rate, the Mead–Fortune household had its own sexual division of labor and gender roles of the kind Mead was so eager to study in others.

Sex and Temperament

From 1931 to 1933, Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune mounted an anthropological expedition to the Sepik River region of New Guinea. The map shows Mead’s fieldwork sites in the southwest Pacific and a closeup of the Sepik River cultures. What happened during this trip is an incredible story about four cultures, three anthropologists, two genders, and one river. This story is enormously significant to what anthropologists know about women, men, and culture. In fact, the story has achieved its own mythic status in the history of science.

The Sepik River is a land of mosquitoes, crocodiles, cannibals, and floating corpses, Mead would write. People ate tasteless flour laboriously processed from sago palms, yams, bananas, and other produce from their garden plots and fish from the Sepik and its tributaries. Until the Australian government imposed a colonial peace a few years earlier, the peoples of the river region had been cannibals and headhunters. But memories and the social organizations that supported these activities remained potent. People constructed narrow dugout canoes with carved prows, villages raised on stilts over flooded river plains, and men’s houses with painted gables filled with exquisite art. Sepik peoples’ striking and dramatic “prim-
itive art” complements their ceremonies and rituals, which appeared to worship, subvert, or invert the differences between females and males. In common with much of New Guinea, these small, intact cultures seemed to play with elaborate permutations of being male or female.

In the first group Mead studied, the Arapesh, both men and women acted in a mild, parental, and responsible manner—like the stereotypes about females at various times in human history. In the second group, the Mundugumor, both men and women were fierce, sexually charged, assertive, and loud—a view some people hold about males from time to time. And in the third, the Tchambuli, men gossiped about each other and worried about their hairstyles, pretty costumes, or whether any women would marry them. The women in this region of beautiful dark lakes were competent and no-nonsense business managers. These three groups showed Mead that a culture may impose personalities and patterns on one gender or both genders that are only a subset of the whole spectrum of possibilities available to human beings.

The Arapesh

When they first arrived in New Guinea, Margaret and Reo were not certain where to go or which group to study. They hired carriers from the interior to help them up the slippery trails and across the rivers; these workers even had to carry Margaret because her ankle was broken. The decision was made for them when their carriers simply stranded them, with six-months’ supplies, in a mountain village.

In the steep hills above the flood plain of the Sepik, level land is scarce. Collecting enough firewood and food is difficult. The women carry loads of sixty to seventy pounds suspended from their foreheads, often with a nursing baby in a bark sling or bag. Precious pigs die easily and yams grow poorly in shallow tropical soils. Mead described the sexual division of labor as a necessity for survival. Men were freer to assume authority, a necessary but evil responsibility. Men worked desperately hard to keep the dangerous secrets of the men’s houses; women were excluded from ceremonies to protect them and unborn children from malignant spirits.

When the Arapesh are questioned as to the division of labour, they answer: Cooking everyday food, bringing firewood and water, weeding and carrying—these are women’s work; cooking ceremonial food, carrying pigs and heavy logs, house-building, sewing thatch, clearing and fencing, carving, hunting, and growing yams—these are men’s work; making ornaments and the care of children—these are the work of both men and women. If the wife’s task is the more urgent—if there are no greens for the evening meal, or a haunch of meat must be carried to a neighbour in the next village—the husband stays at home and takes care of the baby. He is as pleased with and as uncritical of his child as is his wife. . . . And in recognition of this care, as well as in recognition of the father’s initial contribution,
if one comments upon a middle-aged man as good-looking, the people answer: “Good looking? Ye-es? But you should have seen him before he bore all those children.” (Mead 1963:39)

Mead called the Arapesh cooperative, oriented to the needs of the next generation, gentle, responsive, carefully parental, and willing to subordinate themselves in caring for those who were younger and weaker. She noted that the Arapesh would probably find the Western notion of parenting and paternity repulsive. They said that a man and a woman cannot make a baby from a moment of passion or a simple act of intercourse. Rather, sex is the strong purposeful work of feeding and shaping a baby during the early weeks in its mother’s womb. Since the child is the product of both father’s semen and mother’s blood, combined in equal parts in the beginning weeks, both parents must work diligently to make the child both desire. This arduous labor begins when menstruation ceases. When this hard work is done, intercourse is strictly forbidden and a wide array of taboos are placed on the mother to protect the unborn child and insure a safe delivery.

An Arapesh man is strategically involved with various phases of his wife’s labor. Immediately after birth and the careful disposal of the afterbirth, he brings her a bundle of soft absorbent leaves to line the little net bag in which the baby is suspended through its waking time, curled up as though still in its mother’s tummy. He brings water to wash the baby and sweet smelling leaves to keep evil influences from the hut. Putting his wooden pillow (which men use to protect their hair styles) beside his resting wife, he is “in bed having a baby.” Together they fast and perform small rituals to help their baby grow safely. His maternal and nurturant tasks continue in diminishing degrees through the baby’s first year of life. Arapesh parents observe what we call a postpartum sex taboo: They don’t have intercourse with each other or with others until their baby is walking around; then it is strong enough to withstand its parents’ renewed sexuality.

