

## Culture and Personality

*The Daedalus article closes with a demand for a "redefinition of human individuality," in terms of not only human relations but also man's total relatedness with "outerness," with nature itself. In the 1960s Edith struggled with a new concept – she saw each individual as becoming, in some metaphoric sense, a species in him or herself, the source of new evolutionary changes in human consciousness, creators of essential discontinuities.*

Margaret Mead introducing Edith Cobb's *Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*

Once upon a time, and it does feel like a folktale to tell this story, there was a thriving inquiry within the field of anthropology about the ways in which culture shaped personality. Indeed, one of the classics in anthropology, Ruth Benedict's "Patterns of Culture" argued the case that every culture has a personality, a characteristic way or pattern of being human or human being. Describing the personality of a culture and the ways that a culture produces distinctive personalities in the people who carry that culture was really the major question or project for the leading anthropologists in the period leading up to World War II. Books about these issues built the reputations of Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Gregory Bateson, Reo Fortune, and many of the students who passed through Columbia University's Anthropology Department during its most creative period.

Here are three interesting statements from the Margaret Mead page at the Library of Congress website:

"Despite her family's academic background, young Margaret's formal schooling consisted of two years of kindergarten, a year of half-days in the fourth grade, and six years of high school. When not attending school, she and her siblings were taught at home by their grandmother. Since their mother believed that children should learn skills and crafts, the children were also taught such things as music, carving, basketry, drawing, and painting by local artisans in the various places they lived."

"Between 1925, when she set out for Samoa, and 1939, Mead studied seven cultures in the South Pacific and Indonesia. In all of these studies, she focused on the relationship between the individual and culture, particularly in the transmission of culture to children. Mead was one of the earliest American anthropologists to apply techniques and theories from modern psychology to understanding culture. She believed that cultures emphasize certain aspects of human potential at the expense of others. Mead was especially interested in how cultures standardize personality and what happens to people temperamentally at odds with the behavior expected of them. Her pioneering researches included looking at different cultural expectations for males and females, an early attempt at understanding what are now called 'gender roles.'"

"Mead collected nearly 35,000 children's drawings in Manus on her 1928–29 field trip. . . . Mead found no tendency towards spontaneous animism in the drawings she collected, but she did observe some variations in types of drawings by sex and age. Girls, for instance, often tended to draw designs and to use color, while boys avoided color and depicted "realistic" scenes and subjects like human beings, animals, and ships."

And two paragraphs from Eric Silverman's Iatmul notes on the web:

"Mead and Bateson's 1938 study sought to correlate the conventions of infancy and childhood with adult patterns of behavior. Particularly striking is their keen awareness of the emotional nuances of gesture, posture, and glance. Indeed, Mead was at her best in perceiving the significant meanings that people silently convey through fleeting bodily expressions. For her, the truly distinctive humanism of a community was particularly evident in how it performs the everyday things that unite us all into a common humanity. In Tambunum, the mundane triumphs and tragedies of daily life that captivated Mead and Bateson included an infant's first bath, children playing with new toys, frustration at the rain, the tears of unexpected death."

"The 1938 Iatmul study refined the many innovations of the earlier Balinese project. Gregory shot an astonishing 25,000 photos and 22,000 feet of film, while Margaret wrote detailed, often poetic notes about the "inexpressingly touching" qualities of human life and the almost-ineffable tones of Iatmul culture. The resulting dialogue between his scientific lens and her humanistic pen was a metaphor for the multi-dimensionality of human experience. Upon a brief visit to Tambunum in 1967, Mead realized the importance of what she dubbed cultural "intimacy" in small-scale societies, a sense of identity and 'belonging' that arises from the ongoing telling of old, familiar tales and memories. This "intimacy" united present to past, and to future."

The message I get from this intense focus on children and childrearing, on primary communication ("gesture, posture and glance") and the "inexpressingly touching" and "almost-ineffable," on deep "belonging" and "intimacy," on emphasizing "certain aspects of human potential at the expense of others," on gendered styles of expression within a culture, is that the Mead/Bateson goal was to write many "Born to Groove" books, or "Born to Grace" books, many "Individuation through Primary Communication" books. How does a child become an Iatmul, Tchambuli, Mundugumor, Balinese, Arapesh, Samoan, British or American adult? Where does unique individual character come from? And how might each person become creative, expressive, achieve their full potential as a dancer, a flute player, a story teller, a book writer -- artists ad infinitum --within a specific culture?

