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Margaret Mead and the Study of Socialization

L. L. LANGNESS

The scientific study of socialization began little more than fifty years ago. Margaret Mead's professional career began at approximately the same time. This is not merely coincidental, although the direct relationship between the two events might be seen more clearly if *cross-cultural* studies of socialization are emphasized (Williams 1972). Is there by now any informed person who is unaware of the impact made on such studies by Mead's first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*? And if we have so incorporated the early lessons Mead gave us into our scientific tradition that we have lost sight of their significance, perhaps we should pause for review:

It was a simple—a very simple—point to which our materials were organized in the 1920's, merely the documentation over and over of the fact that human nature is not rigid and unyielding, not an unadaptable plant which insists on flowering or becoming stunted after its own fashion, responding only quantitatively to the social environment, but that it is extraordinarily adaptable, that cultural rhythms are stronger

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and more compelling than the physiological rhythms which they overlay and distort, that the failure to satisfy an artificial, culturally stimulated need—for outdistancing one's neighbors in our society, for instance, or for wearing the requisite number of dog's teeth among the Manus—may produce more unhappiness and frustration in the human breast than the most rigorous cultural curtailments of the physiological demands of sex or hunger. We had to present evidence that human character is built upon a biological base which is capable of enormous diversification in terms of social standards (Mead, 1939a:x).

It is easy to confuse simplicity with unimportance. The importance of this shift in our view of human nature, as well as Margaret Mead's contribution to it, a shift that broke the stranglehold biology and genetics held on studies of child development, simply cannot be overemphasized (Hallowell 1955, Langness 1974, Simpson 1958). *Coming of Age in Samoa*, subtitled "A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization," was the first intensive study of what was to become the subdiscipline known as Culture and Personality (Honigman 1972:125). We have by now become so accustomed to prefacing our statements, "in this culture," we tend to forget that it was not always so.

Although Mead made her second field trip to Manus specifically to study animistic thinking, she ultimately included mention of this only as an appendix to the more general book that resulted from it, *Growing Up in New Guinea*. Perhaps she did this because the results were negative, perhaps because, as she said at the time, she wanted to wait until she had replicated the study in an additional society. In any case, the result seems to have been to minimize the importance of an early, convincing, and still unsurpassed challenge to what still hangs on in some circles as part of a general theory of intelligence:

The results of these various lines of investigation show that Manus children not only show no tendency towards spontaneous animistic thought, but that they also show what may perhaps legitimately be termed as negativism towards explanations couched in animistic rather than practical cause and effect terms. The Manus child is less spontaneously animistic and less traditionally animistic than is the Manus adult. This result is a direct contradiction of findings in our own society, in which the child has been found to be more animistic, in both traditional and

spontaneous fashions, than are his elders. When such a reversal is found in two contrasting societies, the explanation must obviously be sought in terms of the culture; a purely psychological explanation is inadequate (Mead 1932b:186).

Only now, 40 years later, is serious attention once again being directed to comparative studies of basic cognitive processes (Cole and Scribner 1973, Price-Williams 1975). "The Comparative Study of Primitive Education," the subtitle of *Growing Up in New Guinea*, was not only a broader field of inquiry which included her study of thinking, but also developed, of course, into what we now conceive of as the cross-cultural study of socialization.

Mead's field work on the Omaha reservation in 1930, although terribly unpleasant for her (Mead 1972), resulted in *The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe* (1932a). This was one of the earliest full-length treatments of culture change, an interest that was to become formalized in anthropology in the 1930s and 1940s (Keesing 1953); and it was certainly one of the earliest "acculturation" studies (Siegal 1955). Mead has herself commented upon this:

The first real evidence of the emergence of a new viewpoint that gave weight to both sides of a culture contact situation came only in 1935 with the publication of a first report by the Social Science Research Council's Subcommittee on Acculturation and with the appearance of a paper by Gregory Bateson, in which, using techniques that anticipated cybernetic methods, he included both groups within an analyzable system. For my own awareness of the problem I owe a special debt to my mother's study, "The Italian on the Land," which I watched her make when I was four. In her research, she treated Italians as future members of the society into which they had migrated and regarded the nature of that society as relevant to their lives. I also knew and appreciated the work of Christie MacLeod who, in writing *The American Indian Frontier*, had taken into account the interrelationships that shaped Euro-American culture contacts (Mead 1966a:xiv-xv).