Mead’s descriptions of mothers nursing their babies are one of the most authentic and enduring images from Sex and Temperament. The emotional content of the culture for her came through in these ordinary moments. Always a skillful observer, she related how mother and infant nursed together to how men and women have sex later in life. She tells how Arapesh mothers, like mothers everywhere, have to go back to work at some point. By the time her child is walking, it may be too heavy for a mother to carry on long trips to her garden. So she may leave it with its father or her sister or mother. When she first leaves the baby, it cries. When she returns, however, she spends an equal time in playing with and nursing the child.

This is an experience that the mother enjoys as much as the child. From the time the little child is old enough to play with her breasts, the mother takes an active part in the suckling process. She holds her breast in her hand and gently vibrates the nipple inside the child’s lips. She blows in the child’s ear, or tickles its ears, or playfully slaps its genitals, or tickles its toes. The child in turn plays little tattoos on its mother’s body and its own, plays with one breast with its hands, plays with its own genitals, laughs and coos and makes a long, easy
game of the suckling. Thus the whole matter of nourishment is made into an occasion of high affectivity and becomes a means by which the child develops and maintains a sensitivity to caresses in every part of its body. It is no question of a completely clothed infant being given a cool hard bottle and firmly persuaded to drink its milk and get to sleep at once so that the mother's aching arms can stop holding the bottle. Instead, nursing is, for mother and child, one long delightful and highly charged game, in which the easy warm affectivity of a lifetime is set up. (Mead 1963:42)

But what about Arapesh individuals who do not conform to these cultural patterns she described? Mead was deeply concerned about people who did not “fit in” their culture; the term she used was “deviant.” If the Arapesh insisted that everyone was gentle, maternal, and not sexually aggressive, then they would have trouble with others who did not fit these patterns. In fact, Mead said that egocentric, possessive, or jealous women suffered most from their deviation from the norms of Arapesh society. They were likely to act out violently because there were no boundaries or acceptance for them as part of the continuum of human culture.

But Margaret Mead left the Arapesh disappointed. She had not found temperamental differences between women and men. So how could she examine the differences between the sexes if both had roughly the same temperament or social personality?

Moreover, Margaret and Reo had other frustrations. Her bad ankle kept her confined to the unstimulating Arapesh while her restless and volatile husband went off on trips. It is clear from her autobiography that she found Arapesh values of nurturing over aggression compatible with her own personality, while her husband found them particularly shapeless and offensive. She attributed their marital troubles to differences in their respective temperaments. Reo, it seems, was equally disgruntled with both the Arapesh and his wife.

The Mundugumur

Their second field site was equally arbitrary. Margaret and Reo looked on a map and selected the nearest group accessible by water, patrolled by the government but not visited by missionaries. The river-dwelling Mundugumur were in sharp contrast to the Arapesh. Both males and females acted like stereotypes of men we would probably like to avoid. In fact, until the early 1930s, the Mundugumur had been cannibals and headhunters.

Mead called both men and women of the Mundugumur virile, actively masculine, positively sexed, jealous, violent, hard, and arrogant. She witnessed many episodes of angry defiance, mutual hostility, and ruthless individualism. She said they could be charming but hypocritical.

The Mundugumur lived on high, fertile land between swift and treacherous tributaries of the Sepik River. Their neighbors and trading partners spoke of them as ferocious and reckless, and avoided crossing their lands. Rich by Sepik standards, the Mundugumur waterways were filled with fish, and with little effort,
their gardens produced plenty of sago palms, coconut trees, and yams. The Mundugumor did not have to cooperate with each other to live well.

Upon the basis of women's work, the men can be as active or as lazy, as quarrelsome or as peaceful, as they like. And the rhythm of the men's life is in fact an alternation between periods of supreme individualism, in which each man stays at home with his wives and engages in a little desultory labour, even an occasional hunting-excursion with his bow and arrows, and the periods when there is some big enterprise on foot. The competitiveness and hostility of one Mundugumor for another are very slightly expressed in economic terms. They quarrel principally over women. (Mead 1963:186)

The rules of Mundugumor kinship and marriage were elaborate and harsh. In fact, they appeared made to be broken at the earliest opportunity. In their best-possible kinship system, every man was supposed to acquire a wife by giving his sister in return for some other man's sister. But this principle never worked well. First of all, men wanted more than one wife; they also wanted to marry younger women who should have been properly married to a man in their sons' generation. So men competed with their sons for women because these young men wanted to use their sisters to make their own marriage alliances. Fathers used their daughters to make matches for themselves.

But Mundugumor women as sisters or daughters were never docile or cooperative in the marital schemes of their fathers or brothers. Furthermore, mothers plotted for themselves and against their daughters! A good Mundugumor mother wanted to see her daughter out of the way, replaced by a daughter-in-law living under her control. The best strategy of these two women was to become allies against their respective husbands. For obvious reasons, a Mundugumor woman preferred to have sons; a man preferred to have daughters.

The same atmosphere of jealousy and hostility prevailed after marriage. A man whose wife announced her pregnancy was a marked and unhappy man. He had to observe many public taboos while his peers taunted and teased him. He resented his wife and cursed the contraceptive magic which had so clearly failed him. A pregnant woman was deprived of sex and worried that her husband would desert her or take another wife altogether.

