Coming of Age in Samoa

*Coming of Age in Samoa* is a book by American anthropologist Margaret Mead – primarily adolescent girls – on the island of Ta'u in the Samoan Islands. The book details the sexual life of teenagers in Samoan society in the early 20th century, and theorizes that culture has a leading influence on psychosexual development.

First published in 1928, the book launched Mead as a pioneering researcher and as the most famous anthropologist in the world. Since its first publication, *Coming of Age in Samoa* was the most widely read book in the field of anthropology until Napoleon Chagnon's *Yanomamö: The Fierce People* overtook it. The book has sparked years of ongoing and intense debate and controversy on questions pertaining to society, culture, and science. It is a key text in the as well as in discussions on issues relating to family, adolescence, gender, social norms.

In the 1980s, Derek Freeman contested many of Mead's claims, and argued that she was hoaxed into counterfactually believing that Samoan culture had more relaxed sexual norms than Western culture. On the whole has rejected Freeman's claims, concluding that Freeman cherry-picked his data, and misrepresented both Mead's research and the interviews that he conducted.[3][4][5]
Content

Foreword
In the foreword to *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Mead's advisor, Franz Boas, writes:

"Courtesy, modesty, good manners, conformity to definite ethical standards are universal, but what constitutes courtesy, modesty, good manners, and definite ethical standards is not universal. It is instructive to know that standards differ in the most unexpected ways."[^6]

Boas went on to point out that, at the time of publication, many Americans had
people (particularly women) as they pass through adolescence as "unavoidable periods of adjustment". Boas felt that a study of the problems faced by adolescents in another culture would be illuminating.
Mead introduces the book with a general discussion of the problems facing adolescents in modern society and the various approaches to understanding these problems: religion, philosophy, educational theory and psychology. She discusses various limitations in each approach and then introduces the new field of anthropology analyzing social structures and dynamics. She contrasts the methodology of behavior and the obvious reasons that controlled experiments are so much more difficult for anthropology than other sciences. For this reason her methodology is one of studying societies in the culture that is fairly well understood such as Europe or America, she chooses radically different from Western culture and likely to yield more useful data and new complexity in that she must first understand and communicate to her readers rather than delve directly into issues of adolescence as she could in a more familiar culture. Once she has an understanding of Samoan culture she will delve into the specifics of how adolescent education and socialization are carried out in Samoan culture and contrast it with Western culture.

Mead described the goal of her research as follows:

"I have tried to answer the question which sent me to Samoa: Are the disturbances which vex our adolescents due to the nature of adolescence itself or to the civilization? Under different conditions does adolescence present a different picture?"

To answer this question, she conducted her study among a small group of Samoans in a village of 600 people on the island of Taʻā, in which, over a period of between six and nine months, she got to know, lived with, observed, and interviewed (having learnt some Samoan) 68 young women between the ages of 9 and 20. Mead studied daily living, education, social structures and dynamics, rituals, etiquette, etc.

Samoan life and education
Mead begins with the description of a typical idyllic day in Samoa. She then comments on the different treatment of children, which is celebrated with a lengthy ritual feast. After birth, however, children are often ignored, for girl children sometimes explicitly ritually ignored, after birth up to disciplining children. Most involve some sort of *corporal punishment*, such as hitting with hands, palm fronds, or shells.
disciplining children. Most involve some sort of corporal punishment, such as hitting with hands, palm fronds, or shells. However, the punishment is mostly ritualistic and not meant to inflict serious harm. Children are expected to contribute meaningful work from a very early age. Initially, young children of both sexes help to care for infants. As the children grow older, however, the education of the boys shifts to fishing, while the girls focus more on child care. However, the concept of age for the Samoans is not the same as in the West. Samoans do not keep track of the actual number of years alive, but rather on the outward physical changes in the child. As a child gets bigger and stronger, she gets more work and responsibility.

Mead describes some specific skills the children must learn related to weaving and fishing, and then almost casually interjects the first description of Samoan sexuality, saying that in addition to work for adolescent girls: "All of her [additional] interest is expended on clandestine sex adventures." This comes directly after a passage where Mead describes how a reputation for laziness can make an adolescent girl a poor candidate for marriage, implying that for Samoans a work ethic is a more important criterion for marriage than virginity.

Male adolescents undergo various kinds of both encouragement and punishment to make them competitive and aggressive. Males have many different possible jobs (e.g., "a house builder, a fisherman, a orator, a wood carver") in the community. Status is also a balance between prowess and achievement and appearing humble. Also, "social prestige is increased by his amorous exploits".

