingly in Mead’s favor:

> Despite the greater possibilities for error in a pioneering scientific study, her tender age (twenty-three), and her inexperience, I find that the validity of her Samoan research is remarkably high. Differences between the findings of Mead and myself that cannot be attributed to cultural change are relatively minor. . . . I confirm Mead’s conclusion that it was undoubtedly easier to come of age in Samoa than in the United States in 1925.\(^{38}\)

*Coming of Age* is filled with details. When we are told about the children learning to work, we are given the content of the jobs, the materials used, and the expectations of all others on the scene. When we are told that young girls must learn to weave, we are told what they weave, with what materials, learned in what order, and with what eventual outcome. The young Mead delivered a picture of both the pleasures and the problems of growing up in Samoa. In a careful reading of the book, Richard Feinberg shows that she delivers two Samoas in her text, the Samoa of her conclusions and the Samoa of Freeman’s counter-conclusions, the Samoa of freedom and abandon and the Samoa of constraint and ambivalence.\(^{39}\) The news from the book was in fact the freedom and abandon, and so it was summarized, presented, and easily taken by the world. But as little as a cursory reading shows Mead displaying the constraints and the struggles with which Samoan adolescents had to deal.

As good as the details are for the careful reader, *Coming of Age* deserved much of its misreading. Mead insisted on it. In an Appendix to his magnum opus, Bronislaw Malinowski, with characteristic arrogance, warned that the ethnographer has no right to say “I don’t know” to any question about the people with whom the ethnographer has lived and worked.\(^{40}\) Strong words, an impossible recommendation and now terribly out of style, but good ethnographers, ever humble in the face of the complexity of the
people under study, must try to get as much detail as possible. Along with documenting everything they can ask about, ideally they should record their failures and then circumscribe their topic of focus with a statement about what they are not studying. At her worst, Mead tried to look as if she had all the detail anyone might want. *Coming of Age* is filled with a false, confident authority on many points of description:

And you will see that his eyes are always turned softly on the girl. Always he watches her and never does he miss a movement of her lips. (p. 96)

What would an ethnographer have to know to make such statements? “Always,” “never,” and “only” are difficult terms and should appear rarely in ethnographies of people engaged in complex activities like courting, not to mention more private acts. Nor did she shy away from ascribing motives:

Nine times out of ten her lover’s only motive is vanity. (p. 103)

Can we say she was likely nine times out of ten wrong? In a wise passage in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, Mead’s teacher and close friend, Ruth Benedict, noted that even if no Japanese behaved according to the principles she described, her conclusions could still be accurate; as long as it could be shown that the Japanese, in not behaving according to principle, nonetheless worried about the principles they were not following, Benedict’s description could stand. By this score, ethnographic certainty comes from inside the worries of a people and not from the predictive assurances of an outside observer. Assurance, not humility, was Mead’s trademark. When focused on details, her assurance pays off; when wildly concluding that people “always,” “never,” and “only” do one thing or another, her assurance leads to trouble.

By the same desire to generalize, Mead’s conclusions about the cultures she worked with were often overdrawn. Even her good friend, Edward Sapir, complained that she confused “the individual psychology of all members of society with the ‘as-if’ psychology of a few.” As she grew further from her fieldwork over the decades, this problem became worse; with hindsight, complex patterns became simple behaviors, ambivalent attitudes became simple desires, and random observations became the key to stating how people in another culture were so different from us. In an evaluation worth repeating, James Boon has noted that Mead “wrote incisively, yet repetitively, almost always in duplicate, and often all over again, whether soon after or years later.” As Mead grew further from the data, detail grew thin and conclusions conformed less with the lives of Samoan and New Guinea children and more with what Mead was trying to say to America. It is possible to complain that both Samoans
and Americans are unduly simplified in Mead’s comparisons. 49 For her work on America, as with her fieldwork in other cultures, we have reason both to praise her and critique her for new purposes. On both accounts, we have reason to miss Margaret Mead, anthropologist. In a recent Presidential Address to the American Anthropological Association, Annette Weiner reminded her colleagues: “Even today, at every association meeting, someone always declares how much Mead’s presence is missed, saying with passion, ‘if only Margaret were here, she would set things right!’.” 50

MARGARET MEAD, EDUCATOR

It is inviting to critique Margaret Mead. Much like the America she represented so fully and forcefully, she was often simultaneously on two sides of key issues, the right and the wrong side—and even the wrong and the wrong side. She spoke with authority in a country dominating and colonizing other parts of the world, and just by virtue of that position she made compromises that turned into political mischief in the lives of those for whom she claimed to speak. In an account of the sexism and racism latent in Mead’s writing, Louise Newman displays how much “opposition movements retain residues of that which they oppose.” 51 American sexism and racism are so tightly fitted to American colonialism, militarism, and economic domination, it is difficult for anyone speaking from within the system, never mind a Margaret Mead speaking for the system, to get clear about what is being opposed, when, in what circumstances, and with what effect. Whatever her accomplishments, we can always turn to Mead as a display board for the difficulty of using the materials of one’s own culture to fix the problems of that culture.