Mead wondered how any infant survived Mundugumor babyhood. Her discussion of nursing as the crucible for adult personality makes her points very forcefully.

Mundugumor women suckle their children standing up, supporting the child with one hand in a position that strains the mother's arm and pinions the arms of the child. There is none of the mother's dallying, sensuous pleasure in feeding her child that occurs among the Arapesh. Nor is the child permitted to prolong his meal by any playful fondling of his own or his mother's body. He is kept firmly to his major task of absorbing enough good so that he will stop crying and consent to be put back in his basket. The minute he stops sucking,
for a moment he is returned to his prison. Children therefore develop a very definite purposive fighting attitude, holding on firmly to the nipple and sucking milk as rapidly and vigorously as possible. They frequently choke from swallowing too fast; the choking angers the mother and infuriates the child, thus further turning the sucking situation into one characterized by anger and struggle rather than by affection and reassurance. (Mead 1963:196)

Poor Mundugumor babies. They were not comforted with their mother’s breasts; they were put in scratchy, harsh baskets until they learned to kick their way out of them. Once out of their baskets, they had to cling strongly to their mother’s hair and make lots of noise to gain even the minimal attention necessary for survival. Mothers resented their smallest illness, accident, or weakness. Blows and cross words marked their weaning. They were surrounded by rules, a series of prohibitions: Don’t go in the houses of your father’s other wives and ask for food; don’t cry or demand attention; don’t wander out of sight, and so on.

It is not surprising that sex for Mundugumor adults potently mirrored their childhood experiences. Children who fought for every drop of milk and every ounce of nurturing would be unlikely candidates for romance, docility, or cooperation with parents’ plans for arranged marriages. So girls put on their best jewelry or grass skirts and boys watched for the slightest sign of opportunity. The following quote is an obvious complement to her discussions about breast feeding.

The love affairs of the young unmarried people are sudden and highly charged, characterized by passion rather than by tenderness or romance. A few hastily whispered words, a tryst muttered as they pass on a trail, are often the only interchange between them after they have chosen each other and before that choice is expressed in intercourse. The element of time and discovery is always present, goading them towards the swiftest possible cut-and-run relationship. . . . Foreplay in these quick encounters takes the form of a violent scratching and biting match, calculated to produce the maximum amount of excitement in the minimum amount of time. To break the arrows or the basket of the beloved is one standard way of demonstrating consuming passion; so also is tearing off ornaments, and smashing them if possible. (Mead 1963:215)

What would happen, Mead asked, to a Mundugumor couple who somehow invented long, languorous lovemaking, to a Mundugumor man who rejoiced in his children’s growth, or to a Mundugumor woman who cuddled and comforted her crying child? Too bad. They would be defined as deviates in Mundugumor society. While such individuals did not cause trouble in their communities, they were outsiders nonetheless. Who would marry a man who wished to be loyal or parental, or a woman who suckled a foster child?

The Mundugumor called some individuals “really bad men.” They had more than their share of wives; some they stole or bought from neighboring groups;
some they cheated their sons out of or traded their daughters for. These men garnered allegiance from younger, less established men who jockeyed for power. At the same time, the bad men conspired secretly to betray these opportunist alliances. The Mundugumor men worked together only when headhunting and eating their enemies at the victory feasts. But such men were not deviates; they were only exaggerations of the expected.

The three months among the Mundugumor were troubled and discouraging for Mead. For starters, the group did not throw any light on her central theme of showing the contrast between female and male temperament since both sexes were so aggressive and assertive. As in the Arapesh, there were no behavioral styles that seemed to separate women and men. She hated the way they treated children and used them in conflicts between the parents. The village flooded regularly and the mosquitos were even more hostile and aggressive than the Mundugumor.

Judging from her autobiography and their letters from the field, it is also clear that Margaret and Reo were getting on each other's nerves. She notes: "Reo was both repelled and fascinated by the Mundugumor. They struck some note in him that was thoroughly alien to me, and working with them emphasized aspects of his personality with which I could not empathize" (1972:206). When she was ill with malaria, her husband offered no sympathy or assistance. When he was sick, she raged, fought the sickness, and climbed mountains.

The couple had an odd division of labor, which strained their marriage and seriously affected the results of their research. Reo assigned Margaret to study mothers, children, and language, topics that were not important to him. Everything else was his. So she would "do gender" and he would do the official ethnography. But their distribution of work created more problems.

In the middle of our stay I discovered that Reo, who had insisted that he alone would work on the kinship system, had missed a clue. . . . I felt that if he had not drawn so rigid a dividing line between his work and mine, we would have been able to put the material together much sooner. . . . It was a flat contradiction of good scientific practice. I did not mind a division of labor based on what Reo wanted to do, in which I was left to do whatever he thought was least interesting, as long as the work got done. (Mead 1972:205)

So Margaret and Reo decided to leave this troubled field site. The government patrol boat took them upstream in time for Christmas. With the kind of luck, good and bad, that had so marked this trip, the boat deposited them on the doorstep of an English anthropologist named Gregory Bateson, who had been working in a dramatic culture called the Iatmul. This group set their tensions between the sexes into elaborate dances and ceremonials, using cross-dressing with costumes and makeup, and mock and ritual homosexuality.
"You must be tired," Gregory said to Margaret tenderly as he pulled out a soft chair for her. She melted. Everything about this new anthropologist and the village was a relief for the aching ethnographer.