For the adolescent girls, status is primarily a question of whom they will marry. Mead also describes adolescence and the time before marriage as the high point of a Samoan girl's life:

"But the seventeen year old girl does not wish to marry – not yet. It is better to live as a girl with no responsibility, and a rich variety of experience. This is the best period of her life."[8]

Samoan household
Three Samoan women preparing to make kava (c.1890)

The next section describes the structure of a Samoan village: "a Samoan village is made up of some thirty to forty households, each of which is presided over by a head man". Each household is an extended family including widows and widowers. The household shares houses communally: each household has several houses but no members have ownership or
permanent residence of any specific building. The houses may not all be within the same part of the village.

The head man of the household has ultimate authority over the group. Mead describes how the extended family provides security and safety for Samoan children. Children are likely to be near relatives no matter where they are, and any child that is missing will be missed quite rapidly. The household also provides freedom for girls. If a girl is unhappy with the particular relatives she happens to live with, she can always simply move to a different home within the same household. Mead also describes the various and fairly complex status relations which are a combination of factors such as role in the household, the household's status within the village, the age of the individual, etc. There are also many rules of etiquette for requesting and granting favors.[9]

**Samoan social structures and rules**
Mead describes the many group structures and dynamics within Samoan culture. The forming of groups is an important part of Samoan life from early childhood when young children form groups for play and mischief. There are several different kinds of possible group structures in Samoan culture. Relations flow down from chiefs and heads of households; men designate another man to be their aid and surrogate in courting rituals; men form groups for fishing and other work activities; women form groups based on tasks such as child caring and household relations. Mead describes the complex rules that govern how they are formed and how they function. Her emphasis is on Samoan adolescent girls, but as elsewhere she needs to also describe Samoan social structures for the entire culture to give a complete picture.

Mead believes that the complex and mandatory rules that govern these various groups mean that the traditional Western concept of friendship as a bond entered into voluntarily by two people with compatible interests is all but meaningless for Samoan girls: "friendship is so patterned as to be meaningless. I once asked a young married woman if a neighbor with whom she was always upon the most uncertain and irritated terms was a friend of hers. 'Why, of course, her mother's father's father, and my father's mother's father were brothers.'"

The ritual requirements (such as being able to remember specifics about family relations and roles) are far greater for men than women. This also translates into significantly more responsibility being put on men than women: "a man who commits adultery with a chief’s wife was beaten and banished, sometime even drowned by the outraged community, but the woman was only cast out by her husband".

Mead devotes a whole chapter to Samoan music and the role of dancing and singing in Samoan culture. She views these as significant because they violate the norms of what Samoans define as good behavior in all other activities and provide a unique outlet for Samoans to express their individuality. According to Mead, demonstrating an excess of pride, or as the Samoans describe it, "presuming above one's age", is the greatest social failing when it comes to singing and dancing. In these activities, individuality and creativity are the most highly praised attributes, and children are free to express themselves to the fullest extent of their capabilities rather than being concerned with appropriate behavior based on age and status:
The attitude of the elders toward precocity in singing or dancing, is in striking form of precocity. On the dance floor the dreaded accusation "You are presuming above your age" is never heard. Little boys who would be rebuked or whipped for such behavior on any other occasion are allowed to preen themselves, to swagger and bluster and take the limelight without a word of reproach. The relatives crow with delight over a precocity for which they would hide their heads in shame were it displayed in any other sphere ... Often a dancer does not avoid continually colliding with them. It is a genuine orgy of aggressive individualism.

Personality, sexuality, and old age
Samoan women in traditional dress (c. 1910s)

Mead describes the psychology of the individual Samoan as being simpler, more honest, and less driven by sexual than the west. She describes Samoans as being much more comfortable with issues such as non-monogamous sexual relations. Part of the reason for this is the extended family structure of Samoan villages. Conflicts that might result in arguments or breaks within a traditional Western family can be defused in Samoan families simply by having one of the parties to the conflict relocate to a different home that is part of the household within the village. Another reason Mead cites is that Samoans do not seem eager to give judgmental answers to questions. Mead describes how one of the things that made her research difficult was that Samoans would often answer just about every question with non-committal answers, the Samoan equivalent to shrugging one's shoulders and saying: "Who knows?"

