

Margaret Mead and mental retardation: Words of understanding, concepts of inclusiveness.

By: J. David Smith and George Lee Johnson Jr.

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Abstract:

The writers reflect on the work of Margaret Mead, who is recognized as one of the founders of American anthropology, to highlight some of her insights on mental retardation. Mead's study of the island society of Samoa revealed a society where everyone participated in all aspects of the culture and where there was more charity toward weakness than toward misdirected strength. Many years after the study, Mead told participants at a conference sponsored by the American Association on Mental Deficiency that genuine opportunities are required for a culture in which most individuals can fully participate.

Keywords: developmental disabilities | Samoan islands | Margaret Mead | anthropology

Article:

Margaret Mead is recognized as one of the founders of American anthropology. She has been cited, in fact, as one of the most important figures in the development of the social sciences in this century (Juliani, 1988). Her fame is usually associated, of course, with her anthropological work in the South Pacific. Mead's study of adolescence in Polynesian cultures resulted in the 1928 publication of her classic book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*. In that book she presented and interpreted data and questioned the widely accepted view of adolescence as a biologically induced period of developmental trauma and struggle. In contrast, Mead presented a picture of adolescence in Samoa that was largely carefree and happy. She also argued in the book that many other of the human experiences and behaviors that were being described in Western cultures as biologically determined were, in fact, products of culture. From this perspective, Mead asserted, these characteristics of cultures were subject to change based on choice.

Margaret Mead's work was highly controversial from the beginning and aroused the ire of many of the scientists who were convinced of the hereditary determinants of psychological and

sociological traits in human beings. Her work has continued to be scrutinized and criticized, with claims that her writings were more ideological than scientific (Freeman, 1983). She has also been criticized for her involvement in psychological rather than anthropological issues (Torrey, 1992). It is interesting to note, therefore, that Mead's original graduate training was in psychology, not anthropology. It is also important that scholars and practitioners in the field of mental retardation understand that there were aspects of her early work that engaged questions that are still central to our discipline. In addition, some of Margaret Mead's insights on mental retardation later in her career merit highlighting. These are the reasons for the present reflection on her work.

In 1923, Mead conducted thesis research for her first graduate degree, a master's in psychology from Columbia University (Mead, 1927). She chose a topic that was related to the biological determinism that dominated American psychology at the time, the heredity of intelligence. Imminent psychologists such as Henry Goddard and Lewis Terman had asserted that intelligence was largely a genetic trait and that it could be validly measured, even in immigrant groups, through the use of intelligence tests (Smith, 1985). Margaret Mead, within the context of this prevailing scientific assumption, selected for her thesis a study of intelligence test scores of children of Italian immigrant families.

Mead's choice of Italian immigrants as subjects for her study is quite understandable given her background. As a child she had lived for a number of years in Hammonton, New Jersey, a community near Philadelphia with a large Italian population. Her family moved there to accommodate the research of Margaret's mother, Emily Fogg Mead, a sociologist. Emily was doing research for her doctoral degree at the University of Pennsylvania. Her study was focused on a comparison of the adaptations of Italian immigrants to their lives in rural and urban communities in America (Mead, 1927).

In the first 2 decades of the 20th century, intelligence testing had become very important in American psychology. It was particularly central to the concept of the hereditary etiology of mild mental retardation and the idea of the "menace of the moron" (Smith, 1985, p. 42) to society. Intelligence tests were used to justify the institutionalization and sterilization of people who earlier would have not been considered to have mental retardation but who were now seen as eugenic threats to the integrity of the culture (Smith & Nelson, 1989). Intelligence tests were also given to immigrants being processed for entry into the United States through Ellis Island. The results were claimed as evidence that most Jewish, Hungarian, and Italian immigrants coming to the United States were "feeble-minded" (Smith, 1985).

In her autobiographical book *Blackberry Winter*, Mead (1972) spoke of her thesis. She said that during that period

[I was] not only preparing to take a Ph.D. in anthropology but also completing my Master's essay in psychology. There were many tiresome statistics to do, as I correlated the scores on

intelligence tests made by Hammonton Italian children with the amount of Italian spoken in their homes. (p. 122)

In analyzing her results, Mead found that the performance of the Italian children was clearly inferior to the performance of "American" children. This was consistent with the assertions of psychologists who, on the basis of similar test results, had earlier found that immigrants were intellectually inferior. The focus of Mead's study, however, went beyond these differences in test performance. Through examining other variables, she discovered important differences within her subject group of 276 Italian children. She found that there were strong correlations between test performance and the language spoken at home, the date of immigration of the father, and the social status of the families (Mead, 1927).

Through her study of the test results and the family biographies of the students, Margaret Mead came to insights that seem in one sense so obvious but in another sense so elusive in our understanding of the influence of environments on development. She noted that

1) The Italians are definitely inferior in performance to the Americans if judged by the test showing alone. Therefore, if grading or promotion were to be governed by test results the Italians would be placed at a clear disadvantage....

2) The scores of the Italian children have been shown to be influenced by the language factor ... according to the language spoken at home, the social status and the length of time the father has been in this country, this last factor being somewhat interwoven with the language factor...; Classification of foreign children in schools where they have to compete with American children, on the basis of group intelligence findings alone, is not a just evaluation of the child's innate capacity. (p. 468)

Viewed from the vantage point of 70 years following her observations, Mead's analysis seems wise and prescriptive of prudent action. It is sobering to recognize, however, that 7 decades later the basis of her call for justice is still being debated. Intelligence test results are still being hailed in some scientific and political circles as hallmarks of defectiveness in some racial and ethnic groups (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994).