Gilliam and Foerstel have pointed to occasions when the residue of opposed prejudices swayed Mead’s activities from her stated positions, whether by commission, omission, or mere association. 52 The positives greatly outweigh the negatives, but the missteps are significant. Gilliam and Foerstel offer examples: Despite her commitment to the peoples of the Pacific and her public work against nuclear armaments, her long term engagement with national defense policy making kept her strangely silent on the use of Micronesia for nuclear testing; and despite her commitment against racism, her willingness to talk about a group of people sharing personality characteristics often had her sounding racist (as in her comments on Melanesians, whom she found bellicose and easy to despise, or African Americans, whom she found without self-esteem). 53 It is not hard to imagine how, in trying to do the right thing for the most people, she gets stuck in positions invidious to her own cause. In each case, she struck out for new ground, worried about how to fit her position to the institutional realities of the day, and
wound up back home, conceptually and politically having gone nowhere. Other women around Boas and Mead, for example, ethnographers Ruth Landes and Gene Weltfish and folklorist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston, found it less easy to compromise; and they had much harder lives.54 A comparison with the less fortunate careers of the women around her could be used to call into question Mead’s courage, but it might better highlight the treachery of the constraints facing women going against the grain and the difficulty of their communicating with the powers that were.

Mead’s position on gender is perhaps the clearest case of an advance reverting to a status quo. It is ironic she is attacked by Freeman for choosing culture over biology in her search for explanations of human behavior. Freeman is wrong twice: First, Boasians, Mead included, did not deny biology as much as they wanted to know “the exact conditions that biology imposed”,55 and second, of the Boasians, it is possibly Mead who stays closest to a deterministic biology—of the kind, for example, that keeps women essentially different from men. To the biological essentialism that has men and women acting as men and women simply because that is how they are, there is a politically necessary and usually right social constructivist corrective, namely, that the arrangement between the sexes is just that, an arrangement, an arbitrary and likely bad arrangement, with its only saving grace being that it can be rearranged. Mead took such a step, well, mostly, with *Sex and Temperament* in 1935. To the social constructivist essentialism that has men and women acting as men and women only because others have told them how to behave, there is a politically backward and mostly wrong corrective, namely, that men and women act as men and women simply because that is how they were born. Mead took such a step, again, well, a little, with *Male and Female* in 1949.56

Given males are restless, quest driven, and achievement motivated and woman more content, pliant, and care-giving, what would a useful arrangement between the sexes be; and is it possible some societies, Samoa, for example, and not America, play more satisfying and realistic tunes on nature’s keyboard of genders and temperaments? This had become, unfortunately, her question, and to answer it she had to make the conspicuous assumption that she knew the real characteristics of males and females. First comes biology, then culture; first core, then frills; this is the essentialist song.57 Throughout the world, people repress each other with accounts of biological gender as destiny; and it is crucial in escaping such foolishness to remember gender, once born into the world and wrapped in pink or blue, is mostly made up. Thank you, Margaret Mead, circa 1935. It is also crucial to remember that to say something is socially constructed is not to claim it is without constraints. Biological determinism and social construction are not paired opposites in scientific explanation. Gender, easy to say, is in every nuance socially constructed and made
consequential on a moment-to-moment basis by people in interaction; but this is not to say it is made up from thin air, as if according to whim. Thank you, but much less so, Margaret Mead, from 1949 on. Remembering biology counts does not have to drive a theory back to an inherent essentialism rooted in the drives of the individual person. Remembering that biology relentlessly presents problems for cultures to solve does not have to invite a view of individuals as slaves to motives established in phylogeny. Ever present biological issues—sexuality, procreation, the helplessness of infants—present part of what humans must deal with in organizing societies together, but biology is not well conceived as a determinant of individual behavior without a full accounting of the world in which the individual makes a life.

The America of Mead’s time was in need of an overhaul. Not long before Mead passed away, Eric Wolf identified the biases of her time as the “drive to democratize America.... to explain and justify the entry of new and previously unrepresented groups into the American scene and to adumbrate the outlines of a pluralistic and liberal America,” and all that without acknowledging, says Wolf, the economic and political power differentials that originally created the problems in the first place.\(^5\)\(^8\) It was a time to add nurture to nature and to celebrate human diversity as so many tunes played on the same piano. For Mead’s generation, intellectual and political advance required documenting enough diversity to shrink the role of nature in the explanation of behavior. Nature was assumed to be the stable core left after cultural layers were removed, as if from an onion. The Boasian program showed the human situation played out primarily in outer layers and not determined by a biological core. This was a worthy program and necessary still to each new generation’s struggle with genetic theories of intelligence, school achievement, sexual orientation, and whatever other cultural systems scientists claim to find a gene for every week. It remains an essential program, but it is not enough.\(^5\)\(^9\) Adding cultural diversity to presumably stable and natural forms does not go far enough.

Nature and nurture should not stand as conceptually opposed and only in the real world sometimes interactive. The dichotomy itself has to be challenged. The very existence of a category called human nature has to be challenged. The very category of natural never comes to us free of history, never free of the intentions of others. Just how the category of natural has been used by people pushing each other around must be examined for a record of political intrigue and a call for change.\(^6\)\(^0\) Mead came of age in an America excited about the question of variation in how people were naturally gendered, raced, coming of age, and ready to learn. That same America has delivered to the present a new set of questions about how people use ideas of what is naturally inherent to mark areas of life where there are inequalities and no means to negotiate them: By folk accounts of nature—yes, women are
less than men, Blacks are less than Whites, adolescents are virtually nuts, and everyone knows school is only for the best and brightest, and all this is naturally so. Mead’s accounts of diversity in how nature could be handled were a first freedom. Calling into question the whole platform for “naturalizing inequality” is an exciting next step.61

For Mead moving beyond nature and nurture to the details of life, we can turn to her seldom acknowledged work on learning. Mead did not write much about learning theory, at least not directly; but it would be easy to reshape her ethnographies into accounts of what the people studied and were learning from each other about how to behave, be it about adolescence in Samoa, gender among the Arapesh, awayness among the Balinese.62 Her version of the social actor, that is, the unit of analysis in her ethnographies, was in constant need of guidance from others. In her photographic study of growth and development among Balinese children, she states her theme well:

