



Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation

Margaret Mead , Mary Pipher (Introduction) , Mary Catherine Bateson (Introduction)

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Rarely do science and literature come together in the same book. When they do -- as in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, for example -- they become classics, quoted and studied by scholars and the general public alike.

Margaret Mead accomplished this remarkable feat not once but several times, beginning with *Coming of Age in Samoa*. It details her historic journey to American Samoa, taken where she was just twenty-three, where she did her first fieldwork. Here, for the first time, she presented to the public the idea that the individual experience of developmental stages could be shaped by cultural demands and expectations. Adolescence, she wrote, might be more or less stormy, and sexual development more or less problematic in different cultures. The "civilized" world, she taught us had much to learn from the "primitive." Now this groundbreaking, beautifully written work as been reissued for the centennial of her birth, featuring introductions by Mary Pipher and by Mead's daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson.

Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation Details

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From Reader Review Coming of Age in Samoa: A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilisation for online ebook

Brandon Fryman says

Coming of Age in Samoa by Margaret Mead was first published in 1928 in which she paints Samoan child rearing practices as compelling as she could. The focus of this ethnography is to expose the average American to the lives of Samoans, specifically young Samoan females and compare them to their American counterparts.

The two main questions Mead (1928) stipulates are 1) “re the disturbances which vex our adolescents due to the nature of adolescents itself or to the civilization” and 2) “[u:] nder different conditions does adolescence present a different picture?” Mead states that she studied fifty “girls” in three villages on the island of Tua, in Samoa (Mead 1928: 6).

The book is made up of fourteen chapters. Each chapter progresses from general to the individualistic parts of everyday life. The introduction discusses what Mead intends to do and statistical information. Then she moves into a general overview of Samoan life, presenting daily activities and the differences between the sexes. Next Mead starts to show how children are socialized and how important “ranks” are in everyday life. In chapter four, these “ranks” play a prominent role and are thoroughly contrasted between villages, within villages, and within the home.

From chapter five to chapter twelve, Mead takes various aspects in women’s lives, such as her age group, community life, sexual relations, dance, personality, experiences and individuality, conflicts and old age and delves into each subject. She introduces individuals and shows how the average female acts compared to a few marginal individuals that do not follow the ideal.

In the last two chapters, Mead compares and contrasts growing up in both America and Samoa. She interjects psycho-social differences within both societies. In these last two chapters, Mead tries to unpack her question “what is in Samoa that is not in America that has Samoan women “good” tempered (Mead 1928:109)?” I feel this is where Mead starts her analysis and defends her findings.

Mead spent nine months in the field (Mead 1928: 6) trying best to “minimize the differences” between her and her subjects by learning the local language, eating their food, playing games, and “sitting” like a women. She states that she took extensive notes, which you get a glimpse of in the appendixes. In the appendixes Mead describes the individuals in greater character, maps out the villages, family life, Christian living, her background in developmental psychology, her field methods and how she came up with her analysis.

The data that Mead shares throughout the book is quantitative, painting a picture of everyday life for women in Samoa. She does however give examples of deviant behavior and introduces these individuals in a somewhat qualitative way. I only say somewhat because we get a sentence or two about eight different individuals.

Mead states (1928) that this work is “the first piece of work by a serious professional anthropologist written for the educated layman in which all the paraphernalia of scholarship designed to convince one’s professional colleagues and confuse the laity was deliberately laid aside.” I felt there were some things missing that I needed in this study such as the physical description of the islands, an estimate of the population, the age and sex distribution, and Mead’s personal academic background – was she qualified in the area of psycho-social development?

If you wanted a more academic feel to the book, then you would have to read the appendices. She wrote in an etic point of view and turned to an emic point of view when she presented information about deviant behavior. Once in awhile she would introduce native words to describe Samoan ranks; since Americans do not have these types of family/village ranks, this was apropos for this study.

Mead’s conclusion simply put is that young Samoan women have less psychological problems because of their upbringing. Samoans are brought up with life, death and sex as a natural daily occurrence so when they experience these phenomenon’s in life, they are not as affected with psychological problems growing up. Children’s education in Samoa is self regulated and not forced upon them by teachers, parents and society

(Mead 1928: 129).

