

## Chapter 2

### *Love and The Work of Culture*

Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead

The central points of this chapter are how Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict constructed their personal and professional lives, how they defined questions about culture, male and female, and how their questions stick around for other generations to ask. Their work lays the foundation for what has developed into Sexuality and Queer Studies, and their research expanded out of their own cultural confines to discover the alternatives. This is a good place to talk about friendships between women, correlating careers with family and love life, anthropological research and fieldwork, definitions of culture, and the problems with categories such as lesbian, bisexual, normal, deviant, masculine or feminine.

Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict are confusing to many students who may want to fit them into contemporary categories and political struggles. Some students assume that what they call “sexual orientations” or “sexual identities” are somehow biological or “natural.” Sometimes they seem to think that people “fall in love” with one person at a time, that husbands help working wives, or that friendship between women is shallow or troubled. It is important to emphasize these women’s own definitions of themselves, the temperament of those times and the impact of their writings.

#### **KEY TERMS**

temperament  
fieldwork  
cultural relativism

#### **FILM AND VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS**

Margaret Mead: An Observer Observed  
1996; 85 minutes

Documents Margaret Mead’s life, fieldwork, and influence.

Filmakers Library: <http://filmmakers.com/index.php?a=filmDetail&filmID=673>

#### **ISSUES WORTH EXPLORING**

- The Library of Congress has created an online exhibit of Margaret Mead’s fieldwork. It is a fascinating site to explore, with photos of her during her various research projects and notes written in her own hand: [www.loc.gov/exhibits/mead](http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/mead)
- Fieldwork methods: This chapter provides another opportunity to discuss the history and methods of fieldwork in the social sciences. How do researchers design their studies? Why does this design sometimes fail to materialize? Then what? What is the value of qualitative versus quantitative data? How do researchers overcome bias? How do issues of consent differ today than they did in Mead and Benedict’s time? How do restudies elucidate the changes brought by time, perspective, and globalization?

- Writing women's lives: What is the relationship of women's personal lives to their professional development? This chapter is a good place to discuss this important question since Benedict and Mead brought their multifaceted personal lives into anthropology and, indeed, appear to have worked out questions about themselves not on therapists' couches, but in their careers, poems and books. Biographies and autobiographies are a great place to start. Several of these are listed at the end of the chapter in the text.
- Several edited volumes are relevant to a discussion of women as fieldworkers, anthropologists, and archaeologists: Ute Gacs, Aisha Khan, Jerrie McIntyre, and Ruth Weinberg edited *Women Anthropologists: Selected Biographies* (1989, University of Illinois). Those in the generations that followed wrote these extremely informative and helpful biographies of earlier women anthropologists. Peggy Golde edited *Women in the Field: Anthropological Experiences* (1986, University of California); she includes very readable accounts of doing fieldwork by a number of formidable women scholars who loved the discipline of anthropology and the work of culture. The patterns of professionalism are particularly revealing.
- Cheryl Claassen edited *Women in Archaeology* (1994, University of Pennsylvania Press), which documents and discusses the exclusion or marginalization of women in archaeology and the resulting male-centered research results. Claassen and her colleagues elaborate patterns of discrimination, determination, and ingenuity; they show female professionals who are underemployed, underpaid and underpromoted within an essentially all-male establishment. There are examples here of women whose choices are conditioned by their roles as wives and mothers.
- *Women Writing Culture* (1995) edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon, *Feminist Dilemmas in Fieldwork* (1996) edited by Diane L. Wolf, and *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay: Personal Essays, Public Ideas* (2000) by Esther Newton contain many revealing essays centered on issues faced by women during fieldwork, women engaged in the profession of anthropology, and women as the subjects of anthropology.
- In the three examples that Mead studied on the Sepik River, breast-feeding practices seem to predict features of adult sexuality. Is this an example of patterns of culture? Do these patterns appear in all cultures?
- Being a wife and a mother were very important to Mead. How much did she project her personal feelings onto others? How is mothering or being a mother culturally constructed? If ethnographers do not describe breastfeeding practices, child-rearing, or female sexuality is it because they just took these for granted as something women "naturally" do?
- Margaret Mead's book, *Male and Female* (1949, Morrow) is quite dated. However, several very salient points have entered popular consciousness. The main ones are her speculations about the asymmetries of gender and the differences between men and women's lives. The basic viewpoint is that males do not bear children; their paternity is only by the grace of a woman. This has consequences. For some, it means that men must control women as child-bearers—both to have children and to be secure about their paternity. Mead thought that men must also have other means of self-expression and status, in addition to fathering. So what do men do, she asks?