Thus it is fair to say, I believe, that by 1932 Margaret Mead had settled on the three major and closely related interests she would thenceforth pursue: Culture and Personality studies, Education, and Culture Change. Virtually all of her subsequent work has dealt with one or the other of these general topics. Over the years she

has continually narrowed, refocused, or expanded her views as her experience has required. In addition, and running through all of her work, from *Coming of Age in Samoa* to the present, has been a serious and explicit concern with methodology. It is ironic that although Mead has been subjected to endless criticism about her presumed lack of methodological rigor, she has been far more open and honest about her methods than have most other anthropologists (Harris 1968). She has been methodologically innovative as, for example, in her work on animistic thought where she employed children's drawings, psychological tests, and experimental observations (Mead 1931, 1932*b*), on Bali where she introduced new photographic and recording techniques (Bateson and Mead 1942, Mead and MacGregor 1951), and on national character where she had to develop techniques for studying culture at a distance and cope with a difficult problem of sampling (Mead 1951*c*, 1953*b*, Mead and Metraux 1953). She has also often clarified anthropological methods for others (Mead 1933, 1939*b*, 1946, 1954, 1956*c*, 1969, 1970*a*).

Margaret Mead's interest in education, and particularly in American education, led her to recognize very early in her career that if a social scientist wished to be heard and to make an impact it would be necessary to appeal directly to the public rather than to peers. Thus she addressed her first books, and, indeed, most of her subsequent work, to the public. Even so, she did not, strictly speaking, "popularize" in the derogatory sense that has often been charged. There is no doubt that Mead was entirely aware of what she was doing:

I can emphasize that this was the first piece of anthropological fieldwork which was written without the paraphernalia of scholarship designed to mystify the lay reader and confound one's colleagues. It seemed to me then—and it still does—that if our studies of the way of life of other peoples are to be meaningful to the peoples of the industrialized world, they must be written for them and not wrapped up in technical jargon for specialists. As this book was about adolescents, I tried to couch it in language that would be communicative to those who had most to do with adolescents—teachers, parents, and soon-to-be parents. I did not write it as a popular book, but only with the hope that it would be intelligible to those who might make the best use of its theme, that adolescence need not be the time of stress and strain which Western society made it; that growing up could be freer and easier and less complicated (Mead 1973).

In this way, as we all know, Mead has long been the foremost spokesman for the profession and she has done more for the public awareness of anthropology than any other anthropologist.

It is in the area of education that Mead's particular concern with socialization is most directly apparent. But it is important to recognize that education, as Mead employs the term in her early work, implies not only the institutionalized and formal methods of schooling employed in the Western world, but also the completely informal and unstructured means employed in the small-scale, preliterate world. The term education is employed by her synonymously with socialization. Neither term, however, describes precisely what she was attempting to study. The term that best describes it—enculturation—did not appear until 1948 when it was introduced by Melville J. Herskovits (Titiev 1964:239).

The aspects of the learning experience which mark off man from other creatures, and by means of which, initially, and in later life, he achieves competence in his culture, may be called *enculturation*. This is in essence a process of conscious or unconscious conditioning, exercised within the limits sanctioned by a given body of custom. From this process not only is all adjustment to social living achieved, but also all those satisfactions that, though they are of course a part of social experience, derive from individual expression rather than association with others in the group (Herskovits 1948:39).

In the introduction to *Coming of Age in Samoa* Mead had defined her task as follows:

because of the particular problem which we set out to answer, this tale of another way of life is mainly concerned with education, with the process by which the baby, arrived cultureless upon the human scene, becomes a full-fledged adult member of his or her society (1928:13).

Her opening sentence in *Growing Up in New Guinea*:

The way in which each human infant is transformed into the finished adult, into the complicated individual version of his city and his century is one of the most fascinating studies open to the curious minded (1930:1).

And then later:

We have followed the Manus baby through its formative years to adulthood, seen its indifference towards adult life turn into attentive participation, its idle scoffing at the supernatural change into an anxious sounding of the wishes of the spirits, its easy-going generous communism turn into grasping individualistic acquisitiveness. The process of education is complete. The Manus baby, born into the world without motor habits, without speech, without any definite forms of behavior, with neither beliefs nor enthusiasms, has become the Manus adult in every particular. No cultural item has slipped out of the stream of tradition which the elders transmit in this irregular unorganised fashion to their children, transmit by a method which seems to us so haphazard, so unpremeditated, so often definitely hostile to its ultimate ends (1930:259–260).