One thing that really stood out to me is how Mead used the word “primitive” to describe Samoans (Mead 1928: 109). I argue against this neocolonial thought that many early anthropologist hold. How “primitive” is a society in which all individuals have a place to live, enough food to eat, and no wars?

Overall, this book would be a fascinating read for someone who wanted to learn about Samoan history; how Christianity affects life in Samoa; how has child rearing practices changed since this ethnography was conducted; how early ethnographies were conducted; how to write an ethnography not full of jargon; and how to collect, store, and analyze data.

Linda Robinson says

While interesting from a sociological standpoint, I enjoyed "Letters from the Field" more, and reading the second book improved my experience with "Coming of Age in Samoa," as the personal account of Mead's studies put all in a clearer perspective. It was a good experiment to read this book and then read "The Savage Mind" by Claude Levi-Strauss right away.

Laura P?tru says

Mead's book, one of the most popular anthropological books, controversial as it is, is about adolescence. More precisely, she ponders whether or not adolescent is a universally turmoil or a result of the environment in which the Western children grow up - a question worth pondering. To answer this question, she analyzes the life of teenage Samoan girls with which she lives for 9 months. Frankly, I knew little of Mead's book before I finished it so my reading wasn't influenced in anyway by the entire critique that surrounds it. However, even without being biased, this book didn't feel too scientific. That's not a bad thing, not at all, but I wouldn't go that far to call it an anthropological masterpiece, a must read. This book is a must read only if you like descriptive writing (very descriptive!) and straightforward speculation. Or if you're interested in reading the work of one of the few female anthropologists that are regarded as classics. Also, bear in mind that she was only 27 when she published the books so don't be too harsh.

With that being said, I enjoyed reading Mead's book and I would lie if I said that I didn't fancy the idea of growing old in a society precisely like the Samoan one, a society in which life isn't regarded as “a battle-field where each group is fully armoured in a conviction of the righteousness of its cause”.

Rick says

Margaret Meade made up her supposed research results to please her mentor and boss when she made the trip to Samoa at age 21. See Margaret Meade and the Heretic, by Derek Freeman, Professor at the Australian National University.

Katherine says

This is one of my all-time favorite ethnographies. From a formatting and methodological standpoint, it was

extremely unique for its time. In the early twentieth century, most ethnographies were, to put it mildly, dry. They were comprised of catalogue-like accounts of kinship relationships, foods that are eaten, plants that are harvested, the organization of the calendar, etc. This stuff is all important, but it painted a two-dimensional picture. Mead succeeded in peopling her ethnography with, well, PEOPLE, while simultaneously including her rigorously researched data. Her final chapter -- more of an essay than part of the ethnography -- relating what she learned in Samoa to adolescents in the U.S. is often criticized, but that criticism is arrogant academician hogwash. It didn't fit the model of the standard ethnography, so her colleagues balked. Unfortunately, Derek Freeman's 1983 work of attention-grabbing dross attempted to debunk Mead's work, a full 50 years after it was published, five years after Mead died, and based on the most ridiculous of evidence. Unfortunately, many remain ignorant of the fact that Freeman's attack has since been near-unanimously judged to be ridiculous.

Kevin says

As a result of Derek Freeman's "debunking" of this book, this is a very complicated book to read. Freeman, who had sociobiological inclinations, was not seeking merely to debunk this book, but the agenda of cultural anthropology to treat human behavior as culturally determined. COMING OF AGE IN SAMOA is one of the key texts in making the claim of culture trumping biology.

What this means to anyone seeking to read this book or Freeman's critique is that both books should be treated as not really being about Samoa, but about the larger issue of the relative weight of culture and biology on human behavior.

As far as I can ascertain from people I know who have done research in Samoa, the truth is FAR more complicated than what either Freeman or Mead suggest.

Erik Graff says

During childhood summers spent at grandmother's cottage in SW Michigan there was little to do but go on walks with the dog, play solitaire, knit, assemble puzzles or read. I read a lot. Some of the books I obtained myself with money earned from doing chores. But even at a penny per cigarette butt collected from around the house, earning enough for a fifty cent paperback took a while, especially after the grounds had been scoured a couple of times. Consequently, I depended a lot on the books at the house or brought up by guests.