Cultural analysis of the child-rearing process consists in an attempt to identify those sequences in child-other behavior which carry the greatest communication weight and so are crucial for the development of each culturally regular character structure.63

She was trying to describe how Balinese children learn balanced and flexible whole-body postures, with dissociated hands and eyes that attend to side issues in interpersonal relations. She used hundreds of photographs to analyze the “sequences in child-other behavior” in which everyone learned from everyone the proper displays of “regular character.” If we were to translate all her work into an account of what everyone has to learn from everyone else, this quote shows how her cultural and interactive learning theory might be phrased. For any event in which learning seemed to occur, her question would focus on how many people, in what order, and by virtue of what levels of organization are involved in shaping the specifics of anyone’s learning.64 Among Samoans and the Manus, Mead did not yet know how to ask this question, although her descriptions can be used to fill in partial answers. In Bali, with Bateson’s help, she both asked the question and attempted an answer. Thereafter, she only pointed at the importance of the question.

She was almost always able to hold the line against an essentialist theory of intelligence and learning. In her master’s essay, she defended Italians against the implications drawn from their performance on IQ tests that they were of lower intelligence than people of Northern European extraction.65 In Samoa, she administered intelligence tests and noted mostly that Samoans seemed little interested in the tasks and performed with little variation across persons. Among the Manus, she found the children unimaginative, but smart, and noted that
Personality is a more powerful force . . . than is intelligence. . . . And it is this very manner of force, of assurance, which seems so heavily determined by the adult who fosters the child during its first seven or eight years. . . . The leading lines of the community represent the inheritance, not of blood, not of property, which is mostly dissipated at death, but of habits of dominance acquired in early childhood (Mead 1930; see also Mead 1932a on the cultural context of animism and the foolish lumping of children and primitives into the same psychological type).66

The biological inheritance of a natural intelligence was of no interest to the Manus and of mostly negative interest to Mead, particularly in the case of low IQ scores that, whether in New Guinea or the United States, whether in 1927 or 1978, “can be attributed to such a wide variety of factors that they do not have comparative significance.”67 Against a rampant essentialist theory of intelligence, she sought an alternative account of how learning was organized by a people building a culture together.

As we restate her theory, we can appreciate the ways it can be used. Then and now, it stands in contrast to the ways most Americans think about learning. It is particularly different from how learning has been institutionalized in American schools. Where Americans focus on learning as hierarchically organized from teacher to student, Mead focused on learning as laterally connected among people doing things together. Where Americans focus on learning as cognition stuck inside the head just in case the organism might have to do something, Mead focused on learning as habits developed in the context of social relations. She was early influenced by the Gestalt psychology of Kurt Lewin and later by the cross-cultural work on stages of identity development by Erik Erikson.68 But the main influence by far is the work of Gregory Bateson, natural historian, husband of a decade, and one-time, and almost only one time, co-author. Bateson’s main treatise on the systematics of human learning did not appear until 1972, but he wrote little in the thirty-five years before that was not about the organization of contexts for communication, in his terms, contexts for learning.69 For Bateson, there is little reason to distinguish communication and learning, and this is usually true for Mead as well. Learning is the on-going engagement with the details of life. As life moves on, so is learning relentlessly necessary.

The Bateson and Mead model of learning anticipates much of what is currently under debate in the ethnographic study of learning. Suppose that, instead of a model of the mind in isolation, we are in need of a theory of how children actually learn inside the complex institutions that carry their lives across multiple pathways into maturity. Most learning theories do not, indeed cannot, begin to address the issue of learning in the real world,
for they have both a theoretical and, more importantly, a methodological commitment to understanding not just the single child but the single child only when interfaced with tasks well defined in the psychological test. The real world, as psychologists like to say, is rough and messy, out of control really; and the psychologist’s well-defined task brings order, experimental control, and a corresponding set of constraints on interpretation. To the extent learning theories are based on the well-controlled experimental task, that is the extent their findings are irrelevant to what people do with the hard to define and constantly shifting tasks of everyday life, including, of course, everyday life in school. Bateson and Mead demanded much more than an account of the workings of heads in isolation from the world. They wanted instead a theory of how sequences of child-other behavior were arranged, made consequential, and fitted into more general patterns well structured across the institutions of society. We are still in need of such a focus.

In Bali, says Mead, “the child is fitted into a frame of behavior, of imputed speech, imputed thought and complex gesture, far beyond his skill or maturity.” The frame is much like a Vygotskian “zone of proximal development,” a fast action guide to the appropriately perplexed soul in search of pattern, in search of connections that enrich a person’s engagement with the world. The framing may be different for Balinese babies and American babies, but there is a frame nonetheless; and a description of the child learning requires a description of the framing work:

Where the American mother attempts to get the child to parrot simple courtesy phrases, the Balinese mother simply recites them, glibly, in the first person, and the child finally slips into speech, as into an old garment, worn before, but fitted on by another hand.

Words are the garments of the mind. They come to us close to fully formed, already patterned, well used by others, and available only with a heavy price of conformity. The road to maturity is well traveled; it takes us mostly to places where others have already been, places thick with connections, much like Mead’s prose, again and again, to what has already happened and will still happen. Mead could be so taken with patterning she could easily forget about the ingenuity it took for participants to squeeze into or out of the patterns even a little change. She was taken with the patterning, and she would often write as if, once socialized, the person is nothing more than an internalized pattern. Then she would flip-flop and give, first, the details of the behavior and the complexity of the persons involved and, second, the cultural pattern as if it described the behavior of socialized robots.