Many other examples can be found. Mead appears to have never been particularly interested in how an infant becomes *social*, or even in how it becomes *human*. She was interested from first to last in how it becomes *cultural*—and she seems to have meant cultural in a remarkably sophisticated, meaningful, and modern sense. The contemporary concept of culture that would come the closest to what she had in mind would perhaps be that of Clifford Geertz:

We are, in sum, incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture—and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it: Dobuan and Javanese, Hopi and Italian, upper-class and lower-class, academic and commercial. Man's great capacity for learning, his plasticity, has often been remarked, but what is even more critical is his extreme dependency upon a certain sort of learning: the attainment of concepts, the apprehension and application of specific systems of symbolic meaning. Beavers build dams, birds build nests, bees locate food, baboons organize social groups, and mice mate on the basis of forms of learning that rest predominantly on the instructions encoded in their genes and evoked by appropriate patterns of external stimuli: physical keys inserted into organic locks. But men build dams or shelters, locate food, organize their social groups, or find sexual partners under the guidance of instructions encoded in flow charts and blueprints, hunting lore, moral systems, and aesthetic judgments: conceptual structures molding formless talents (Geertz 1965:113).

The distinction involved here between enculturation and socialization is by no means trivial:

So it is important to reaffirm the difference between the study of enculturation—the process of learning a culture in all its uniqueness and particularity—and the study of socialization—the set of specieswide requirements and exactions made on human beings by human societies. Unless, in each case, the full details of enculturation are recorded and, later, are examined as meticulously as are techniques of drumming or singing, and are analyzed, in context, in many systematically chosen cultures, the probability of our developing a cross-culturally viable theory of socialization is negligible.

Each time a member of some other discipline arrives at a generalization about socialization based on an indiscriminate use of anthropological materials, each time an anthropologist applies to his own work the treatment of socialization currently in vogue in the behavioral sciences, which has not passed through the refining crucible of comparative study of enculturation, the confusion is further compounded. Controversies arise in which the anthropologist, or someone with a genuine knowledge of enculturation, objects that the particular generalization made by a behavioral scientist does not take culture (by which he means *cultures*) into account; in reply, the behavioral scientist insists that he has taken as a basic premise the idea that man is a cultural animal, that all culture is learned, and so forth. But to the extent that they are talking past each other, the controversy remains unresolved (Mead 1963:187).

It is probably true to say that although she rarely bothered to define it, Mead employed the concept of culture throughout her entire career far more consistently, insightfully, and successfully than most other scholars. This is at least partly responsible for her success and durability as an anthropologist. Although she was influenced by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, as her monograph, *Kinship in the Admiralty Islands* (1934) shows, she was not led astray as were many of her peers by the simplicities of Radcliffe-Brown's version of structuralism. She retained and used the concept of culture in spite of Radcliffe-Brown's insistence (1957) that there could be no science of culture. Likewise, she was not plunged into relative inertia because of the difficulties of operationalizing or defining culture as were still others of her colleagues. Mead continued to demonstrate in her articles, books, and lectures just what completely cultural animals we really are. If her early work, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935) is a dubious but plausible overstatement of this, *Male and Female* (1949) is a more mature and convincing one. Even more convincing is the work on Balinese

character (Bateson and Mead 1942, Mead and MacGregor 1951) and the work on culture and national character she conducted during and just after World War II. *And Keep Your Powder Dry* (1942), Mead's penetrating analysis of American character, is perhaps the best single example here, with *Soviet Attitudes Toward Authority* (1951b) being another very good one.

While it may be true that theory is more often implicit than explicit in Mead's work, it has always been informed by a clearly formulated, consistent, and strongly held view of the nature of man and culture (Webb 1968). Furthermore, she has never been uncomfortable when grappling with explicit theoretical issues in the study of culture. Her theoretical position is probably best seen in such works as "The Concept of Culture and the Psychosomatic Approach" (1947), *The Study of Culture at a Distance* (Mead and Metraux 1953), "The Cross-Cultural Approach to the Study of Personality" (1956a), "Cultural Determinants of Behavior" (1958) and *Continuities in Cultural Evolution* (1964). That the culture concept has become recognized as the "most central problem of all social science" (Malinowski 1939:588), "the foundation stone of the social sciences" (Chase 1948:59), "the key concept of anthropology" (Devereux 1956:23), and so on, is in important measure due to the persistence and talent Margaret Mead brought to her work.