So Mead and Fortune decided to stay and finish their fieldwork with a group called the Tchambuli. They were neighbors to the Iatmul and had many similar practices. Both groups had splendid artistic traditions and complex cultures. Both lived in settled villages and traded fish with bush dwellers who made sago flour, the other staple of their diet. For both groups, women fished for a living and retained sole control of the disposition and marketing of their catches. Women manufactured large, woven mosquito-proof sleeping bags traded throughout the Sepik.

The Tchambuli lived on a blue-black lake. Small, sharp hills rose beyond the indistinct shores of the lake. In Mead's time a road wound near the lake margins. Men's houses, thirty to forty feet long, with painted, carved gables and figures of bird-men at the ends, lined the road. Paths ran from the ceremonial houses up the rocky hillsides to the women's houses. These were built to last three or four lifetimes and house three or four families.

For Mead, the Tchambuli dwelling house revealed the solidarity and solidarity of women. Women, competent, collegial, and certain of themselves, occupied the center of the house. Men sat at the edges near the doors, uneasy, wary, ready to bolt back into their ceremonial houses. There they gathered their own firewood and cooked their own bachelor meals. While the women fished and wove, the men practiced dances, prepared extravagant costumes of feathers, fibers, and shells, or arranged each other's curls.

To men, the thing that mattered most in life was art. Every man knew at least one art: carving, weaving, painting, dancing, music, costume-making, drama productions, and the creation of a graceful pattern of social relations that allowed the unadorned women to draw sustenance and return to their work or trading activities. The women tolerated and even appreciated the games, dances, and theatricals the men staged. But the dance was valuable, not the dancer.

The relationships of Tchambuli men to each other were delicate. By contrast, men related to women as the most solid and predictable element in their lives.

As a small child, he was held lightly in the arms of a laughing casual mother, a mother who nursed him generously but nonchalantly, while her fingers were busy plaiting reeds into sleeping-baskets or rain-capes. When he tumbled down, his mother picked him up and tucked him under her arm as she went on with her conversation. He was never left alone; there were always some eight or ten women about, working, laughing, attending to his needs, willingly enough, but unobsessively. (Mead 1963:248)

Tchambuli women weaned their children in the same careless, casual manner as they nursed them, stuffing their mouths with sweet delicacies to stop their crying.
Mead concluded that Tchambuli women had what she called dominance. She pointed out that the group practiced both patrilineal descent and polygyny (having two or more wives). These customs would seem to be oppressive or degrading to women. Yet these women had real power. While men bickered and reconciled, the women quietly carried on with their work. Mead spoke of women as impersonal, vigorous, and efficient.

The Tchambuli view of sex and sexually active females was firmly illustrated in the problem of what to do with young widows.

A young widow is a tremendous liability to a community. No one expects her to remain quiet until her remarriage has been arranged. Has she not a vulva? they ask. This is the comment that is continually made in Tchambuli: Are women passive sexless creatures who can be expected to wait upon the dilly-dallying of formal considerations of bride-price? Men, not so urgently sexed, may be expected to submit themselves to the discipline of a due order and precedence.

(Mead 1963:258)

Women, it is clear from her description, exercised their own choices for a mate despite patrilineal clans, polygyny, and a shallow mystique of arranged marriages. Do not, however, be misled. Assuming that Mead presented a proper perspective on what she witnessed, women's freedom to ignore the rules of patriliny and arranged marriages still produced jealousy, conflicts, and soap operas dramas. For boys, there was a deeper discontinuity; a young man had no real training for his future role. By contrast, girls were thoroughly and practically trained in handicrafts, fishing, and the responsible, practical lives of women. The young men Mead saw in this society were confused; she says they were more maladjusted than any other group she had known. The patrilineal system justified a young man's wish or need to dominate, to initiate marriage choices, and to dictate economic decisions. But for reasons that are clear only in a later historic context, a man could not do these things. So some young men grew angry, violent, and neurotic. This was the primary example of deviancy she noted for the group.

Situations on the Sepik

Meanwhile, the anthropologists were having a crazy time. During part of this period, the three of them worked together in a tiny eight-foot by eight-foot mosquito room. Relentlessly, they analyzed themselves, each other, and their respective cultures. Then they added the four Sepik cultures they studied and others they had known. The three of them talked continually about their work, their theories, and the implications of their findings for studying a topic such as marriage. Bateson lacked the methodological sophistication of the American researchers, but Margaret and Reo lacked his theoretical elegance. From all existing accounts, the events and feelings of this time changed their lives profoundly and probably the discipline of anthropology as well.
All were experiencing some depression in the field. Margaret and Gregory were beginning to build a deep communication that Reo could never share. Margaret was at the apex of a triangle; two men courted her, competed for her, and even coerced her on occasion. No wonder she wrote of the confused Tchambuli men living in a charged atmosphere of courtship and of energetic and competent women who chose at leisure.

