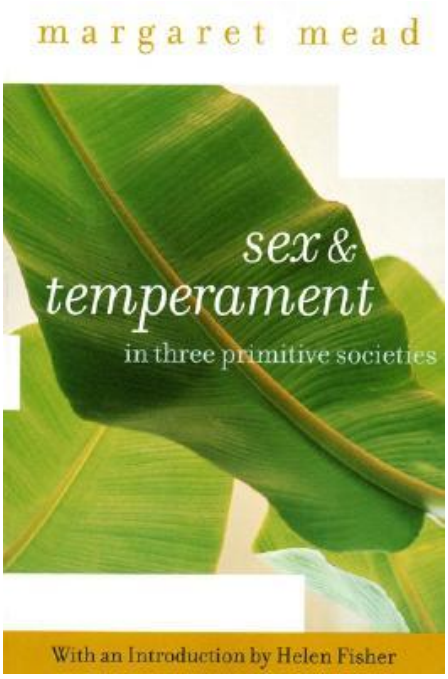

Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies

Margaret Mead

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First published in 1935, *Sex & Temperament* is a fascinating and brilliant anthropological study of the intimate lives of three New Guinea tribes from infancy to adulthood. Focusing on the gentle, mountain-dwelling Arapesh, the fierce, cannibalistic Mundugumor, and the graceful headhunters of Tchambuli -- Mead advances the theory that many so-called masculine and feminine characteristics are not based on fundamental sex differences but reflect the cultural conditioning of different societies. This edition, prepared for the centennial of Mead's birth, features introductions by Helen Fisher and Mead's daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson. A precursor to Mead's illuminating *Male & Female, Sex & Temperament* lays the groundwork for her lifelong study of gender differences.

Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies Details

Date	:	Published May 22nd 2001 by Harper Perennial (first published 1935)
ISBN	:	9780060934958
Author	:	Margaret Mead
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From Reader Review Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies for online ebook

Carter says

This book was written in 1935 and writing style/language being indicative of that time period was somewhat dry and formal. This is understandable because of both the time frame and the fact that this book was written for educational purposes/scholarly audiences. This made the book somewhat of a long read.

However, Margaret Mead did a fantastic job of addressing her initial concern, that of the differences in male and female behavior in the context of cultural norms. She was able to follow three vastly different tribes and provided a detailed account of aspects usually associated with gender, such as expressions of emotion, parenting style and contributions to the tribe (who provides the food, who is involved in important ceremonies, etc.).

She also did a fantastic job of concluding the book by applying this information to modern society and discussing the impact of gender roles as they affect modern society. Overall, an interesting read and the conclusions she drew are still relevant today.

Karen says

Very well written, but very dated compared to our current society. I can definitely see why it caused controversary at the time of its publishing. Excellent example of our studies of other peoples, and our biases inherent in those studies.

Edwige says

Bien que les théories de Margaret Mead aient été remises en cause de nombreuses fois, ses observations des tribus océaniennes nous montrent à quel point la société façonne l'être humain et que rien n'est "prédéfini". Agréable à lire, on s'imagine très bien se retrouver au milieu d'un village Arapesh ou à une fête Chambuli. Margaret Mead nous donne à travers ce livre une vision des relations homme-femme; non seulement dans les sociétés claniques, mais nous renvoie également au rapport entre les sexes dans notre société occidentale.

Ffiamma says

attraverso lo studio delle abitudini e dei costumi di tre popolazioni della nuova guinea, margaret mead ci fa vedere l'influsso del sesso sul temperamento e ci mostra che le differenze tra uomini e donne sono spesso create dai condizionamenti sociali. studio degli anni 30, molto chiaro e affascinante- da perdercisi dentro.

Valerie says

Margaret Mead had more notoriety than her contemporaries (compare her to her schoolmate Ruth Benedict, for example). The students of Franz Boas changed anthropology to such a degree that many of the criticisms of their work tend to blame them for not going far enough along the trails they blazed. People in Mead's time tended, for example, to criticize her for getting TOO much involved in the personal experiences of her 'subjects'--now she's considered too dry and impersonal.

Mead was a puckish, stout woman who had a lot to say about her own society. If she chose to 'tell all the truth, but tell it slant', as Emily Dickinson advised, she mostly did so to try to circumvent a sort of a priori censorship in her times, when criticism of the prevailing standards and mores were simply prevented from being published. In anthropology, where she wasn't talking about 'anyone we know', she could report honestly, and her critics were often at a loss to counter her arguments, since THEY didn't know the informants, either.

If Mead tended to pick examples that underscored her theses, she was scarcely alone in that--compare people's realization of Mendel's unconscious fudging, for example. Real lives are not that clear-cut, and the unconsciously snobbish belief that 'primitive' people lived 'simpler' lives than we was a staple even among the introducers of cultural relativism.

As a case study, it's a good introduction--but there's need for new studies. Couldn't be among these people, though--their lives have been so changed in late years that few even of the elders remember how they once lived.