Mead concludes the section of the book dealing with Samoan life with a description of Samoan old age. Samoan women in old age "are usually more of a power within the household than the old men. The men rule partly by the authority conferred by their titles, but their wives and sisters rule by force of personality and knowledge of human nature."

Educational problems: American and Samoan contrasts
Mead concluded that the passage from childhood to adulthood (adolescence) in Samoa was a smooth transition and not marked by the emotional or psychological distress, anxiety, or confusion seen in the United States. Mead concluded that this was due to the Samoan girl's belonging to a stable, monocultural society, surrounded by role models, and where nothing concerning the basic human facts of copulation, birth, bodily functions, or death, was hidden. The Samoan girl was not pressured to choose from among a variety of conflicting values, as was the American girl. Mead commented, somewhat satirically:

... [an American] girl's father may be a Presbyterian, an imperialist, a vegetarian, an adherent of Edmund Burke, a believer in the open shop and a high tariff, who believes that women should wear corsets, not roll their stockings, not smoke, nor go riding with young men in the evening. But her mother's father may be a Low Episcopalian, a believer in high living, a strong advocate of States' Rights and the right to musical shows and horse races. Her aunt is an agnostic, an ardent advocate of women's rights, an internationalist who rests all her hopes on Esperanto, is devoted to Bernard Shaw, and spends her spare time in campaigns of anti-vivisection. Her elder brother, whom she admires exceedingly, has just spent two years at Oxford. He is an Anglo-Catholic, an enthusiast concerning all things medieval, writes mystical poetry, reads Chesterton, and means to devote his life to seeking for the lost secret of medieval stained glass. Her mother's younger brother...[14]
Reception

On publication, the book generated a great deal of coverage both in the academic world and in the popular press. Mead's publisher (William Morrow) had lined up many endorsements from well known academics such as anthropologist Malinowski and psychologist John Watson. Their praise was a major public relations coup for Morrow and drew popular attention to the book. Academic interest was soon followed by sensational headlines such as “Samoa is the Place for Women” and that Samoa is "Where Neuroses Cease".\[15\]

Impact on anthropology

For most anthropologists before Mead, detailed immersive fieldwork was not a common practice. Although subsequent reviews of her work have revealed faults by the standards of modern anthropology, at the time the book was published the idea of living with native people was fairly ground breaking. The use of cross-cultural comparison to highlight issues within Western society was highly influential and contributed greatly to the heightened awareness of anthropology and ethnographic study in the United States. It established Mead as a substantial figure in American anthropology, a position she would maintain for the next fifty years.\[16\]

Social influences and reactions

As Boas and Mead expected, this book upset many Westerners when it first appeared in 1928. Shocked by her observation that young Samoan women deferred marriage for many years while enjoying eventually choosing a husband. As a landmark study regarding sexual mores, the book came under attack on ideological grounds. For example, the National Catholic Register merely a projection of her own sexual beliefs and reflected her desire to eliminate restrictions on her own sexuality. Intercollegiate Studies Institute listed Coming of Age in Samoa as #1 on its list of the “50 Worst Books of the Twentieth Century”.\[18\]

Critique of Mead's methodology and conclusions

Although Coming of Age received significant interest and praise from the academic community, Mead's research methodology also came in for criticism from several reviewers and fellow anthropologists. Mead was criticized for not...
methodology also came in for criticism from several reviewers and fellow anthropologists. Mead was criticized for not separating her personal speculation and opinions from her ethnographic description. Dr. Mead forgets too often that she is an anthropologist and gets her own personality involved with her materials.”[19] Shortly after Mead’s death, Derek Freeman published a book, Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth, failed to apply the scientific method and that her assertions were unsupported. This criticism is dealt with in detail in the section below.[20]

The Mead–Freeman controversy

In 1983, five years after Mead had died, Derek Freeman – a New Zealand anthropologist who lived in Samoa – published a book, Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth, failed to apply the scientific method and that her assertions were unsupported. This criticism is dealt with in detail in the section below.[20]

Derek Freeman

In 1988, he participated in the filming of Margaret Mead in Samoa, directed by Frank Heimans, which claims to document one of Mead’s original informants, now an elderly woman, swearing that the information she and her friend provided Mead when they were teenagers was false; one of the girls would say of Mead on videotape years later:

We girls would pinch each other and tell her we were out with the boys. We were only joking but she took it seriously. As you know, Samoan girls are terrific liars and love making fun of people but Margaret thought it was all true.