_The intensity of our discussion was heightened by the triangular situation. Gregory and I were falling in love, but this was kept firmly under control while all three of us tried to translate the intensity of our feelings into better and more perceptive field work. As we dealt with the cultural differences between Arapesh, Mundugumor, Tchambuli, and Iatmul, we talked also about the differences in temperamental emphasis in the three English-speaking cultures—American, New Zealand, and English—that we represented and about the academic ethos that Gregory and I shared. No part of this was irrelevant to our struggle to arrive at a new formulation of the relationships between sex, temperament, and culturally expected behavior._ (Mead 1972:217)

None of them, as they saw it, fit the classic gender roles for their respective cultures. At various times in their writings and in conversations with each other, Mead, Benedict, and Bateson identified themselves as “cultural misfits.” Mead certainly did not fit the stereotype of the American wife and mother nor the image of a career women with no children. Bateson was brilliant but uncertain what to do with his intelligence. In her writings, Benedict often expressed a sense of herself as a person living so far from the cultural norms or expectations that only anguish and unhappiness would result. She wished she had lived in a time more in tune with her personal characteristics.

So the people of the Sepik were not the only ones testing the possible configurations of gender. Benedict’s best-seller, _Patterns of Culture_, argued forcefully for accepting the many ways humans learn to love each other. Margaret Mead brought her own temperament and sex into the field with her. Bateson’s work on the transvestite or cross-dressing ceremonies of the Iatmul people who live in the same area would become a classic and lead to some formative work on schizophrenia, cognition, and the boundaries of human thought. For Mead and Bateson, this was the beginning of an extraordinary collaboration; a personal and professional journey that had enormous impact in anthropology and beyond. As Margaret’s third and last husband remarked to their daughter,

_It is not accidental that when Margaret was on the Sepik, struggling with the question of diversity in herself and in her ways of loving, she was formulating the contrasts between three New Guinea peoples who dealt very differently with maleness and femaleness, with assertion and creativity._ (Bateson 1984:160)
Daughters of Sex and Temperament

In the years that followed the publication of *Sex and Temperament*, many readers had trouble believing that within a 100-mile area of a remote and magnificent river region Mead conveniently found three societies that perfectly illustrated her points. During her lifetime, she was criticized forcefully for this book; she called it "my most misunderstood book." As she said in one of the many reprints of *Sex and Temperament*,

> It is difficult to talk about two things at once—sex in the sense of biologically-given sex differences, and temperament in the sense of innate individual endowment. I wanted to talk about the way each of us belongs to a sex and has a temperament shared with others of our own sex and others of the opposite sex. In our present-day culture, bedeviled by a series of either-or problems, there is a tendency to say, "She can't have it both ways, if she shows that different cultures can mold men and women in ways which are opposite to our ideas of innate sex differences, then she can't also claim that there are sex differences." (Mead 1963:ii. The emphasis is hers.)

Mead always insisted that the sites selected for their three phases of fieldwork were only good luck. Ultimately, each was a theoretical bonus. As we shall see a little later, later ethnographers tend to back her up on these points.

In addition to this influential book on gender and personality, Mead published five volumes on the Arapesh. Few anthropologists have left such a record, and this one remains unsurpassed and unchallenged. Bateson's work on the Iatmul also complements and validates her work. And, fortunately, we have the fieldwork of contemporary anthropologists, Nancy McDowell in the contemporary Mundugumor (now called the Biwat) and Deborah Gewertz among the Tchambuli (now called the Chambri). So we can ask these anthropologists and the host of excellent ethnographers who do fieldwork in this area: Was Margaret Mead losing it on the Sepik? Did she know what she was doing? Can we trust her conclusions? What can we really learn from studying sex and temperament in such settings?

Anthropologist Deborah Gewertz went to the Sepik River to do fieldwork in the early 1970s with the Chambri (Tchambuli). Although she was primarily concerned with trade and exchange networks, Deborah knew that she would be working in a group that had become an icon in women's studies. After all, Margaret Mead had labeled the women of Tchambuli "dominant."

Deborah concludes that Mead was essentially correct in what she saw, but she didn't stay long enough or have the viewpoint at that time to see the Chambri embedded in a long history of which 1933 was only a piece. Mead studied the Tchambuli as the group had just returned to the shores of the beautiful lake after a twenty-year exile in the hills above. While Mead was there, competition between males decreased temporarily while they rebuilt their base, the men's houses, the male rituals, and the symbolic equipment: slit drums, costumes, art, and musical instruments. It is no wonder the men seemed strained and watchful, worried about
marital prospects, or that they appeared preoccupied with artistic productivity and building activity. The women had already rebuilt their barter market system, trading fish for sago in the complementarity that ensured their food supply. So the women appeared “dominant.”

According to Deborah Gewertz, Mead did not take complex regional histories into account nor push her own brilliant methodology to its fullest conclusions. She should have noted that women can move throughout a hierarchy without changing into men. Women can move through time taking on different attitudes and practices without losing basic functions. Sex roles (or gender roles) have enough flexibility to use in adjusting to changing circumstances. We cannot just label a group of women as dominant or submissive. Instead, we may find an underlying pattern of relationships that persists through time and provides us a range of negotiations for a complex variety of social situations.