Coming of Age in Samoa had been in the living room bookshelf as long as I could remember. Initially, of course, it seemed too grown-up. However, as I grew older and explored more and more of the adult books in the resident collection, they became less intimidating. Indeed, a perusal of this particular title suggested a lot of material about girls and sex on some tropical island. The first two topics had been interesting me more and more over the last few years. The third, the tropical setting, was just icing on the cake. I'd seen movies about tropical islands!

The book was not at all as sexy as I'd hoped, but it was informative. As obsessively neurotic as I'd become about the subject, it was refreshing to read about a culture that seemed both relatively free of hang-ups and liberal as regards youthful erotic behavior. Alas! My culture wasn't like that, but it did serve a bit to liberate my imagination if not my behavior.

Years later, in seminary in New York, I became close friends with Mead's Episcopal confessor and actually

crossed paths with the great woman herself on the Columbia University campus. She looked disconcertingly like my grandmother.

Patrick says

I think this is a good book but depressing book on raising children in a heterogeneous culture for someone who wants to raise their children in a traditionalist mindset because she states it is nearly impossible to raise a child to hold values that are dear to you because of competing values inherent in a heterogeneous culture. She does this via contrasting our culture with that of a Samoan traditionalist culture. Her point on women's sexual choice is largely irrelevant in today's culture. I give this book 2.5 stars.

Mead anthropology teaches us the importance of choice in upbringing of people. She sought to show alternatives to the American way of life and to show that culture does not always need to be fixed that it can change by conscious choice. The ideal culture sexual decision should be made by intentional choice not from some external force like pop culture dictating it. Her definition for an ideal culture was where every individual expresses his/her full potential. She states that sexuality is culturally shaped. She used her ethnographic study to answer the question how does culture shape individuals and what is the role of biology in human behavior? She believed in teaching children on how not what to think. When she wrote this book, the thoughts of the time was that culture did not shape the way we turn out so she did introduce the notion of nurture vs nature debate. The reason she chose the Samoan culture to study is due to its simplicity in comparison to Western culture so to show differing attitudes that are culturally determined. Are Western adolescent problems due to civilization or is it inherent to adolescence?

In Samoa, birth order is more important than the age of the person to keep the hierarchy of the village in place. The adults have a laissez-faire attitude toward their kids and discipline is enforced by an older sibling only. The whole system is kept in place by constant birthing in which the older sibling will always have a younger one to be responsible over (this can lead to trouble if the personality of the elder is not conducive to being conscientious. This system probably works in a village where people know each other but not in modern day metropolis. Temper tantrums will usually get children out of whatever they do not want to do b/c older children just want to shut them up. Usually, it is the little girls that are charged with rearing babies while little boys are allowed to play outside with the older boys. The boys learn the importance of team work early on, the girls once they achieve puberty are weaned off child rearing and allowed to do the work of older women so in away they never have to care for children ever again. The chief domestic chore the girl is in charge of is weaving. The boys are socialized by their peers into a strong band of brothers that does work and is both schooled in cooperation and competition by the other males. But even though, the boy must excel in something, he cannot be a genius in his craft to earn him the scorn of his elders so he has to have the social skill to know if he is pissing a person off by his precocious skill. The competitive nature of rearing a boy toward greater social status means he has to thread the line between childhood fun and prestige that comes from having adult responsibility for when he becomes a chief he no longer is allowed to associate with childhood friends. A chief is someone who has above average abilities but not someone who is the best in anything he does. What a woman loses in prestige, she gains in freedom.

Girls are obeyed by their rank in age rather in their marital status. Children have a range of places to choose from to stay with relatives if they do not approve of their household so this enforces checks and balances on the discipline in the household. They have strict enforcement of incest sibling taboo. It is interesting that people are not allowed to state why they have come until the end of the visit when it is okay to ask what they want.

Young children are grouped into age grouping and look in askance on children of a different group even

though they maybe related. While girls home life was all work, hanging out with their outside gang was filled with play time. Teenage girls friendship is centered around their lovers friends while women become friends women who are in similar spots as they are. Boys social friendship are stronger than girl which includes a soa, which is a wingman for picking up girls. Because the economy needs male cooperation, male friendships tend to be long-lived while female friendships that are not based on family are dictated by women's husbands friendship. The teenager women's group does no work except play hostess to visiting delegation from other villages. The women completely depend on their men for their status. The village princess is also its chief hostess when visitors visit. Since women are not involved in public life, they do not care for it much. While the laws of the land are more lenient for women than for men especially in cases of marriage fidelity, there is a strict division of labor between the sexes.