Now that I've gotten hold of a copy for reference, I can add more detail about this particular edition.

This is the 'Perennial' edition, published in 2001. It has an introduction by Helen Fisher, acknowledgements and an introduction (from 1935) by Mead herself, and 'Words for A New Century' by Mead's daughter, Mary Catherine Bateson. Tellingly, it's dedicate to Franz Boas.

Mead explains how she came to choose the tribes she studied in the Acknowledgements, and gives more circumstantial detail in the introductions to each of the sections. Based on her own account, the choice of which societies to study was more or less coincidental. The three groups (Arapesh, Mundugumor, and the Tchambuli) were (note the tense) close neighbors--as such matters are reckoned in New Guinea, which is very mountainous, and which, at the time, was very heavily forested. There has been a great deal of deforestation since (as is true in many areas), and the few alpine meadows that once existed are now almost gone due to climate change--but these were mostly not inhabited by humans, at the time of the studies.

The people who were studied in this book were members of closely related linguistic, cultural, and religious groups. When discussing, for example, the 'tamberan' cults, Mead goes into some detail to explain how similar beliefs are cherry-picked by people with different emphases and ideals to support their own priorities.

It's evident that a lot more research took place among the Arapesh than among the other two tribes. It's also evident that Mead was aware that the Mundugumor at least (and, to a lesser extent, the Tchambuli) no longer lived the way that's described. Whether it was EVER true that they lived the way they described to Mead is less clear. There was evidently quite a bit of nostalgic romancing going on--quite ironic, in a lot of ways, because what was being 'remembered' was not, by our standards, particularly desirable lives. The people

involved (who were not anything like 'primitive' in the sense that they had lived the same way that their ancestors had lived for many generations; by their own accounting things had changed drastically over time) had been 'pacified' to put an end to headhunting and (alleged) cannibalism. But even before they were subjected to such laws, there's quite a bit of evidence that the 'traditional' practices had declined significantly. Headhunting (and cannibalism, if it really had happened) had become more or less a matter of buying and selling victims who had been condemned to be sold for the resolution of blood-feuds--and the killing was contracted out--so that in some cases children were convinced to do the killing as a part of initiation processes. This was probably quite a bit rarer than the romances depicted, since the number of children awaiting initiation was probably not very large in any given year.

The best analogy would probably have been Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Buffalo Bill and his troupe knew perfectly well that the stories they were peddling were almost entirely fantasy. But they were telling the stories to outsiders whom they could count on to be fairly credulous--so they continued to present a pageant which had very little to do with people's actual lives--in order to justify quite egregious behavior by the interlopers against the indigenous peoples.

In this case, as in the case of Buffalo Bill, the indigenous people were probably often quite willing to accede to the conceits of the romances, because the romances represented them as being quite a bit more potent and unified than they probably really were.

Mead was almost certainly aware that this sort of fantasizing was going on. She admits that the conditions she describes no longer exist--but she doesn't discuss whether they were EVER true--or just stories she was told by people in a deprived and anomalous state.

It's not necessarily relevant whether the stories she was told were literally true, since what she was studying was people's ideals--and how people were able or unable to live up to those ideals. Many of the case studies are not of people who comfortably live up to the ideals, but of people who CAN'T live up to the standards--and to an analysis of WHY they can't.

This is at least partly because almost no people can live up to their societal ideals easily--and many can't do so at all. The ideals are not, after all, intended for mediocre people--or for people who are temperamentally unmatched to the ideals. There's no need to try to indoctrinate those who naturally accord with the ideals--they'll do as their nature dictates. What's needed is to convince people who AREN'T naturally aligned with their societies' ideals to try to live up to those ideals.

In terms of the questions examined in this book, what's at issue is the temperamental assumptions behind sex roles. None of the three groups in the book have the same assumptions about what kind of temperament is 'masculine' or 'feminine' as the (more or less) consensus assumptions of 'Western' societies. The Arapesh believed that neither men nor women are 'naturally' passionate, aggressive, or sexy. They regarded sex as more or less a sidelight, in or out of marriage. The Mundugumor believed that both men and women were 'naturally' aggressive, socially and sexually; impersonal, lacking in tenderness, and competitive. The Tchambuli believed that men were 'naturally' flirtatious, dramatic, and artistic, and that women were 'naturally' domestic, practical, impersonal, and humorous.

But these are all ideals, of course. Real people aren't this simple, as individuals or as group members. Some people are gregarious, gentle, and generous. Others are asocial and standoffish. Some people are shy, and others are extroverted. But most people are ALL of these things, in one mixture or another--varying at different times of their lives, and in response to their personal and family experiences as much as in response to their inherent (and innate, which is different because it includes an average of 9 months of intrauterine

experience) 'natures'.