With the blessings of Mead, anthropologist Nancy McDowell reworked the field notes from Margaret and Reo’s sojourn among the Mundugumor in 1932 and compared them to her fieldwork with the group (now called the Biwat) in the early 1970s. Nancy concludes that “Mead’s ethnographic skills, as well as her powers of observation and perception, were exceptional and clearly superseded the theory she espoused” (McDowell 1991:77). Unlike Mead, however, Reo Fortune never wrote up his notes from this trip. Margaret did some of them for him (as many academic wives have done for husbands); but the rest in his handwriting are useless.

There are indications that they were not fully sharing data with each other. Fortune’s notes are fragmented, disorganized, and practically unreadable. The theoretical paradigms within which they worked led them to ask only certain kinds of questions and neglect others. Mead’s American cultural anthropological approach led her to assume that human culture was far more simple than it really was, that it could be encapsulated by particular themes or as “personality writ large,” and she fell victim to oversimplification. (McDowell 1991:290)

Margaret Mead and ethnographers who followed her put a great deal of emphasis on women’s economic powers. Bateson did not even notice the economic roles and autonomous activities of the women; he saw them only in complementary relationships with men, their fathers and husbands. Gregory Bateson recognized that women and men do not always follow the rules or conform to anyone’s stereotypes.

For the most part, the [latmul] women exhibit a system of emotional attitudes which contrasts sharply with that of the men. While the latter behave almost consistently as though life were a splendid theatrical performance—almost a melodrama—with themselves in the centre of the stage, the women behave most of the time as though life were a cheerful cooperative routine in which the occupations of food-getting and child-rearing are enlivened by the dramatic and
exciting activities of the men. But this jolly, cooperative attitude is not consistently adopted in all contexts, and we have seen that women occasionally adopt something approaching the male ethos and that they are admired for so doing. (Bateson 1958:148)

He found that women occasionally took assertive roles in warfare, in the dancing grounds, and with husbands who could not or would not compete with other men.

What do we learn from these researchers? We see that gender roles are not fixed, rigid, or defined for all time. Sex roles are not divinely assigned nor inherent in something we call “nature.” They are flexible; they can be used as problem-solving devices. For example, the Arapesh believed that women should avoid the yam gardens because the yams did not grow well around females; both women and gardens were believed to be protected by this belief. By contrast, Mundugumor couples took advantage of a similar mindset and deliberately copulated in other people’s gardens just to ruin them.

What Mead called sex roles are only a script, not a prescription. She quoted Ruth Benedict, who said culture is “personality writ large.” In Benedict’s view, writes Mead,

It is possible to see each culture, no matter how small and primitive or how large and complex, as having selected from the great arc of human potentialities certain characteristics and then having elaborated them with greater strength and intensity than any single individual could ever do in one lifetime. (Mead 1934:v)

Their view of culture as a pattern or configuration of homogenous and integrated elements, often linked with a unified theme, lacks the dimensions of contemporary theories. Now anthropologists think that culture is never simple, uniform, or well-integrated. It is a messy, complicated, and often contradictory set of differences or oppositions that may exist side-by-side within the same group claiming the same territory, history, or worldview. This is why, today, we can talk of a female culture and a male culture within complex and contradictory ethnic, national, and world cultures.

Mead published Sex and Temperament in 1935; in the same year, Gregory Bateson completed Naven, his still-stimulating study of Iatmul culture. And in 1935 they married and went to the island of Bali in Indonesia to begin their first, last, and most extraordinary collaboration.

Beyond the Sepik

The Mead-Bateson collaborative research in Bali was probably far ahead of its time, involving systematic observations and an innovative use of photography. But for purposes of our story, the key event was Margaret’s unanticipated pregnancy. There she was, thirty-eight years old. Her English husband had been called up for the war just beginning. In a forthright and organized way, she took charge of her
pregnancy and delivery. She taught a young pediatrician, Dr. Benjamin Spock, about comparative styles in child-rearing and the importance of breast-feeding. She showed a film on births in New Guinea to those attending her birth.

Gregory and Margaret were delighted with their newborn daughter, Mary Catherine, called Cathy. In the mellowness of breast-feeding the baby she had never expected to have, Margaret was full of empathy for young mothers and grateful for the advantages she had.

_I had nothing to do except keep my milk up and feed and hold the baby. I did not have to go anywhere, I had no housework to do, no uneasy husband to placate, no worries about money—in fact, I faced none of the problems that can make the first baby so difficult for an inexperienced young mother. But I was trying to do something, consciously and in a new way, that combined our best knowledge and my own observations of mothers and babies in many cultures._ (Mead 1972:306)

She acknowledged the desperation of many young mothers, isolated and afraid, lacking experience, support, or confidence, even sinking into depression.