Although Mead worked in cultures that can easily be thought of as exotic, and although she wrote books that often became popular, she never indulged in sensationalism, nor did she concentrate on the esoteric. Her work has always been serious and comparative; it has most frequently contrasted other ways of life with those of her countrymen. In *Coming of Age in Samoa* she discussed American educational problems as they related to her findings about Samoa. In *Growing Up in New Guinea* she did likewise. This early interest grew and developed in literally hundreds of conferences, articles, and lectures and led eventually to *The School in American Culture* (1951a). While Webb's claim that, "with the exception of the technical monographs (for example her work on the Mountain Arapeh) she never really has written about anything other than Western society," (1968:158) cannot be taken seriously, it is quite apparent, as he also suggests, that two of her major interests have always been the reformation of American culture and the creation of a better world. Her attitude towards this can be seen clearly in the

following passage from *Balinese Character*, written just as America was entering the Second World War:

we are faced with the problem of building a new world; we have to re-orient the old values of many contrasting and contradictory cultural systems into a new form which will use but transcend them all, draw on their respective strengths and allow for their respective weaknesses. We have to build a culture richer and more rewarding than any that the world has ever seen. This can only be done through a disciplined science of human relations and such a science is built by drawing out from very detailed, concrete materials, such as these, the relevant abstractions—the vocabulary which will help us to plan an integrated world (Bateson and Mead 1942:xvi).

Insofar as anthropology and the other social sciences had as their original purpose the idea of social reform (Becker 1971), and as the current trend in the social sciences is quite clearly back towards this original and only meaningful purpose (Hymes 1969), Mead's attitude and consistency on this point, which has often been denigrated in the recent past, must surely be seen as a virtue.

Mead's continuing interest in culture change, which originated with *The Changing Culture of an Indian Tribe*, eventually resulted in the practical manual *Cultural Patterns and Technical Change* (1953a). Her revisit to Manus, twenty-five years after her initial field work there, rather drastically revised her views of the process of culture change:

The transformation I witnessed in 1953 taught me a great deal about social change—change within one generation—and about the way a people who were well led could take their future in their own hands. It helped correct the widely held belief that slow change, however uneven, was preferable to rapid change. The Manus children I studied earlier, in 1928, had taught me about the consequences of the kind of education advocated by contemporary educators. For Manus children, given great freedom, grew up to accept—even though grudgingly—the standards of the adult world. I learned that it is not enough to depend on the next generation; adults themselves must take part in change (Mead 1966b).

New Lives for Old: Cultural Transformation—Manus, 1928–1953 (1956b), although not the first restudy of a culture done by anthropologists, was an unusually dramatic example, and it quickly

became one of the best-known and most influential studies of its kind. As above, it questioned for the first time the assumption that culture change must go slowly if it were not to be disruptive. More important, it helped to shape and clarify Mead's theoretical position with respect to the evolution and microevolution of culture as recorded in *Continuities in Cultural Evolution*, and it also helped her to formulate her recent and insightful *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap*. The contrast Mead develops in *Culture and Commitment*, between *postfigurative*, *cofigurative*, and *prefigurative cultures*,¹ although perhaps not as completely developed as we might wish, is one that deserves our most serious attention. It is one of only a few formulations dealing with the immensity of the changes confronting us that does not confuse the contemporary situation *subjectively* viewed (the young have always rebelled against authority, etc.) with the same situation *objectively* viewed (the position of young people in the world today is, in fact, totally without precedent). Only an anthropologist with Margaret Mead's interests and vast experience—with socialization and enculturation, cognition, with culture change and communication, and with evolution—could convincingly write as follows:

Today, as we are coming to understand better the circular processes through which culture is developed and transmitted, we recognize that man's most human characteristic is not his ability to learn, which he shares with many other species, but his ability to teach and store what others have developed and taught him. Learning, which is based on human dependency, is relatively simple. But human capacities for creating elaborate teachable systems, for understanding and utilizing the resources of the natural world, and for governing society and creating imaginary worlds, all these are very complex. In the past, men relied on the least elaborate part of the circular system, the dependent learning by children, for continuity of transmission and for the embodiment of the new. Now, with our greater understanding of the process, we must cultivate the most flexible and complex part of the system—the behavior of adults. We must, in fact, teach ourselves how to alter adult behavior so that we can give up postfigurative upbringing, with its tolerated con-

1. Postfigurative cultures are those in which children learn primarily from their forebears. Cofigurative cultures are those in which both children and adults learn from their peers. A prefigurative culture is one in which adults learn from their children as well as from their forebears and peers (see Mead 1970b).

figurative components, and discover prefigurative ways of teaching and learning that will keep the future open. We must create new models for adults who can teach their children not what to learn, but how to learn and not what they should be committed to, but the value of commitment (1970*b*:72).