Young girls see young boys as the enemy. Frequently, the young youths loose their virginity to older people of the opposite sex. Besides marriage, pre-marital sex and adultery are condoned as appropriate sexual expressions. In pre-marital courtship, a wingman or wingwoman is necessary to seal the deal. The most violent adolescent fights is if the soa steals the affection of the beloved or if friend of the beloved cockblocks the guy. In the strictly clandestine affair, the soa is the one who gets in touch with the girl and usually short in duration and both boy and girls may carry several at once.

There is an interesting case for rapists who rape b/c the girl are coquettish or they are impatient with the courting process so they rape. Once a rapist is branded no one wants to go near him and the household in which the rape occurs considers it great sport to chase after the rapists. In marriage proposal, the boy needs to bring her something substantial to talk to her. Once the marriage is accepted by the family then the boy is invited to stay over the family's home and sex can occur that way.

The only girl who is required to keep her virginity until marriage is the princess of the village. In marriage, the bridegrooms talking chief take "tokens of her virginity" and if she proves to be not a virgin, the women in her family beat her up. Although the concept of celibacy is foreign to the Samoan, virgins are definitely more prized than a regular girl.

The princess has to be a virgin b/c the whole village reputation is dependent on that fact but the princess does not get to choose her husband only the talking chiefs have the ability to choose the princess' husband. The princess can get out of an arranged marriage by eloping with her beloved. Adultery is common and accepted part of Samoan life since marriage is only a social and economic arrangement adultery is not unheard of though divorce can occur as a result of it which means living in a woman's home.

In dancing, the princess dances the formal dance while the talking chief or his wife provides the role of jester. Dance is encouraged to be individualized so dancers have superiority and inferiority complex. In dancing, the children are the center of attention and it is highly individualized. It can be compared to present day dancing in dance clubs. Shyness disappear in dancing. The only time youths are ridiculed is if they cannot dance or if the male is awkward in sexual relations.

The person who does something that is no accepted norm is branded a weirdo or "musu" and left at that without any curiosity to the motivation why the person does what he does. People do not have private property nor private acts. As if to compensate for the whole life is public knowledge, Samoan's hold their thoughts and feelings to themselves. The Samaon focused on negative personality traits to differentiate b/w people such as ugliness or viciousness while personality is devoid in Samoan. The Samoan prefer a personality of temperance and disdain excesses be it bad or good. The most disliked trait is being "stuck up". Temperament and intelligence are not recognized but rather actions present a fuller picture of a person rather than empathizing what the person is going through.

I think it is interesting how the birth, death, and sexual activities of a person is open knowledge to children due to the lack of privacy in such cramped spaces but public physical affection is discouraged. Mead states

that masturbation is nearly universal. Like in all cultures, salacious behavior is more readily a male phenomenon. While voyeurs are discouraged, sex with fellow peers present were accepted as the norm.

Just like in the US, a person's peers have a bigger influence on how a person turns out than ones home life. Despite the shifting households, Mead states that the household with a stronger nuclear family had better well-adjusted children b/c they had definitive well-defined roles to which they were expected to play and thus had a personality.

On average, a girl losses her virginity roughly by the same time as American girl roughly by the age of 15 to an older man who knows what he is doing. Girls homosexual experience are considered a natural part of growing up and a gateway towards heterosexual relationships. In general all homosexual relationships are regarded as stepping stones to heterosexual relationships but even in Samoa there are true gays who hang out with women more than men. The burden of advancing in his amorous target is on the man. Amatory lore is done by men who pass it down from older males to younger males and then to women. A man who cannot please his woman is looked upon and ridiculed. Men analytically study the technics of sex in detail while women are just aware of what is suppose to take place. They treat sex as an art so there are no neuroticism in Samoa.