Mead’s theory of learning may be her most radical move, because it disallows an analytic separation between individual and culture, between nature and culture, and, most importantly, between those condemned by
the world and those doing the condemning. By her theory of learning, the units of analysis are engagements, sequences of engagement, and patterns of sequences of engagement. Left aside are theories of inherent intelligence and motivation free of the world in which they are played out; left aside also are theories that permanently fix a child’s learning trajectory in traits developed by early experience as if there were no world holding the trajectories together. Just as in her work on gender and adolescence, Mead could not always stick to her own insights, and she easily gave way to more established ideas about how a child’s career line could be decided by, say, an overly scheduled bottle feeding. But when she did stick close to behavioral detail, she had the theoretical material to undermine how Americans think of knowledge and its distribution.

This is a crucial issue in contemporary America, where we send our children to school not to learn to read and write but to read and write better than each other. The school test has become our measure of how each child is to move through the world. As our population is increasingly divided between the few who have and the many who do not, school failure is attributed earlier and more completely to those on the bottom. Underlying this trouble is a theory claiming that small differences among children at early ages are signs of their inherent potential. Mead knew how such a theory could be misused. If a country organizes for half of its citizens to get educated, precise tests can be constructed for the purpose, and they can be legitimated by a competition of all against all until the top half, or the top tenth, emerges as the rightful heirs to success. Individual performances on standardized tests with little relation to reality have become the cement that keeps American social structure in place. Mead knew better, and she struggled to develop a descriptive language that would analytically place each child in the push and pull of cultural forces that shaped their lives far more than the small differences that could be observed in the psychologist’s laboratory. She never did say what has to be said, but she could have: America is that well-organized place that arranges for individual children—about fifty percent of them—to be analytically isolated and institutionally condemned to failure in school and often in the rest of life; and this job is done by everyone in a series of engagements in which the cultural materials available to the participants are structured to allow a student to look good only at the expense of others.

CONCLUSION

When Margaret Mead started writing, her America needed redirection; and she went to what she thought were new worlds and brought back part of what was needed. Anthony Wallace described anthropology as the science of the “anecdotal veto,” and no one has lived up to the task better than
Mead. She could not have made up better stories to challenge American commonsense. She needed, of course, the help of the Samoans, the Manus, the Balinese, and others she found at the edges of an ever expanding America. With them, she developed counter examples to American beliefs on how people were naturally supposed to be.

Mead’s America was marked by an adolescence that made teenagers outsiders to their own society, and, to add craziness to a potentially difficult time of life, in ways orchestrated by that same society. To this mess, she could remind everyone that more emphasis on responsibility—for no one worked harder than Samoan children taking care of younger siblings—and less emphasis on repression just might net us young adults who could build a better society.

Mead’s America was marked by theories of learning that separated measured knowledge from intelligent activity in ways that gave those with access to schooling unfair advantage in every public arena. To this mess, she could show that all learning was a matter of alignment with others—everyone did it, and even those who appeared not to learn were in fact learning to look that way with the help of those around them.

Although this is a great deal to have delivered, Margaret Mead’s counter examples did not change her America. She could not have developed her examples without the American frame, not just in the sense America helped cast her net to distant shores, but in the more important sense her examples were developed explicitly to speak to Americans. As she took away, she also gave back; as she took away core American beliefs about adolescence and learning, she confirmed science and democracy as their frame without an acknowledgement of the even wider frame of capitalism and colonialism. At the same time she defined variation in how children grow up in different cultures, she generally failed to notice that her Samoa, her Bali, her America, or any other place in the twentieth century cannot be talked about without taking a systematic account of Western systems of signification that come with guns and money, certainly, and modes of self and presentation, perhaps just as certainly. Inside the American frame, she could challenge one category after another and make things more lively and up for discussion, but she never developed a critique of the American frame. She never developed a systematic critique of the capitalism and colonialism that supported her version of either anthropology or public service. We still have her work to do and then some. Perceived ideas of adolescence get worse. Adolescence gets longer, school performance is increasingly the only measure of the young person, and employment opportunities denied to the young poor are matched only by employment opportunities offered to educated adults to care for disenfranchised adolescents. Perceived ideas of learning fare even worse as our sense of how to measure knowledge and intelligence has been narrowed to fit the heightened competition that
allows children of plenty to continue to lord over the rest. Margaret Mead would be terribly disappointed. The problems were more difficult to solve than she had thought. As we get on with her work, we can appreciate that she always brought a great deal for us to work with and reapply. She always came to help. No wonder we miss her.

This paper exists because Denis Philips asked me to teach a short seminar on Mead to the Continuing Studies Program at Stanford in 1993. Paula Fleisher helped to teach the class. Richard Blot and Robert McDermott encouraged a write-up. Bernadine Barr, Eric Bredo, Shelley Goldman, Meghan McDermott, Mica Pollock, and two seminar groups at Stanford asked for changes in early drafts. If there is anything wrong with the paper, it is their fault.