One has the feeling reading her autobiography that Mead was constructing her life as she went along. She was building it out of pieces of people she studied and admired, bringing other people, friends, and husbands, into her life, enriching theirs at the same time. Her daughter comments:

_In Blackberry Winter, Margaret again and again uses metaphors that suggest her sense of herself as directing a play, as a producer, assembling and placing a particular constellation of people._ (Bateson 1984:111)

The households she constructed after Catherine's birth are a major case in point. Although Margaret was always sensitive to the lives of wives and mothers in American nuclear families, she herself did not wish to create such an arrangement. Mead thought that nuclear families were too isolated or limiting. As she grew older, she did not want to own or clean an apartment or house or do any domestic tasks beyond salad making; she always lived with close friends in assorted households and hired assistants in the museum where she worked.

Catherine had a nanny, the nanny had a child. Catherine's father was away most of the time. So Catherine grew up in the households of loving and responsible people, in the families of others. She created extended households, although not an extended family in the genetic sense. As Margaret notes in her autobiography, mothering was not a full-time occupation for her. In fact, it would appear from her autobiography that she and Gregory spent little time alone with their child. It is also clear that each parent had close ties with Catherine throughout their lives. In fact, their only child did not grow up "weird," disturbed, or neurotic. Catherine had a number of mothers in this arrangement; she knew her biological mother was loving but different from the American norm. This is an important example for any
who perceive American culture as monolithic or one-dimensional or who think only one family style will work.

Intimacy and the World Stage

Margaret Mead continued to puzzle out the meanings of gender and to speak out about women and children throughout the rest of her long career. She taught at Columbia University and worked for the American Museum of Natural History. She was finally promoted to curator in 1964. Although neither institution gave Mead the status or the salary she probably deserved, they offered her flexibility and the much valued freedom to work as anthropologist-at-large.

Most of her advances and royalties went into the Institute for Intercultural Studies, which gave grants to young anthropologists and supported research, public service and the discipline of anthropology in numerous ways. Margaret Mead was mentor to dozens and dozens of young anthropologists at key turning points in their careers. She called for a woman’s viewpoint in anthropology long before we knew it had a male-centered bias. As feminism and a female-centered viewpoint became established, she reminded us to remember the men. She brought large numbers of women in the calling of anthropology and refused to listen to protests about discrimination. She would say, “Don’t complain about women’s status or problems. Just get to work.”

All of Margaret Mead’s husbands were anthropologists. Each was involved with the questions of how to relate their personal lives to their work as anthropologists. Mead met and liked the women her ex-husbands married and helped the three men at many stages in their careers. As one of her friends remarked, “Margaret was always a gentleman.” Margaret sustained an intimate life throughout her adult years with a man and with a woman. While this double pattern satisfied her, it required a certain secrecy and thus a certain isolation. As her daughter, Catherine, notes in her own autobiography,

Margaret worked hard and incessantly to sustain relationships, caring most about those in which different kinds of intimacy supported and enriched each other, the sharing of a fine meal, the wrestling of intense intellectual collaboration, the delights of lovemaking . . . The intimacy to which Margaret and Ruth progressed after Margaret’s completing of her degree became the model for one axis of her life while the other was defined in relation to the men she loved or married. (Bateson 1984:117)

But Ruth Benedict died in 1948 and Margaret’s marriage to Gregory Bateson was gradually dissolving in the same period. Gregory, more than anyone else, resented Margaret’s management of his life and eventually left her, moving far away. That was not part of her life plan, and she grieved the loss for a long time. They remained friends, colleagues, and co-parents. For Margaret, intense conversations and collegial involvement were linked to lovemaking; this theme appears again and again in her writing.
In 1975 Margaret Mead wrote an article for her regular column in *Redbook* magazine and talked about bisexuality. She defined it and defended it without identifying herself publicly. The time has come, she says, to view this as normal. That a person is capable of loving members of both sexes should not be such a taboo subject nor such a strange phenomenon. She talks about cultures in which boys or girls go through a stage of relating almost exclusively with each other. They fall in love and have deep physical attractions. She spoke of times in history when people experimented with a great variety of personal relations in politics, art, music, drama, and intellectual projects, crossing barriers of race, sex, and age.

Changing traditional attitudes toward homosexuality is in itself a mind-expanding experience for most people. But we shall not really succeed in discarding the strait jacket of our cultural beliefs about sexual choice if we fail to come to terms with the well-documented, normal human capacity to love members of both sexes. . . . What is new is not bisexuality, but rather the widening of our awareness and acceptance of human capacities for sexual love. (Mead 1975:30)

When Margaret married Reo (a jealous and straitlaced type) and went into the field for two years, her physical relationship with Ruth ended. But the separation of marriage and travel did not alter their intellectual intimacy. Theirs was a spiritually permanent relationship. Margaret, however, cared about the consequences of living openly with a woman and desired to protect her public image and professional position. She might see herself as marginal or a misfit; but she never intended to become a social outcast.

For Ruth, however, her relationship to Margaret was the touchstone of her life. From the start of their deepest friendship until the end of her life, Benedect was what she called “a woman-loving-woman.” In the early 1930s, Ruth Benedict separated from her husband and found the first of two women who lived with her and shared her life and spiritual sensitivities until her death in 1948. Benedict’s writings from that time on talked about redefining the categories of abnormal and normal; she spoke out strongly about the absurdities of treating homosexuality as an illness. She pointed out cultures that treated homosexuals as healers or leaders, or allowed alternative gender roles. She wrote about the Native American customs in which men wore women’s clothes and did women’s work. “Normal,” in her view, was relative to the culture in which a person lived.