Because women were considered economic assets, they were generally allowed to do anything they wanted sexually in their own time. Luna had multiple lovers at the same time while Namu had a primary lover and had several boys on the side that were males that she would pass the time with when her primary lover was not available. Although there are cases of abortion, it is exceedingly rare as illegitimate children are welcomed in society. People talk of romantic fidelity in terms of days or weeks @ most but there are cases of intense jealousy for a lover which means despite the promiscuous environment, romantic love was alive and well. Mead states, "the girls' minds were perplexed by no conflicts, troubled by no philosophical queries, beset by no remote ambitions. To live as a girl with many lovers as long as possible and then to marry in one's own village, near one's own relatives and to have many children, these were uniform and satisfying ambitions."

The law of probability states that there are women who will be individualistic in their preference for another culture while others will act out b/c of bad parenting.

The girls have few attachments so they also lack few jealousies. Lita and Sona had ambition and channeled their ambition into education at the missionary school. While the majority of the Samoan girls chose the status quo, the choice of going to school opened up a contrariness way of looking at the world that some girls chose.

While a few girls choose another lifestyle of whites, other girls are true delinquents in their culture such as the strong-willed Lola with strong passions that was mad about her life and having to share it with people around her combined with the fact that she had no strong role model made her an outcast. Her younger sister Siva is following in Lola's outcast ways though may turn out ok due to her comedic ways. Mala was an orphan became a kleptomaniac. She played and preferred boys to girls probably a dyke. While Sala just is interested in sex and nothing else, so she is projected to be good first time sexual companion but horrible wife because she cannot learn household duties.

B/c sex experience is freely taken by both genders, they differentiate based on whether the woman is developed or developing not on marital status like the west. Around age 23 after the woman is done with sexual experimentation society expects her to settle down so for the most part she complies. Do none of the women get pregnant with pre-marital sex? Whereas a move makes little difference to the women b/c they do not form community bonds, it proves profound for a male whose community bonds are stronger than that of a woman. But unfaithfulness to a wife is less tolerated in a woman's home turf than it is if he stayed at his own home. The sexes even when married are segregated in their labor except when performing their marital

duties. For women, once they are married nothing important happens to them; thus the desire to prolong singlehood as long as possible. While women's life ends when she gets married, a man's increases in status due to heavy competition that they have to succeed.

Also, women are discouraged from doing things alone as solitary enterprise is considered bad b/c only things that are done in secret are bad. Considering the utter lack of privacy for the women and the freedom of latitude that is given to them in matters of sexuality, it would make sense that anything done in private would be considered bad.

While the men get their power from their titles, women usually rule by the force of their personality and the psychology of human nature.

Samoa culture is a laissez-faire culture devoid of any competition for women so they do not feel pressured to be or do anything. In the end, the lack of pressure makes them complacent so though they do not have any pressure to grow, they are static. Samoa's rewards the lesson of not caring and punishes people who are too ambitious. It rewards people who took defeat lightly and turned to some other goal with a smile. They have a race to mediocrity culture b/c children have no expectations besides growing up like their ancestors where men are jostling towards ever increasing social status while women have no expectations besides following in their elders foot steps. But on the plus side, there are generally no overwrought jealousies in adolescence since individual goals are lacking.

Mead states the amount of choice that Americans have in raising their children leads to angst in children over which path to state whereas in Samoa and other traditional cultures one standardized way of raising their children allows for children to follow the prescribed path that works for most children though not all. Mead says the reason why Samoan adolescents are so well adjusted is b/c teenagers are allowed to experiment. She advocates the need for choice in sexual experimentation to alleviate conflict but ironically decries all choice that are competing in our culture b/c it confuses our children by competing values. Mead states that it is the plethora of choices in people's values that causes neurosis in modern man that is largely absent in Samoan culture.

Mead states that the because of the amorphous quantity of authority figures in the life of a children, the child is secure that their multiple older people she can trust for her general welfare while the birth order does not effect the roles which the child operates in b/c there are always people who are older and younger than the child. Because the child learns only the opposite sex is a lover regardless of personality and one can only be friends with relatives of the same sex, casual hook ups and marriage of convenience and divorce are readily made without strong emotional attachment. While Samoan children see people as a whole devoid of any personality so they do not form any emotional attachment and can have casual sex with whomever they find attractive. American children see distinct personalities so they learn distinguish who they like the best. So American children get to experience romantic love but girls can experience also no love and marital dysfunction due to unmet expectations.