Notes

1 “To the Memory of Margaret Mead,” in Children in and out of School, ed. Perry Gilmore and Alan Glatthorn (Washington, D. C., 1982). Gilmore used “She Came to Help” as the title for her paper on Margaret Mead at American Anthropological Association Meetings, 1990.
2 Margaret Mead, Coming of Age in Samoa (New York, 1928).
3 Murphy, The Body Silent (New York, 1987).
6 With a Daughter’s Eye (New York, 1984).
7 Geertz, Works and Lives (Stanford, 1987).
8 Deborah Gewertz followed Mead onto the Sepik over forty years later, and she called Mead and Reo Fortune (Mead’s second husband) “masters of ethnography;” see her Sepik River Societies (New Haven, 1983). Although there were only a few attacks on her work before she passed away, Mead nonetheless spent her last decade reminding everyone of the value of her fieldwork; see especially, “The Evocation of Psychologically Relevant Responses in Ethnological Fieldwork,” in the Making of Psychological Anthropology (New York, 1978); and also “Towards a Human Science,” Science 191 (1976): 903–909; Letters from the Field, 1925–1975 (New York, 1977); “The Sepik as a Cultural Area,” Anthropological Quarterly 51 (1978): 69–75.
9 The role of America in Mead’s theory and rhetoric is discussed brilliantly in Hervé Varenne, “Introduction: America according to Margaret Mead,” in Margaret Mead, And Keep Your Powder Dry (New York, 2000).
10 In 1919, Elsie Clews Parsons taught a course at the New School on Sex in Ethnology. Ruth Benedict was in that course, and a few years later Mead was in Benedict’s course. Parsons’ book on The Family (New York, 1906) used ethnographic data to argue for a reorganization of premarital sexual arrangements. The topic and mode of presentation were in the air; see Louise Lamphere, “Feminist Anthropology: The Legacy of Elsie Clews Parsons,” American Ethnologist 16 (1989): 518–533.
11 Franz Boas, “Forward,” in Coming of Age.
12 Social Organization of Manu’a (Honolulu, 1930); Growing Up in New Guinea (New York, 1930).
13 Kinship in the Admiralty Islands (New York, 1932).
14 All appeared in the Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History.


17 A history of the issues and the times is available in Philip Bock, Psychological Anthropology (San Francisco, 1982) and Spindler, The Making of Psychological Anthropology. An example of Mead at diaper wild is her 1951 film, Bathing Babies in Three Cultures, in which Balinese, American, and New Guinea cultures are defined by small differences in how mothers in the three cultures handle their baby’s bath. The bathing scenes do not deliver the differences Mead points to, and her conclusions feel forced. This is unfortunate, because interaction rituals are a great starting point for cultural analysis. Ironically, a good example is the still photograph analyses Bateson and Mead produced with Balinese materials, discussed below.

18 Studying Cultures at a Distance, ed. Margaret Mead and Rhoda Metraux (Chicago, 1953).

19 Bateson and Mead, Balinese Character: A Photographic Analysis (New York, 1942); for a sample of the team’s work, see Jane Belo, Traditional Balinese Culture (New York, 1970). Along with Miguel Covarrubias, The Island of Bali (New York 1936,1986), Beryl de Zoete and Walter Spies, Dance and Drama in Bali (New York, 1938) and Colin McPhee, A House in Bali (New Haven, 1947), the books make Bali in the 1930s a classic field site. For intercultural intrigue, intellectual verve, and international politics, the group is worth a study. Mead’s own accounts in her autobiography, Blackberry Winter (New York, 1972), and Letters are interesting, but not as juicy as the stories in Jane Howard’s biography, Margaret Mead: A Life (New York, 1984) or the biting exposé by Tessel Pollman, “Margaret Mead’s Balinese,” Indonesia 49 (1990): 1–36.


21 Mead liked to stereotype members of a group with a partial account of their character and its hardships. In James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, A Rap on Race (New York, 1971), she picked on the Irish, because they get angry when “they’re in love. It was one of the things that I used to watch with my child when we shared a household with a family where the wife was Irish…. So my daughter was beginning to learn that anger and love are the same thing, which she wasn’t supposed to learn, because she wasn’t Irish, after all.” Oliver Cromwell could not have had a better reason to rid the earth of the Irish.


23 Hildred Geertz, Images of Power: Balinese Painting Made for Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead (Honolulu, 1994).

24 For the demanding position that the past lives on in the present not because it is determining, but because it is behaviorally recreated ad nauseam in present circumstances, nothing is stronger than Gregory Bateson’s paper on “Communication,” in Natural History of an Interview, ed. Norman McQuown (Chicago, 1971).

25 For a celebration of Bateson’s photography, see Dianne Hagaman, “Connecting Cultures; Balinese Character and the Computer,” in Cultures of Computing, ed. Susan L. Star (London, 1995); for a heated disagreement on how to work with cameras, see Bateson and Mead, “For God’s Sake, Margaret,” Co-Evolutionary Quarterly 10 (1976): 32–44. For a restudy of their careful photographic work, see Gerald Sullivan, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and Highland Bali: Fieldwork Photographs of Bayung Gedé (Chicago, 1999).

26 While Bateson and Mead were working on “awayness” among the Balinese, in Finnegans Wake (New York, 1939), James Joyce coined the term “attenshun” to cover his experience among the Irish. Bateson’s ideas on the push and pull of awayness or attenshun, what he called “schizmogenesis,” were taken from his reading of Samuel Butler, The Way of All Flesh (London, 1904).

27 In a pair of books, an American psychiatrist and a Balinese mental health worker have critized Bateson and Mead’s description of “awayness” and other personality traits. They believe
national character traits to be ethnographically interesting, but think Bateson and Mead failed to capture the Balinese from inside; see Gordon Jensen and Luh Kedut Suryani, The Balinese People (London, 1992) and Suryani and Jensen, Trance and Possession in Bali (London, 1992). Bateson and Mead’s generalizations, particularly those relating Balinese character to schizophrenia, left critics much to point to, but the depth of their observations remain unparalleled.

28 Geertz, Works and Lives, rejects Mead’s “culture-and-personality speculations” in Balinese Character, but reports that they do not “seem to detract very much from the cogency of her observations, unmatched by any of the rest of us, concerning what the Balinese are like.” To this high praise, he adds that, though Mead believed Bateson’s photographs “demonstrated her arguments, hardly anyone, including Bateson, much agreed with her.” Bateson’s half of the book had little influence on the study of Bali or on anthropology in general, but was a major influence on the development of behavior analysis.