Another of Mead’s statements on which Freeman focused was her claim that through the use of chicken blood, Samoan girls...
Another of Mead’s statements on which Freeman focused was her claim that through the use of chicken blood, Samoan girls could and do lie about their status of virginity.[22] Freeman pointed out that virgins among Samoan men that they have a specific ritual in which the bride’s hymen is manually ruptured in public, by the chief, making deception via chicken blood impossible. On this ground, Freeman argued that Mead must have based her account on (false) hearsay from non-Samoan sources.[23]

The argument hinged on the place of the taupou system in Samoan society. Mead described institutionalized virginity for young women of high rank, and it is exclusive to Samoan women emulated the taupou system, and Mead's informants denied and claimed that they had lied to Mead.[24]

**Anthropological reception and reactions**

After an initial flurry of discussion, many anthropologists concluded that Freeman systematically misrepresented Mead’s views on the relationship between nature and nurture, as well as the data on Samoan culture. According to Freeman’s colleague Robin Fox, Freeman “seemed to have a special place in hell reserved for Margaret Mead, for reasons not at all clear at that time”.[25]

Moreover, many field and comparative studies by anthropologists have since found that adolescence is not experienced in the same way in all societies. Systematic cross-cultural study of adolescents shows that adolescents experience harmonious relations with their families in most societies. They find that, when family members need each other throughout their lives, rebelliousness, is minimal and counterproductive. Adolescents are likely to be practicing neolocal residence patterns (in which young adults must move the residence patterns result from young adults living in industrial societies who geographically mobile populations. Thus, Mead's analysis of adolescent conflict is upheld in the comparative literature on societies worldwide.[27]

First, these critics have speculated that he waited until Mead died before publishing his critique so that she would not be able to respond. However, in 1978, Freeman sent a revised manuscript to Mead, but without responding.
Second, Freeman's critics point out that, by the time he arrived on the scene, Mead's original informants were old women, grandmothers, and had converted to Christianity, so their testimony to him may not have been accurate. They further argue that Samoan culture had changed considerably in the decades following Mead's book. They suggested that such women, in this new context, were unlikely to speak frankly about their adolescent behavior. Further, they suggested that these women might not be as forthright speaking to an elderly man as they would have been speaking to a woman near their own age. Concerned were already Christians at the time of their interviews as teenagers.

Some anthropologists criticized Freeman on methodological and empirical grounds. Freeman had conflated publicly articulated ideals with behavioral norms—that is, while many Samoan women would admit in public that it is ideal to remain a virgin, in practice they engaged in high levels of premarital sex and boasted about their sexual affairs among themselves. Freeman's own data documented the existence of premarital sex in Samoa. In a western Samoan village, he documented that 20% of 15-year-olds, 30% of 16-year-olds, and 40% of 17-year-olds engaged in premarital sex. In 1983, the American Anthropological Association passed a motion declaring Freeman's *Margaret Mead and Samoa* irresponsible and misleading. Freeman commented that "to seek to dispose of a major scientific issue by a show of hands is a striking demonstration of the way in which belief can come to dominate the thinking of scholars".

In the years that followed, anthropologists vigorously debated these issues. Notable scholars who published on the issue include Appell, who stated "I found Freeman’s argument to be completely convincing"; little but tends to reinforce what many anthropologists already suspected regarding the adequacy of Mead's ethnography, Feinberg, Leacock, Levy, Marshall, Nardi, Patience, Paxman, Scheper-Hughes, Shankman, Young, and Juan.

Much like Mead's work, Freeman's account has been challenged as being ideologically driven to support his own theoretical viewpoint (sociobiology and interactionism), as well as assigning Mead a high degree of gullibility and bias. Freeman's
refutation of Samoan sexual mores has been challenged, in turn, as being based on public declarations of sexual morality, virginity, and taupou rather than on actual sexual practices within Samoan society.

Lowell Holmes – who completed a lesser-publicized restudy – commented later: “Mead was better able to identify with, and therefore establish rapport with, adolescents and young adults on issues of sexuality than either I (at age 29, married with a wife and child) or Freeman, ten years my senior.”[36]

In 1996, Martin Orans examined Mead's notes preserved at the Library of Congress data as available to the general public. Orans concludes that Freeman's basic criticism – that Mead was duped by ceremonial virgin Fa'apua'a Fa'amu (who later swore to Freeman that she had played a joke on Mead) – was false for several reasons: first, Mead was well aware of the forms and frequency of Samoan joking; second, she provided a careful account of the sexual restrictions on ceremonial virgins that corresponds to Fa'apua'a Fa'amu's account; and third, that Mead's notes make clear that she had reached her conclusions about Samoan sexuality before meeting Fa'apua'a Fa'amu. He therefore concludes, contrary to Freeman, that Mead was never the victim of a hoax. Orans concludes that due to Mead's interpretive approach – common to most contemporary cultural anthropology – her hypotheses and conclusions are essentially unfalsifiable and therefore "not even wrong.