In Samoa, the culture not the individualize parents raise their children. They have little emotional attachment because they live in large heterogeneous households, the segregation of sexes before adolescence enforced by the incest taboo, and the regimentation of friendship along relationship lines. Mead also finds the lack of children's knowledge of the basics of sex ed, birthing process, and death appalling. She thinks the nuclear family should be loser so neurosis does not develop in the family members to be like someone. Mead wants US citizens to be trained like doctors in that we are not shocked by life's major events from a baby's birth, to sexualize behaviors, to death because on any given day we are consulted on all 3 things. She is correct in thinking exposure to only one or 2 births, sex experience, and death gives the three life events a huge unsightly emotional importance in our lives.

Meads perfect childhood experience is a homogeneous society, with sex choice so one can divorce the good feelings that the sex act produces with being in love with the 1st person one sleeps with b/c the inexperienced

women equate sex with love. That is, they don't confuse lust with love. She would like us to be more open about our sexual practice incorporating oral sex, doggystyle, and women on top as normal in our repertoire.

Mead further states that while our children are divorced from seeing the use of what they are studying, Samoan children have on the job training what needs to be done so feel like they are an integral part of the community. Their life are much more unified with work and play mixing side by side with each other. They also have a lot of leeway on when to settle down so it takes away the "benchmark" age on when to do anything such as marriage by the age of 30 does not occur thus decreasing neurosis.

In conclusion, Mead stresses the negativity of choice in adolescent life inherent in American culture with its multi-cultural leanings. She blames America's heterogeneous culture for lacking to provide a common standard to raise our children in for the unnecessary angst in raising children. Because the outside world's culture is so at odds with tradition, the parents only choice is to take away the child's economic power to buy what they want. So her perfect culture is a traditional culture where there is some sort of common standard. She cites the old strictures in female sexuality, contraception, and marriage in limiting female relationship choice thus giving women more headache is largely settled in today's society.

She blames the American dream of endless working opportunities with the reality of only a fix set working opportunities with the stresses in American teenagers life. She also blames the fact that children are allowed to seek opportunities not available to their parents for the stress they feel. She blames the American dream as unrealistic in giving what seems like a choice to the choiceless.

In heterogeneous society where competing values bombards our children, she states the only way to make sure that our children come out good is not to entrench ourselves in traditional thinking but rather equip our children with the tools necessary in how to think not what to think. They must be taught tolerance and unprejudicial thinking, the responsibility of their choices lies with them alone. So, basically, she states that conservatives who want to raise their children a traditional way are out of luck b/c a society built on tolerance will have competing values and will have competing claims on their children.

Steve Van Slyke says

Just prior to taking off for Tahiti to help a friend sail his boat from there to Apia, Samoa, I bought this book hoping to learn more about Samoan culture.

Even though it was written a long time ago it could still have been interesting, and parts of it were. But for me it was slow-going and ultimately I gave up about half way through.

Samoa culture today is far from what it was back then, and judging by some of the other reviews here, what Mead was told and reported about the culture back then may not have been accurate. So if you are headed for Samoa and wanting to learn more about the islands and their people, I would look elsewhere.

Matthew says

Mead's seminal work is used by many sociology classes (including one I took during my undergraduate years) to show that many of the cultural practices we might assume are universal among humankind in fact depend upon our social context. By showing that the natives of Samoa engaged in social and sexual practices we consider to be unusual or harmful, Mead sought to highlight the malleability of humankind, and the power that culture has in shaping us into who we ultimately become.

Unfortunately for Mead, and for the millions of people who read this book and take away that lesson, Mead's work utterly fails. Much of Mead's information about island life came from her interviews with young island girls, who later admitted that they told Mead outrageous lies about sexual exploits as part of a game. Later research confirmed that the Samoan natives did not lead lives so very different from other groups, and the sociologist's love of the 'Tabula Rasa' mind has slowly given ground to the scientific fact that human societies are largely preset due to the social forces in which our species evolved.

Carolynne says

2/5 stars By the time I finished the Forward, Introduction, and Prologue, I was already tired of this book. So much of the introductory material seemed bigoted and ethnocentric that I was turned off.