I think Margaret Mead was depressed whenever she was not working full tilt on these questions because they were and are urgent questions. Our fate as a species that can evolve an infinite variety of adapted-to-locality cultures depends on the answers.

They collected so many thousands of children's drawings, took so many thousands of photographs and feet of film, wrote so many notes, did so much fieldwork, not only because they didn't know the answers. I think they were not at all sure what they were looking for or listening for or hoping to find. On the eve of destruction I doubt if they were very certain about which questions they were trying to answer.

World War II was looming in the West and East so these leading thinkers went to study childrearing among peoples less corrupted by civilization. World War II kept them from writing up the comparisons of childrearing in Iatmul and Bali and in all the other cultures. And after the war anthropology as a discipline never really returned to this

focus on culture and personality and, within that focus, the tighter and heavier focus on comparative child rearing as the key to cultural understanding and children's liberation.

Thank Gaia that Maggie Mead got an extra year of Kindergarten and dropped out, that her mother wanted her to learn skills of all kinds, that her grandmother supervised most of her childhood education and that she learned so much from local artisans. I believe it was her own childhood that led her to focus on childrearing between 1925 and 1939, and I believe it was her own focus on skills and primary communication as a child that let her breeze past the language barriers of seven very different cultures and work her way to the core insights for which she is justly famous.

I am mindful this moment that I was born in 1939 as these intensive studies of childhood were being abandoned and all energies were being turned to the united front against fascism, totalitarianism, the axis of evil. Here we are in 2004 with all kinds of "autism" spreading, "attention deficit disorders" and "pervasive development disorders" increasing and our leaders telling us that a "preemptive, unilateral, preemptive" war on terrorism must be our highest priority even if it means leaving all our children behind. The human potential questions are even more urgent than they were in the 1930s. Today we have ever fewer prime or primitive models of co-evolutionary grooves and sustainable cultural transmissions to study, emulate and recreate in our localities.

Pat Campbell:

Margaret Mead, home-schooled! MM, with a scholarly focus on children! Why were we teachers not informed that she, one of the most esteemed anthropologists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, devoted so much of her pathbreaking research to the lives of children? We knew she raised issues of cultural roles and standards between genders, but her intrigue with children was less apparent to education majors. She seemed so distant and yet she was near and dear to our work with children. Mead even wrote an article for the Music Educators Journal, "Music as a Human Need" (1972), in which she discussed the place of music and art in our lives, and our inclination to prefer certain artistic expressions over others. It was in that article that she explained these preferences as "...related both to the different ways you were brought up in your families and to the person each of you is—someone not quite like anyone else." (p. 27) Though she was writing to teachers, she seemed to be talking to children, too.

There is growing interest in children amongst anthropologists, sociologists, ethnomusicologists, folklorists. Marginalized in descriptions of social organization and kinship, individual personality and collective culture, and dismissed altogether by adult "outsiders" to their culture, children were used like specimens for examining, collecting, and measuring culture, and as a means of tracing the origin and development of adult behaviors. That is changing now, thankfully, so that children are seen less "from above to below" and more eye-to-eye as who they are in the midst of their own peer culture, and in the locus of their roles within the family. Thank goodness, they are their own entities, separate and running in their own worlds. We adults can only hope to get a peek, when they allow us in. The "bopi" or autonomous children's area (Section 1 Ch. 2 Wombworlds) still exists.

- Two classic works for those intrigued with anthropological studies of culture, including youth, there is Ruth Benedict's Patterns of Culture (1934, New York: Houghton Mifflin) and Margaret Mead's Coming of Age in Samoa (1928, New York: W. Morrow & Co; new preface added).

- A more careful research approach is developing for those who study the lives of children. Recommended readings on the topic: Schwartzman, Helen B., 2001, Children and Anthropology: Perspectives for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey) and Corsaro, William A., 1997, The Sociology of Childhood (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press).