In 1999, Freeman published the book *The Fateful Hoaxing of Margaret Mead: A Historical Analysis of Her Samoan Research* included new material, in particular interviews that Freeman called of "exceptional historical significance" and "of quite fundamental importance" of one of Mead's then adolescent informants by a Samoan chief from the Samoa (in 1988 and 1993) and of her daughter (in 1995).[38] Correspondence of 1925–1926 between Franz Boas and Margaret Mead was also newly available to Freeman. He concludes in the introduction to the book that “her exciting revelations about sexual behavior were in some cases merely the extrapolations of whispered intimacies, whereas those of greatest consequence were the results of a prankish hoax.

Freeman argues that Mead collected other evidence that contradicts her own conclusion of puberty girls were always escorted by female family members.[39] He also claims that because of a decision to take ethnological trips to Fitiuta, only eight weeks remained for her primary research into adolescent girls, and it was now “practically impossible” to find time with the sixty-six girls she was to study, let
With the remaining time, she instead went to Ofu, and the bulk of her research came from speaking with her two Samoan female companions, Fa'apua'a and Fofoa. Freeman claims Mead's letters to Boas reflect that she was influenced by studies of sexuality from Marquesas Islands, and that she was seeking to confirm the same information by questioning Fa'apua'a and Fofoa. She sent her conclusions to Boas on March 14 and with "little left to do" In Freeman's estimation: "no systematic, firsthand investigation of the sexual behavior of her sample of adolescent girls was ever to be undertaken. Instead, Margaret Mead's account of adolescent sexual behavior elsewhere was based on what she had been told by Fa'apua'a and Fofoa, supplemented by other such inquiries that she had previously made." As Fa'apua'a told Freeman, in his 80s, that she and her friend had been joking, Freeman defends her testimony in the introduction of his second book about Mead: both that the octogenarian's memory was very good, and that she swore on the Bible, as a Christian, that it was true.

In 2009, a detailed review of the controversy by Paul Shankman was published by the University of Wisconsin Press. It supports the contention that Mead's research was essentially correct, and concludes that Freeman cherry-picked his data and misrepresented both Mead and Samoan culture.

See also

- Culture of Samoa
- Heretic, a play by Australian playwright David Williamson that explores Freeman's reactions to Mead.
- The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia

References

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adolescent resentment and delinquency, a cult of virginity. frequent rape, reprisals by rape victim's families,... sexual jealousy and strong religious feeling."


5. ^a b "The Trashing of Margaret Mead". Savage Minds. 13 October 2010.


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12. ^ Mead, Margaret (1928). Coming of Age in Samoa. William Morrow Pa October 2014. "The ease with which personality differences can be adj Samoans from pressing one another too hard."


15. ^ Shankman, Paul. The Trashing of Margaret Mead. The University of Wi

16. ^ Shankman, Paul. The Trashing of Margaret Mead. The University of Wi
“So amusing did the natives find the white woman’s prurient questions that they told her the wildest tales and she believed them! Mead misled a generation into believing that the fantasies of sexual progressives were an historical reality on an island far, far away.” Library of Congress, “Afterward: Derek Freeman and Margaret Mead.”

In 1943, knowing what I did of the rite of fa'amasei'au, I felt certain that Mead’s account was in error and could not have come from any Samoan source.” Derek Freeman, “All Made of Fantasies: A Rejoinder to Paul Shankman” Anthropologist 100 (4): 972-983 (1999).

32. ^ a b Shaw, John (2001-08-05). "Derek Freeman, Who Challenged Margaret Mead on Samoa, Dies at 84". *The Times*.
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Notations


- Lowell D. Holmes (1987) Quest for the Real Samoa: the Mead/Freeman and Garvey


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- **Virginia, Mary E.** "DISCovering U.S. History", Benedict, Ruth (1887–1948

**External links**

- Coming of age in Samoa; a psychological study of primitive youth for Western civilisation (1928)

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