Having heard of this book, and conclusions drawn from it, for most of my life, I was surprised and disappointed to learn that Mead spent only nine months doing her research before writing up this book. That seems a bit flimsy for an anthropologic study - Mead did not even see one complete cycle of the year.

Viktoria says

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Mandy says

I became fascinated with the controversy over Margaret Mead's work, so I read the original book, and then educated myself on the criticisms. Her descriptions of Samoan life are truly fascinating, and while it sounds like she got some essential details wrong, I still found the subject matter riveting. Apparently, American teenagers were just as neurotic in the 1920s as they are today.

Kyle says

The first time I encountered Margaret Mead was in a biography about Norbert Wiener. I was very impressed that Mead had written a well received book at the age of 27 in 1928 when at that time science was dominated by men. So, when I came across this book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, sitting on the shelf in the local bookstore I decided to give it a go.

Coming of Age in Samoa details the lives of adolescent Samoan girls in the early 1920s. Mead spent time observing the girls and provides an interesting look at their lives from birth to old age. Though the descriptions of the Samoan culture circa 1920 is certainly fascinating, the portion of the book that really captured my interest was the last two chapters, where Mead asks the question, "What can we learn about our society from studying the lives of the Samoans". Mead makes some insights that are just as relevant today as they were in 1928.

Mead set the stage for these latter two chapters in the beginning of the book when she asks the question, "Must adolescence always be a stormy time of rebellion and angst or is that a unique feature of Western culture?". Throughout the rest of the book the answer become clear. Adolescent girls in Samoa do not have the same turmoil and strife that adolescent girls (and boys) in America have. Mead hypothesizes that this is due to a lack of choice in Samoan culture. In Samoa, everyone believes the same things and the opportunities that a teen girl has for the future are relatively few. In comparison, an American teen is beset with limitless opportunities, and unlimited choices, which her parents, friends, and society constantly pressure her to choose from.

Mead makes a great point at the end of Chapter 13: "In all of these comparisons between Samoan and American culture, many points are useful only in throwing a spotlight upon our own solutions, while in others it is possible to find suggestions for change. Whether or not we envy other peoples one of their solutions, our attitude towards our own solutions must be greatly broadened and deepened by a consideration of the way in which other peoples have met the same problems. Realizing that our own ways are not humanely inevitable nor God-ordained, but are the fruit of a long and turbulent history, we may well examine in turn all of our institution, thrown into strong relief against the history of other civilizations, and weighing them in the balance, be not afraid to find them wanting."

This is a point I think is vital to how we live and raise our children. The struggles of our youth or our culture in general are due to the details of our culture, not fate or some inevitable part of the human process.

Mead's words 80 years ago haunt me, because she saw the same problems we face today. "At the present time we live in a period of transition. We have many standards but we still believe that only one standard can be the right one. We present to our children the picture of a battle-field where each group is fully armored in the conviction of the righteousness of its cause. And each of these groups makes forays among the next generation. But it is unthinkable that a final recognition of the great number of ways in which man, during the course of history and at the present time, is solving the problems of life, should not bring with it in turn the downfall of our belief in a single standard."

Unfortunately, it is now eighty years since Mead has written those words and I believe that our society still is filled with these battles between camps of righteousness. Mead stated that:
The children must be taught how to think, not what to think.

And I don't think we do that.

In Mead's words, "Education, in the home even more than at school, instead of being a special pleading for on regime, a desperate attempt to form one particular habit of mind which will withstand all outside

influences, must be a preparation for those very influences...And even more importantly, this child of the future must have an open mind. The home must cease to plead an ethical cause or a religious belief with smiles or frowns, caresses or threats. The children must be taught how to think, not what to think And because old errors die slowly, they must be taught tolerance, just as today they are taught intolerance. They must be taught that many ways are open to them, no one sanctioned above its alternative, and that upon them alone lies the burden of choice.”

I wish this was how our education system functioned. I long for the day when raising a child to be racist is viewed the same as physically abusing a child. I hope that I can raise my children to be tolerant and to not try and force my beliefs upon them.

Of course, the tricky part is finding where you draw the line. Obviously you need to instill in a child the idea of right and wrong. However, I would argue (and I believe Mead’s writing supports this) that right and wrong are very subjective things and culturally based. So how can I teach a child right and wrong without also inflicting upon them whatever “regime” (as Mead calls it) I subscribe to?