In every known human society, the male's need for achievement can be recognized. Men may cook, or weave or dress dolls or hunt hummingbirds, but if such activities are appropriate occupations of men, then the whole society, men and women alike, votes them as important. When women perform the same occupations, they are regarded as less important. In a great number of human societies men's sureness of their sex role is tied up with their right, or ability, to practice some activity that women are not allowed to practice. Their maleness, in fact, has to be underwritten by preventing women from entering some field or performing some feat (1949:168).

- Mead conjectured that male activities are not only different because of biological differences (sexual dimorphism) but even the same activities when done by men would be regarded as more important than the same activities done by women.
- Students occasionally ask about the many evolutionary, historic, revisionist or postmodernist critiques of Margaret Mead's work. A few remember Derek Freeman's controversial analysis—*Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*, (Harvard University Press, 1983). If you feel like jumping in the deep end of this vast pool, you might like a book edited by Lenora Foerstel and Angela Gilliam, *Confronting the Margaret Mead Legacy: Scholarship, Empire, and the South Pacific* (Temple University Press, 1992). One key question about this controversy for those of us in Women's Studies is not who is right or wrong, not Mead's faults as a scholar. Some major issues are how women are represented, misrepresented, and unrepresented both in research and in professional development. Why has Margaret Mead, now deceased, attracted such a firestorm of attention? How does this compare to the controversy surrounding Rigoberta's testimonial mentioned in the Introduction?

## QUESTIONS STUDENTS ASK

- Could a man have written *Sex and Temperament? Patterns of Culture*? How have the meanings given to the terms "sex" and "gender" changed since Margaret Mead's time?
- If their culture was so unpleasant, why didn't the Mundugumor just leave it and go somewhere else? Maybe live with the Arapesh?
- O.K., it's one thing to talk about cultural relativism. But there has to be some cross-cultural reality, the bottom line that we can call "feminine" and "masculine." What is it?
- What is "being in the field" or "doing field work" like? How is fieldwork different for men than for women?
- How come my other (anthropology) classes never discussed Mead and Benedict? Why haven't I heard about their contributions to anthropology?
- What was the division of labor among the three groups Mead studied? Are there any cultures where men do women's work? Do men ever assume the same moral and emotional responsibilities in these societies as women do? In any human societies?

- The inevitable “talk show questions:” Was Margaret a feminist? Was she really “bisexual?” Was she “out” at the Museum? Did her husbands know about her and Ruth? What did her daughter Catherine think? Did the way Margaret raised her daughter hurt her? How did they get away with being so unconventional? If Margaret was such a free thinker, why did she worry about or bother about being a good wife? So what do we call the relationship between Margaret and Ruth: love, friendship, lesbian? If she was such a professional, so strong-minded, why did she put up with Reo’s assignment of fieldwork? Why didn’t Margaret make Reo help in the house?

## QUESTIONS FOR EXAMINATIONS

1. Margaret Mead and Ruth Fulton Benedict first met:
  - a. while Benedict was studying in Samoa.
  - b. as undergraduate students in the 1920s.
  - c. when Benedict taught Mead at Columbia University.
  - d. through Mead’s husband Reo Fortune.

Answer: C

2. Margaret Mead wrote all of the following except \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*
  - b. *Coming of Age in Samoa*
  - c. *Patterns of Culture*
  - d. Mead wrote all of the above texts.

Answer: C

3. What are the three societies Mead discusses in her book, *Sex and Temperament*?
  - a. Arapesh, Samoan, Iatmul
  - b. Arapesh, Mundugumor, Tchambuli
  - c. Samoan, Tchambuli, Iatmul
  - d. Mundugumor, Tchambuli, Cressman

Answer: B

4. The Mundugumor could be said to have which gendered personality pattern in Mead’s view?
  - a. women and men are temperamentally different, with women being dominant
  - b. women and men are temperamentally similar, both being nurturing and cooperative, the so-called “feminine”
  - c. women and men are temperamentally similar, both being aggressive and competitive, the so-called “masculine”
  - d. neither men nor women acted within their cultural ethos

Answer: C

5. Deeply feeling the restrictions of American culture, Ruth Benedict \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. was a radical even in her early years at college
  - b. refused to marry and bear children in order to protest male dominance over women
  - c. faced moments of serious self-doubt and suicidal thoughts
  - d. spent her later years traveling the globe to forget the problems she faced in the U.S.

Answer: C

6. In 1925, Mead set off for fieldwork research in \_\_\_\_\_.
- Manus
  - Samoa
  - the Grand Canyon
  - New Guinea

*Answer: B*

7. Which of the following best characterizes how Tchambuli women nurse their children?
- Nursing is business-like and rushed, and leads to anger and struggle by the infants.
  - Mother and child enjoy nursing; infants are focused upon, played with, breastfed slowly, and caressed.
  - Nursing is friendly, though impersonal, casual, and unobsessive, and is an accompaniment to other, unrelated activity.
  - Nursing is strictly a personal matter between mother and child.