In spite of her emphasis on children, Mead never restricted her work merely to child-rearing practices, emphasizing instead the wider cultural context and the roles of siblings, parents, and grandparents in the enculturative process. She recognized very early that much of the study of enculturation—the process of transmitting particular cultural forms and symbols to particular individuals and groups—revolved around the problem of communication; and she also realized early that the communicative process was not entirely verbal. Whereas all of this might be said to be merely implicit in her early work, it was the early work (with the added stimulus of Gregory Bateson's similarly emerging ideas on culture and communication) that guided her to undertake the remarkable study of Balinese character. *Balinese Character* was an attempt to demonstrate, on the one hand, how culture is organized and communicated in all its nuances from generation to generation, and, on the other, how anthropologists could communicate their knowledge of this process to others without relying so exclusively on the printed word. It was a most rewarding experiment which has, unfortunately, never been replicated. The best statement of what they were attempting is found in their own introduction to the book:

In this monograph we are attempting a new method of stating the intangible relationships among different types of culturally standardized behavior by placing side by side mutually relevant photographs. Pieces of behavior, spatially and contextually separated—a trance dancer being carried in procession, a man looking up at an aeroplane, a servant greeting his master in a play, the painting of a dream—may all be relevant to a single discussion; the same emotional thread may run through them. To present them together in words, it is necessary either to resort to devices which are inevitably literary, or to dissect the living scenes so that only desiccated items remain.

By the use of photographs, the wholeness of each piece of behavior can be preserved, while the special cross-referencing desired can be obtained by placing the series of photographs on the same page. It is pos-

sible to avoid the artificial construction of a scene at which a man, watching a dance, also looks up at an aeroplane and has a dream; it is also possible to avoid diagramming the single element in these scenes which we wish to stress—the importance of levels in Balinese interpersonal relationships—in such a way that the reality of the scenes themselves is destroyed.

This is not a book about Balinese custom, but about the Balinese—about the way in which they, as living persons, moving, standing, eating, sleeping, dancing, and going into trance, embody that abstraction which (after we have abstracted it) we technically call culture (Bateson and Mead 1942:xii).

This was an ambitious attempt to avoid the earlier, more literary style of Mead, without resorting to the analytic extremes of Bateson's early work, *Naven* (1936). Had World War II not intervened, the impact of this fruitful innovation would doubtless have been much greater than it was. *Balinese Character* might well be seen as the first formal study of "socialization as cultural communication," and therefore as the original inspiration for this particular volume, a slightly belated testimonial to an exceedingly valuable idea.

Mead has always been in the forefront of anthropological research. As we have noted, she helped to break the monopoly biology and genetics held for a time on ideas of human development. She produced the first work in *Culture and Personality*. She was the first seriously to challenge Piaget on cognitive processes. She was one of the earliest anthropologists formally to study culture change and, more particularly, acculturation. She was also the first cultural anthropologist to appeal successfully to the public. She studied the process of enculturation before the term existed. Her view of the culture concept was considerably more advanced than that of most of her colleagues. She pioneered in the area of national character studies and the study of culture at a distance, and she consistently maintained, at times in the face of outright derision, that anthropology was a reformer's science. She innovated methodologically and, with Bateson, she introduced the idea of culture as communication. Open to suggestion, she took selectively and critically, and for her own purposes, from psychoanalytic theory and from Radcliffe-Brown. Finally, she has given real meaning to the study of rapid change and the concept of the generation gap.

It has often been noted that there exists no "school" of Mead, no tightly knit band of disciples, no clique or loyalists, no true believers, no central theme or discovery to be institutionalized in Mead's name. So be it—all behavioral and social scientists have been influenced by the work of Margaret Mead, an influence that has gone far beyond the sciences themselves to permeate virtually every literate household. Whatever her critics say, and granted that like all such gifted and productive people she is open to criticism, her positive contributions are monumental. Her influence on the profession, on related disciplines, and on the public, as well as on the theme of this volume, are simply without precedent.

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