So the questions are:

- 1.)How can you teach a child to think and to keep an open mind while also teaching them the values that are near and dear to your heart?
- 2.)Should society as a whole get involved with how you teach your child these things? We as a society already step in where there is evidence of physical or sexual abuse. Should society step in for mental abuse as well? Should we consider it just as neglectful when Dad teaches Little Johnny to hate as when he beats Little Johnny?

C?r???lu says

A famous classical anthropological book, easy to read even for laymen, it lacks much depth and novelty. Or perhaps it seems so in retrospective. Mead sets out to answer the question: is adolescence necessarily as turbulent as it is in our society? To find out, she investigates the coming of age process in Samoa. Although the ethnographic account may not be thorough enough, it provides some useful insights. The Samoans were very “chill” people. The children had responsibilities and tasks since an early age, but the relationship with parents wasn't very demanding. As they grew up, they could choose to move to any relatives if home wasn't good enough. The relationships in Samoa aren't as emotionally-laden as in our society. Sex experimentation is normal after puberty and later, sex is seen simply as a pleasurable activity that is a goal in itself, and is detached from more complex, complicating connotations. In a relationship, status matters more. Samoan life benefited from a good climate with abundance during the whole year, a small population and excellent geographic conditions, favoring a social organisations that hardly creates any conditions for conflict. More than that, what helps is the lack of emotional intensity and involvement, so when conflicts or violence arise, they are not the same as we understand them. They lack the psychological load which we attribute to them here. So adolescence is a far less turbulent period in Samoa. (I skip the details, but Mead describes in minute details the growing up process)

Mead then uses this conclusion to criticise modern society and education. According to her, some of the main faults of these are that the education bears little to no relation to real-life and, worse, the child is aware of that. Then, in a society with such a vast amount of alternatives, the need to choose is a constant pressure upon the child and the youth. The choice leads to conflicts with rejected alternatives, with other members and parts of society. The choices are also rarely coherent internally. Parents usually try to press certain choices upon the child and the relationship between them is often dramatic, tense, possessive, conflictual.

Jenny (Reading Envy) says

I'm finally leaving New Guinea behind in an attempt to read about some other parts of Oceania before the end of the year. After reading Euphoria by Lily King, which is loosely based on Margaret Mead's earliest research, I wanted to go back and read some of her work from that time period. This book is her first, pre-dating the work she would do next in New Guinea.

I'm not sure what to think. There are claims now that she was lied to by the women and that many of the young girls made up stories of sexual activity, but that sounds like church-related coverup to me, not knowing anything about it. Even when she wrote this book, missionaries had taken root there, attempting to change the cultural practices governing various elements of everyday life. She even puts the girls living with the missionaries in a different category of girlhood because of the additional restrictions they had on their life. I wasn't there, it's hard to really know, but I do appreciate her early anthropological work with groups of women. Of course this was by necessity since it is difficult for a female scholar to enter into a traditional society's male groups, but since not many women worked as anthropologists back then, her research is bound to be different.

Between this book and Growing Up in New Guinea, it is clear that Mead is deeply interested in the nature vs. nurture debate. She spends considerable time pontificating on the education system of the United States vs. New Guinea (and here, Samoa) and tries to explain or suggest solutions for what she sees as problems and successes in both places. These were the least interesting parts of each of the books to me, because I just don't think it's as simple as she tries to make it. But this is very much a reflection of the time she did her research in the field of anthropology, in a world where very few cultural groups were isolated and untainted by the inevitable "other."

I did love the chapters on dance and personality, presenting a very unique perspective.

You know, I have a highschool classmate that married a Samoan, and I'm tempted to ask her if they have any opinions on this text!

Dane O'Leary says

This is a book I'd throw up to tell someone why I love anthropology so much. With Coming of Age, Mead essentially made ethnography and anthropological studies accessible to the mainstream. This book weaves illustrative description with comparisons to Western adolescent life in a way that really illustrates the message of the book: Adolescence isn't universally a time of turmoil, but rather is a result of Western civilization on the process of growing up.

Beautifully written, but easy to read. I'd recommend this to anyone interested in other cultures and how social experience varies with your surroundings.