*Answer: C*

8. Ruth Benedict is most famous for her book, entitled \_\_\_\_\_.
- Naven
  - Coming of Age in Samoa
  - Margaret and Me
  - Patterns of Culture

*Answer: D*

9. Male ethnographers have tended to notice women's economic roles and autonomous activities \_\_\_\_\_.
- about as often as female ethnographers have done
  - less often than female ethnographers have done
  - more often than female ethnographers have done
  - only when they do fieldwork with their wives

*Answer: B*

10. Mead applied her experiences of other cultures to \_\_\_\_\_.
- giving birth to her own child
  - her own rearing of her child
  - the households she formed over time
  - all of the above

*Answer: D*

11. Mead's daughter Cathy grew up in her mother's large, unusual and extended households. This demonstrates that \_\_\_\_\_.
- Cathy's father, Gregory Bateson, was unwilling to help in raising his daughter
  - there is more than one correct or right way to raise children
  - Mead didn't have to worry about balancing work and child-raising
  - Mead was determined to blend in with the natives in whatever culture she studied

*Answer: B*

12. The World-War II-era project Research in Contemporary Cultures \_\_\_\_\_.
- allowed Benedict and Mead to collaborate on innovative research
  - revealed the ways women work with each other and with men when circumstances permit
  - focused its attention on interdisciplinary and collaborative research
  - all of the above

*Answer: D*

13. Which of the following statements about Margaret Mead is incorrect?
- Gregory Bateson's jealousy and possessiveness drove Mead to divorce him.
  - Mead often had to bend gently to the wishes of her husbands or other male authority figures.
  - Mead was more concerned with the public learning of her same-sex relationship than was Benedict.
  - The intellectual exchanges between Mead, Bateson, and Fortune probably wrought profound changes in the discipline of anthropology.

*Answer: A*

14. To Benedict and Mead, war \_\_\_\_\_.
- is not a biological instinct or innate human drive
  - releases tensions brought about by continued conflict between men and women
  - through psychological intimidation is more effective than combat with firearms
  - all of the above

*Answer: A*

15. Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune decided on their first field site in New Guinea \_\_\_\_\_.
- based on advice from Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict
  - because male-female relations in New Guinea societies resembled those Mead and Fortune saw in their own marriage
  - when they became stranded in the mountains of New Guinea
  - to escape the conflicts of World War II

*Answer: C*

16. Both Benedict and Mead \_\_\_\_\_.
- believed that they were misfits in American culture
  - challenged conventional ideas about "unnatural" love and relationships
  - wrote best-selling popular books that are still read
  - all of the above

*Answer: D*

17. Experiencing pregnancy and motherhood in her middle years, Mead \_\_\_\_\_.
- felt anxious having to stay home for long periods of time
  - was explicitly grateful to avoid the desperation and panic many younger mothers feel
  - became unable to continue with her work on cultural relativism and mothering
  - gave her husband full responsibility for their child, as a test of her sex role theories

*Answer: B*

18. In her reexamination of the Tchambuli, Deborah Gewertz found that \_\_\_\_\_.
- men were much less artistically talented than Mead indicated
  - Mead neglected to account for recent Tchambuli migration history
  - Mead's observation and ethnographic skills were rudimentary at best
  - conflict had replaced formerly-peaceful equalitarian relations between group members

*Answer: B*

19. The book *Patterns of Culture* \_\_\_\_\_.
- popularized the perspective of cultural relativism
  - argued that women are second-class citizens only in certain cultural contexts
  - invoked serious criticism from anthropologists who feared its humanistic approach
  - all of the above

*Answer: D*

20. With which of the following statements would Margaret Mead agree?
- Biological sex is more important than culture in determining personality.
  - Arapesh teen girls avoid distress by seeking monogamous relationships.
  - Middle age is a time when women universally experience "menopausal zest."
  - The concepts of normal and abnormal vary from one culture to another.

*Answer: D*

## **ESSAY QUESTIONS**

- Ruth Benedict's work popularized cultural relativism in anthropology. Why was this so important? Include a definition of cultural relativism in your response.
- In romantic relationships, Mead continually found herself encountering the dynamics she wished to analyze in fieldwork. What are some of those recurring themes?
- Compare and contrast the three Sepik River cultures Mead studied. Which of the three seems most familiar to you, and why?
- Why did Mead face such criticism for her book *Sex and Temperament*?
- What was the sexual division of labor in Mead's households and with each of her husbands? How did having a baby change her work?