29 Balinese Character is one of two landmark books for the study of body movement as communication as practiced by Ray Birdwhistell, Kinesics and Context (Philadelphia, 1970), and Adam Kendon, Conducting Interaction (New York, 1990). The second landmark is by another student of Boas, David Efron, Gesture and Environment (New York, 1941), on the gestural world of Jewish and Italian immigrants to New York City. After her rich experience with film in Bali, Mead would often write as if it were simple to record, “scientifically,” the behavioral patterns of a people. She sometimes knew the difference between a good description and a set of pictures; see, for example, Margaret Mead and Paul Byers, The Small Conference (The Hague, 1968).

30 James Boon is more willing to celebrate the methodological importance of Bateson and Mead: their “extraordinary field methods (involving photographs, filming, and several varieties of simultaneous writing) deserve a study in their own right;” see his “Between-the-Wars Bali,” in History of Anthropology 4 (1986): 218–247.


33 Derek Freeman, Margaret Mead and Samoa (Cambridge, 1983).

34 The next year, biographies by Howard, Margaret Mead, and Bateson, With a Daughter’s Eye, revealed some of the details of Mead’s sex life, including affairs with Edward Sapir and Ruth Benedict. It is nice no one seemed to care about the revelations, and it is even nicer to think Mead’s work on sexual mores in different cultures was in part responsible for the shift in sensitivities. Imagine! Margaret Mead’s fieldwork methods were more important to newspapers than her sex life. The Benedict-Mead relationship now has its own study: Hilary Lapsley, Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict: The Kinship of Women (Amherst, 1999).

35 For a quick response from six Pacific specialists, see Ivan Brady, ed. “Speaking in the Name of the Real,” American Anthropologist 85 (1983): 908–47. A later collection by Leonora Foerstel and Angela Gilliam, Confronting the Margaret Mead Legacy (Philadelphia, 1992) is more critical, as is the volume written by the Samoan Chief Malopa’upo Isaia, Coming of Age in American Anthropology: Margaret Mead and Paradise (1999). A insightful critique of the Boasians, including the early work of Margaret Mead, is the important testament to long term fieldwork by Paul Radin, The Method and Theory of Ethnology (New York1933, 1987); he accuses Mead’s ethnography of “a pretentious impressionism, and a counsel of perfection.”

36 Freeman’s self-involvement in writing the book is revealed by the title of the second edition, Margaret Mead and the Heretic (London, 1995). Recently, he has further documented his complaints on Mead in The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A Historical Analysis of her Samoan Research (Boulder, 1998). Freeman has now spent about as many years critiquing Mead in Samoa as she spent weeks in the field, and she is still more convincing. Even if Freeman is right about Mead being the victim of a hoax, there is still no reason to accept the naïve realism of his biological arguments.
A previous great controversy in anthropology, between Robert Redfield and Oscar Lewis on Tepoztlán, was mined by a next generation for accounts of how divergent methods generate divergent results. Lewis was more interesting than Freeman, but the terms of his debate with Redfield are echoed by Freeman’s attack on Mead. Read Lewis in a letter to Redfield (11 June 1948) and experience how Freeman might write to Mead: “Much of the unity and bonds of family life in Tepoztlán flow from what might be called negative factors rather than positive ones. . . . It would be missing many of the crucial aspects of Tepoztlán not to see the great amount of internal tensions and conflict that exist, as well as frustrations and maladjustments. . . . The idea that folk cultures produce less frustrations than non-folk cultures or that the quality of human relationships is necessarily superior in folk-cultures seems to me to be sheer Rousseauian romanticism.” A subsequent letter (13 May 1954), in response to a paper by Redfield, gives a more complete Tepoztlán: It “made me keenly aware of the shortcomings in my version of Tepoztlán with its accentuation of the negative aspects of life. It is true that I had often thought of how far ‘we’ had come compared to Tepoztlán, especially in terms of the potential of our civilization. But I was never really satisfied that I had conveyed the ‘wholeness’ of Tepoztlán life and you have put into words and thoughts more beautiful than I had ever conceived the very aspects of peasant life that I had left out. In my next community study, if I should ever do another, I must strive for the ‘good and the bad’ as you have put it.” Both letters appear in Susan Rigdon, *The Culture Facade: Art, Science, and Politics in the Work of Oscar Lewis* (Urbana, 1988). Lewis’ next fieldwork stayed tuned to the hard side of life, but rarely seemed as crass as Freeman.


What counts as sex in Samoa has been a recent point of controversy, as if the Freeman-Mead debate were nothing more than an American Presidential scandal; see Nicole Grant, “From Margaret Mead’s Field Notes: What Counted as Sex in Samoa?” *American Anthropologist* 97 (1995): 678–82; and Paul Shankman, “The History of Samoan Sexual Conduct and the Mead-Freeman Controversy,” *American Anthropologist* 98 (1996): 555–567.

On Mead and Freeman not giving readers the detail to evaluate who is wrong or right, see Martin Orans, *Not Even Wrong: Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman, and the Samoans* (Novato, CA, 1996).


It is not the ethnographer’s job to predict how people will behave, for they are always too complex for that. The alternative is to predict when people might be surprised at each other; see Charles Frake, *Language and Cultural Description* (Stanford, 1980).