The fact that Margaret Mead did not consider the Italian children she tested to be "defective" is perhaps reflected in the opening sentences of one of the appendices to *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). Here she referred to herself as a person without "any training in the diagnosis ... and without any apparatus for exact diagnosis of the mentally defective" (p. 155). Her humility and her recognition of the multicultural complexities of mental retardation in this passage are, however, eclipsed by the thought-provoking information she reported on the prevalence of mental retardation in the island society she was studying:

In the Manua'a Archipelago with a population of a little over two thousand people, I saw one case which would be classified as idiocy, one imbecile, one boy of fourteen who appeared to be

both feeble-minded and insane.... The idiot child was one of seven children; he had a younger brother who had walked for over a year, and the mother declared that there were two years between the children.... In no one of these three cases of definite mental deficiency was there any family history which threw any light upon the matter. (p. 155)

In her Samoa study Mead reported two additional cases of disabilities that may have involved mental retardation. One was of a boy with epilepsy who died while she was there. The other was a girl of 10 who was paralyzed below her waist and may have had other disabilities resulting from poisoning. It is intriguing to consider the cultural differences in the prevalence of mental retardation implied by Mead's report from Samoa.

The total of 5 people that she described in terms of a classification of mental retardation out of a population of 2,000 people yields a prevalence figure of less than .002%. This is, of course, far below the most conservative figures for mental retardation that have been reported in recent years in the United States.

That the observations of an anthropologist with training in psychology and psychometrics yielded a mental retardation prevalence figure that is minuscule is puzzling when compared to our contemporary understanding of the needs and characteristics that constitute what we call mental retardation. Where were the other people in Mead's study of Samoa who would be similar to those people we think of as having mental retardation and for whom we serve as advocates? A clue may lie in Mead's discussion of Sala. In the appendix to her book, she described this girl as standing out in her perceptions of the adolescent girls she observed in Samoa. Mead referred her readers back to her earlier characterization of Sala as "sufficiently inferior to the general norm of intelligence to approximate to a moron" (p. 155).

In *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Mead described Sala in the chapter "The Girl in Conflict." According to Mead, Sala was

stupid, underhanded, deceitful and she possessed no aptitude for the simplest mechanical tasks. Her ineptness was the laughing stock of the village and her lovers were many and casual, the fathers of illegitimate children, men whose wives were temporarily absent, witless boys bent on a frolic. It was a saying among the girls of the village that Sala was apt at only one art, sex, and that she, who couldn't even sew thatch or weave blinds, would never get a husband. (p. 181)

These frank descriptions belie the insight and compassion that Margaret Mead revealed for Sala further in her description of the young woman's plight. Even while portraying Sala as fickle and superficial in her relationships, Mead suggested that there was more depth to Sala's own comprehension of her incompetence than her peers may have understood. Of Sala's understanding of her place in the Samoan village that was her home, Mead noted:

The social attitude towards her was one of contempt, rather than antagonism, and she had experienced it keenly enough to have sunk very low in her own eyes. She had a sullen furtive

manner, lied extravagantly in her assertions of skill and knowledge, and was ever on the alert for slights and possible innuendoes. (p. 181)

In describing Sala and her station in her Samoan village, however, Mead also provided a suggestion that the young girl's life in that setting was quite different from the perceived place of the "moron" that had been prescribed a few years earlier by the American psychologist Henry Goddard. Goddard had said that there was no place in the complex structure of 20th century America for morons. In his description of the need for institutionalization of the "Salas" of the United States, Goddard (1912) stated that "Segregation through colonization seems in the present state of our knowledge to be the ideal and perfectly satisfactory method" (p. 117). In contrast, Mead (1928) described a Samoan culture that "possesses more charity towards weakness than towards misdirected strength" (p. 182). She indicated that even with the negative responses Sala's behavior elicited from others, her well-being in the Samoan culture was ultimately based on a social compact of inclusiveness.

Mead returned to this theme many years later. In 1959, she spoke to a conference sponsored by the American Association on Mental Deficiency (AAMD). In her remarks she referred to a statement made by a group of Catholic sisters who worked with children who had mental retardation. Mead quoted them as saying that they were attempting to make it possible for the children that they cared for to make a "contribution in time as well as in eternity" (Mead, 1959, p. 253).

Later in her speech Mead (1959) returned to the example of the work of the Catholic Church and persons with mental retardation. She gave the example of a child with Down syndrome who had been tested, diagnosed, and given every opportunity for the best skill training that money would buy. In her early teens, however, this young woman was given religious instruction, and Mead described the change that took place in the girl's life in terms of "wholeness." She said that at the same time the girl

became Catholic, she became a human being in a way that she had not been one before.... I think that what happened on the secular side with this little girl was that for the first time she met a situation where people were willing to teach her the whole instead of saying, "you are defective and you can only learn a part." (p. 260)

Mead concluded her address to the AAMD by elaborating on the concept of education for "wholeness." She distinguished between societies where everyone participates in all aspects of the culture (e.g., Samoa) and segmented, socially stratified societies that no longer attempt to teach the "whole" to all people (e.g., the United States). She emphasized that genuine opportunities are necessary for a culture in which most individuals learn to fully participate, and she warned of the "risks of complicating sections of our culture so much that we define them as things most people can't learn" (pp. 258-259).

The greatest challenge advocates in the field of mental retardation today face may be revealed in Margaret Mead's insights. Perhaps in order to enable people with mental retardation to become genuinely included in our culture, we must strive to make accessible to more and more people the essential "wholeness" of citizenship. One step toward promoting this wholeness may be in striving to achieve the Samoan source of hope for Sala, the expression of "more charity toward weakness than towards misdirected strength" (Mead, 1928, p. 182).

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