Her masterpiece, *Patterns of Culture*, was an instant success. Some have called it “a paradigm shift,” which means its radically new perspective forever changed the collective worldview. It replaced the absolute standards of morality and harsh value judgments of the nineteenth century with the enduring concept of cultural relativism. If cultural standards are relative to place, time, and people, then all of us can reevaluate the relationships between men and women in our own society. She made a very clear statement about biology: If women are weak, this is because we have learned to be or are expected to be, not because our biology has predetermined our weakness. She used her own field experiences in the American Southwest and those of her colleagues from around the world (including Reo Fortune’s work on Dobu) to show how matrilineal cultures differ
from the patrilineal model of Euro-American societies. The book and its radical message moved beyond anthropology and other intellectual circles into popular consciousness. At its core was a profound feminist vision that has become, in effect, the coin of the realm. Ordinary people, not just anthropologists, now talk about particular cultures and the patterns that give their lives meaning.

Her book caused serious arguments among anthropologists. Some felt that it threatened the status of the discipline as a science. Some said it was too humanistic, too fuzzy, too literary, too subjective, too simplistic. The book was, of course, one of the inspirations for Mead’s *Sex and Temperament* and other studies who talked about the “approved personalities of each sex.” Out of these two books came an entire school of anthropology, the study of culture and personality, as well as reaction against this kind of theory and research. But these are stories for another day.

**Conclusion: Their Last Great Work**

World War II and Margaret’s child-care responsibilities prevented more field work after 1940. So Mead and Benedict gathered a host of dynamic colleagues to work on a project they called Research in Contemporary Cultures or “the study of culture at a distance.” They formed a research team of scholars and citizens from many places in the world and did ethnography without the fieldwork. Well-funded, they believed that their work had national significance and would be their contributions to winning the war and establishing the peace to follow. They developed innovative and interdisciplinary methods with an emphasis on complex modern civilizations grounded in cultural relativism and the culture and personality approach. The most famous book to come out of this massive governmental and professional collaboration was Benedict’s classic study of Japanese national character, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*.

The project probably did not change the course of American anthropology nor did it enter popular awareness as their earlier works had done. Nonetheless, there are reasons to look at this venture today. Their project addresses questions that women in contemporary social movements regularly ask. If women organized and controlled the institutions that seem to control us, would the world be a different place? A better place? Do women structure people and activities differently than men do?

Mead and Benedict would answer yes. In their project there were no hierarchies, no pyramids of status, no ladders of success. There were only co-equal circles. Conveners took responsibility for getting groups together. The only titles they used marked types of responsibility, not types of prestige. Volunteer or paid, beginners or professionals, part-time or full-time, everyone worked together and gave away power to get results. They did not even have a central office. Ruth Benedict thought of this as a synergy in which the framework and goals of the group complemented and enhanced individuals and their contributions. They treated interpersonal relations, not formal structure, as the foundation of productivity. This meant that raising a family, being a parent, spouse, or lover, were rewarded; these activities were considered relevant to the project and accorded
They talked about fostering diversity, accepting dissonance or diversification, and the creative use of chaos. This project, as was everything Ruth Benedict touched in the last period of her life, was gently but firmly feminist. As president of the American Anthropological Association, she said that insight and intuition are as important to the nation as are the findings of science. She also believed that societies that honored maternal principles had greater peace and balance. In her publications she emphasized women’s values and a woman’s perspectives.

Both Mead and Benedict practiced warm ties of interdependence cemented with rituals, shared meals, all-night conversations, and physical intimacies. They contrasted these activities with war. War, they said, is not an innate or biological response of human beings. It does not result from some instinct, some gene, or some drive. It is not “natural for mankind.” Instead war, for all its terrors or triumphs, is purely cultural. It is only another, albeit murderous, social institution. If this is true, they said, then human beings can change; we can choose to “study war no more.” We could teach each other and raise our children to adopt other cultural and psychological means to avoid conflict and destruction. Naive by our standards, yes, but influential throughout the world and beyond their lives.

From Samoa to the end of her life, Margaret Mead focused more intensely on women, children, growing up, and the fundamental questions of gender than any other anthropologist or social scientist has ever done. She introduced these topics into our national discourse and into international arenas and forever challenged and changed our ways of seeing.

In the next chapter, we continue these themes as we look at how women in human cultures have marked our passages through biology and the life cycle.

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So Many Books: Where Can I Start?


Margaret Mead’s own autobiography is fascinating: *Blackberry Winter: My Earlier Years* (1972). So is her daughter’s autobiography, which is combined with biographies of her famous parents: Mary Catherine Bateson, *With a Daughter’s Eye: A Memoir of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson* (1984). Three other sources to read about Mead are Jane Howard’s biography, *Margaret Mead: A Life* (1984); Rhoda Metraux’s *Margaret Mead: Some Personal Views* (1979); or the *American Anthropologist* of June 1980 (vol. 82, no. 2) entitled, “In Memoriam: Margaret Mead.”

Some related books worth reading include Mary Catherine Bateson’s *Composing a Life* (1989). Here she treats the lives of five extraordinary women