Critical literature on Mead has moved beyond Samoa. Freeman’s attack was followed by the complaints discussed above about her Balinese effort. The same year delivered Foerstel and Gilliam’s *Confronting*, with complaints by the grandchildren of her New Guinea informants, some of them anthropologists, on how much she was a part of the America that has constrained their lives unfairly.

Sapir, *The Psychology of Culture* (The Hague, 1994), corrects Mead’s enthusiasm: “The presumptive or ‘as if’ psychological character of a culture is highly determinative, no doubt, of much in the externalized system of attitudes and habits which forms the visible personality of an individual. It does not follow, however, that strictly social determinants, tending, as they
do to give visible form and meaning, in a cultural sense, to each of the thousands of modalities of experience which sum up the personality, can define the fundamental structure of such a personality.”

47 Boon, Affinities, once again, and again, “all right always already.”

48 Victor Barnouw noted that “Mead had an unfortunate tendency, of which Freeman takes advantage, to make stronger and broader assertions in later publications than she did in her original study.” Samoans are more uniformly peaceful and non-competitive in her latter-day summaries than in the early ethnography. See his “Coming to Print on Samoa,” Journal of Psychoanalytic Anthropology 6 (1983): 425–433.

49 George E. Marcus and Michael M.J. Fischer, Anthropology and Cultural Critique (Chicago, 1986).


52 Gilliam, “Margaret Mead’s Contradictory Legacy,” in Foerstel and Gilliam, Confronting.

53 Foerstel and Gilliam, Confronting. Gilliam says Betty Lou Valentine said Mead said, at a talk in the early 1960s, that African Americans have low self-esteem. The idea was in the air in liberal circles, although it left obscure why there was so little self-esteem to go around and why white liberals seemed to acquire so much of it. See, for example, Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, The Mark of Oppression (New York, 1951), on the effects of poverty on the psychic life of African Americans. At the same time, Martin Deutsch, The Disadvantaged Child (New York, 1967), was writing essays about “cultural deprivation” as the reason for black children not doing well in school, and Oscar Lewis, Anthropological Essays (New York, 1970), was pointing to “a culture of poverty” to explain the psychic life of poverty across generations. For a critique, see Charles Valentine, Culture and Poverty (Chicago, 1968) and Mead’s unfortunate response in Current Anthropology 10 (1969).

54 For an account of Landes’s harsh life in anthropology, see George Park and Alice Park, “Ruth Schlossberg Landes,” in Women Anthropologists, ed. U. Gacs, A. Khan, J. McIntyre, and R. Weinberg (Urbana, IL, 1989). Weltfish’s life was only a little less difficult; see Ruth Pathé, “Gene Weltfish,” in Women Anthropologists, and Juliet Niehaus, “Education and Democracy in the Anthropology of Gene Weltfish,” in Foundations of the Anthropology of Education, ed. Juliet Niehaus, Richard Blot, and Richard Schmerzing (in press). Hurston’s story is as complex as her talent was extraordinary. It is now popular to praise Hurston by pointing to how Boas and Mead, by their style of work and their personally not lending a hand, suppressed her talent. Some of the critiques go beyond the facts. Hurston should be praised, but no more so than either Boas or Mead. Together, their strong points offer a three-part impulse for reorganizing America. For one discussion, see Deborah Gordon, “The Politics of Ethnographic Authority: Race and Writing in the Ethnography of Margaret Mead and Zora Neale Hurston,” in Modernist Anthropology (Princeton, 1992).


56 Mead, Male and Female (New York, 1949).

57 Mead grew up surrounded by a public discussion of the rewards and dangers of co-education; for a masterful overview of the issue, see David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot, Learning Together: A History of Coeducation in American Schools (Cambridge, MA, 1990). Only a glance at psychologist G. Stanley Hall’s ideas on the potentials of women would have kept Mead firmly opposed to the biologically phrased essentialism of the time. Her slip back to an essentialism was subtle, more the move of a person who had not given up on nature as an explanation of individual behavior than the move of a person who thought there were things that women could not do if they had to.

59 That nature and culture are contexts for each other and not an appropriate contrast set was available to Margaret Mead in John Dewey, Art as Experience (New York, 1934): “the true antithesis of nature is not art [read: culture] but arbitrary conceit, fantasy, and stereotyped convention.” For Dewey, nature and culture are to be studied together as the setting for “relationships that determine the course of life.” Mead shared a campus and milieu with Dewey for decades, but with little direct influence. Their ideas are compatible, and it is hard to believe Mead would not have read, as Benedict did, Human Nature and Conduct (New York, 1922); Howard, Margaret Mead, reports that Mead carried the book with her, and Sullivan, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, articulates Mead’s account of “character” in Bali with a passage from Dewey. Lawrence Cremin, The Genius of American Education (New York, 1965), placed Dewey and Mead on alternate pages of a work on educational theory in the U.S., and Eric Wolf, “American Anthropology,” used them as twin icons of liberal reform. Virginia Yans-McLaughlin says students of Boas were encouraged to read Dewey, but textual ties seem weak; see “Science, Democracy, and Ethics,” History of Anthropology 4 (1986): 184–217. At a memorial for Dewey in 1952, the philosopher John Herman Randall told a story about Mead reading philosophy:

A few years ago, when Russell’s Human Knowledge had just come out, I had a phone call. “This is Margaret Mead. I am reading Russell’s book, and I wonder whether you could tell me briefly just what is the difference between Russell and Dewey.” We poor professors all get calls like that. But Margaret Mead is an intelligent girl—though she puts too much faith in improved diapers for my taste—so I made the attempt to answer her.

His answer might have been to Mead’s liking: Dewey’s contribution was to work out “the implications of taking ‘experience’ as primarily the social experience of human communities. This makes ‘experience’ all that the anthropologist includes as belonging to human ‘culture.’” See “John Dewey, 1859–1952,” Journal of Philosophy 50 (1953): 5–13. Bertrand Russell might have been required reading in Mead’s relationship with Gregory Bateson who was using Russell’s theory of logical types in his work on double binds and schizophrenia. For an account of the differences between Russell and Dewey, see Tom Burke, Dewey’s New Logic (University of Chicago, 1994). On the importance of culture in pragmatism, see John J. McDermott, The Culture of Experience (New York, 1976) and Stream of Experience (Amherst, 1986); R. W. Sleeper, The Necessity of Pragmatism (New Haven, 1986); and J. J. Stuhr, ed. Philosophy and the Reconstruction of Culture (Albany, 1993).

60 As on most matters of importance, Jonathan Swift said it well, this time in his 1726 account of Gulliver’s third voyage: “new Systems of Nature were but new Fashions, which would vary in every Age; and even those who pretend to demonstrate them from Mathematical Principles, would flourish but a short Period of Time, and be out of Vogue when that was determined;” see “Voyage to Laputa,” in Gulliver’s Travels and Other Writings, ed. M. Starkman (New York, 1981).

61 On the use of “natural” categories to divide the social field in line with established power distributions, see the essays in Sylvia Yanagisako and Carol Delaney, ed., Naturalizing Power (New York, 1995).

62 Mead did write a great deal on education, although programmatically; for a summary, see Gay Reed, “Deprovincialization: Margaret Mead on Education,” a paper for the American Educational Studies Association, 1993. Although her criticisms of education were mostly correct, Mead was strangely harder on schools than she was on the business community or the military; for an example, see Mead, “Thinking Ahead: Why Is Education Obsolete,” Harvard Business Review 36 (1958): 23–30.

63 Margaret Mead and Frances Macgregor, Growth and Culture (New York, 1951).
The phrasing of this question comes from Bateson by way of a story told by Ray Birdwhistell, “Some Discussions of Ethnography, Theory, and Method,” in About Bateson, ed. J. Brockman (New York, 1977). Near the end of a lifetime of claiming all organisms make sense if one knows their code, Bateson was asked what question he would put to any organism if he knew its code. Bateson answered: “I’d ask that animal under what conditions, in what setting, with how many and what organization of his fellows, and what order of duration of communication would be required for him to be capable of telling the truth.” If Bateson and Mead agreed that all organisms make sense according to a specific code, they likely had a point of disagreement as well. Mead thought that cultures were supposed to make sense, if not now, then after some reform, whereas Bateson suffered no such illusion. In her memoir, With a Daughter’s Eye, Mary Catherine Bateson tells the story of looking at a William Blake watercolor, Satan Exalting over Eve. The daughter wanted to know, if Satan had just had his way with Eve, why did he not look happy. The father’s answer is an anthropologist’s version of original sin: “Because he has started the process that produced congressman and schizophrenia and picnics and policemen on the corner, and the whole bag of tricks called culture, and it’s that vision that gives him the look of agony.”

Mead took a master’s degree in psychology at Columbia before she switched to working with Boas.

Mead, Growing Up.


Lewin, A Dynamic Theory of Personality (New York, 1951); and Erik Erikson, Childhood and Society (New York, 1950).

One of Bateson’s first papers was about learning to play the flute among the Iatmul and its implications in the social organization of gender; see “Music in New Guinea,” Eagle 24 (1935): 425–433. After Iatmul, Bateson turned to the problem of learning to be a body in Bali and then the problem of learning to be schizophrenic in Palo Alto. Rich accounts of learning across such diverse settings appear in two collections of his essays; see Steps to an Ecology of Mind (New York 1972) and A Sacred Unity (New York, 1991); the first volume contains the systematics paper, “The Logical Categories of Learning and Communication”.


Yeah, yeah, but, really, aren’t people differentially able? Sure, why not, but that does not mean we know how to discern those differences or how to make the most of the variation. Worse, in thinking that we know how to sort people out, we can get a great deal wrong. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, in Maxims and Reflections (London, 1998), said it better: “Maybe there are people who are by nature not up to this or that business; precipitation and prejudice are, however, dangerous demons, unfitting the most capable person, blocking all effectiveness and paralysing free progress. This applies to worldly affairs, particularly, too, to scholarship.” (This line is from 1823.)

Colin McPhee showed how Balinese children are effortlessly absorbed into gamelan groups by adults who sit behind them and guide their hands until they begin to play notes that
contribute to the overall musical pattern; see “Music and Children in Bali,” in *Children and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Margaret Mead and Martha Wolfenstein (Chicago, 1955).

74 Vygotsky, *Collected Works*.

75 *Balinese Character*.

76 At her worst Mead would write of Bali as a single set of forces that would produce a single kind of child. Contrast that version of Bali with the multi-layered, perspectival wonder in Boon, *Affinities*:

What has come to be called Balinese culture is a multiply authored invention, a historical formation, an enactment, a political construct, a shifting paradox, an ongoing translation, an emblem trademark, a nonconsensual negotiation of contrastive identity, and more. Its evidence is, to employ a bookish figure, well-thumbed. To make matters still more layered, practices and ideas associated with Bali—just one complex position in the so-called Malayo-Polynesian world—cut across different historical identities and classifications. They include for the foreseeable future ‘Indonesian’ (alias Dutch East Indies, Indian Archipelago, etc.); from the fourteenth century onward “Hindu”; and in part (the Sanskritized part) what scholars call “Indo-European.”

77 For theories of school failure, see Hervé Varenne and Ray McDermott, *Successful Failure* (Boulder, CO, 1998).


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