One thing that Mead doesn't pay sufficient attention to, I think, is that all three of the groups profiled have a strong reluctance to think that anything might be just happenstance. They seem unable to believe that any ills or problems could be matters of simple bad luck. They had (apparently) no idea of contagion or protective hygiene. Any standards of cleanliness seem to have been predominantly aimed at preventing vengeful persons from practicing sorcery. Even the Arapesh, who believed that they were unable to be (or remain) angry at relatives, still felt the need to explain suffering by arguing that 'those people over there' WERE practicing sorcery--using personal property conveyed to them by relatives overcome by (temporary) anger, which the 'foreign' sorcerers keep against the time when they will (or may) be paid to cast spells.

This belief that all ills are personally directed against individuals is, in a way, comforting. It not only means that we are not tiny motes at the impersonal mercilessness of a senseless universe--it also conveys the hope that if we can mollify our enemies (or at least counter their spells), we may be able to recover our health.

Unfortunately (or fortunately, or just fortuitously) it ISN'T true. SOME of our ills may be deliberately launched against us. Most, however, ARE impersonal--and attempting to forestall them by natural and supernatural means can even be worse than useless, since it can prevent research into more effective preventatives, treatments, and cures. Not that there's any certainty that such remedies exist, of course.

The general contention in this book (that human temperaments are not bipolar and sexually dimorphic, but are personal and variable) is buttressed by the tribal and personal case studies in the book. It is not, however, as Mead contends, an explanation of homosexual and transgendered experiences. It does tend to support the idea that our RESPONSE to homosexuality and transgendered people is culturally bound. But it isn't an argument that such behaviors are an artifact of our assumptions. I suspect that both phenomena occurred in ALL of the peoples profiled: but that Mead didn't observe it because she didn't know how to detect it in societies whose underlying assumptions were different than in 'Western' societies. For example, there is one man among the Mundugumor who is described as behaving in kindly, generous, nurturing ways. He is somewhat vilified as being unrealistic, not only because his behavior was not consistent with 'manly' behavior as defined by his people, but also because his behavior was inconsistent with 'feminine' behavior in his society. He was also mocked for fantasizing that there had been (or might yet be) a society in which his behavior would be normal. This is seen as 'unrealistic', which is taken as an insult. But when the primary assumptions of your own society are uncongenial, being 'unrealistic' may be a perfectly viable defensive position. And after all, this man's behavior would have been perfectly 'normal', if he'd been born an Arapesh. So why revile him for not being a good Mundugumor? He might be better advised to move to where he'd be welcome--as many non-Arapesh women do in the book. Sounds more like a candidate for adoption than remediation, to ME.

One important point that seems underemphasized in this book is that competitiveness is not identically mapped on scarcity. The Arapesh are materially quite poor, while the Mundugumor are relatively rich--and yet the Arapesh are schooled to be gentle and nurturing, and the Mundugumor to be harsh and competitive.

Note that ALL of the societies in the book practiced infanticide. Not consistently--some women among the Mundugumor, for example, chose to rescue and adopt infants who had been exposed to die. They induced lactation by encouraging attempts at suckling, and supplemented this with coconut milk. They did so at least partly because women in the Mundugumor society were taught to desire sons, and men daughters--so that men tended to intervene to save daughters and women to save boys. But they also did so in order to justify raising children even when they were not married.

Roman Westberg says

Culture provides us with roles connected with values, these roles are shaping our behaviour, but it also limits our potential where our personality is not in agreement with these roles... Society needs to provide many more sets of roles, not limited by sex, social gifts or status. Schools, families, working places should allow greater variety in values, expressing higher tolerance with diversity...
Good summary and introduction in this book, feels fresh after 60 years.

Ginger says

This ethnography discusses the different gender roles in three different cultures, each located in the same country: New Guinea. The Arapesh believe that both women and men become pregnant when the woman is pregnant, and will perform the same child rearing duties as women. The Mundugumor are cannabalistic and both men and women do not give a lot of physical affection to their children. The Tchambuli men believe that art is important, and it is their role in society to pursue the arts while the women make money. It is interesting to see how the roles of men and women can differ so much, even within the same country. It also brings up the question, is the role of men and women ever definite? What defines a woman? What defines a man?

Elisa Martínez says

Una excelente etnografía sobre la diferencia sexual, que muestra, además, la importancia de la diversidad y los problemas de la desigualdad.

Sean says

Published in 1935, "Sex and Temperament" is Margaret Mead's work describing her observations of three distinct primitive tribes in Papua New Guinea. Mead lived with the tribes and shares detailed observations of the cultures of each tribe, as well as describing how various personality types fit into each culture.

There are more fine-grained descriptions in her book, but at a high level, she found that: 1) with the Arapesh, men and women were equally peaceful; 2) with the Mundugumor, mean and women were equally aggressive; and 3) with the Tchambuli, women were more aggressive than men.

Mead's conclusion after observing these three tribes is that personality traits that are in some cultures considered sex-based, or assigned to a particular sex, are in fact interpreted differently in different cultures and not necessarily associated with one sex or another. This argues for "nurture over nature"--each culture has its own ideas of which personality traits it considers normal and which it considers abnormal. Children of that society are then raised within those expections. In some cases, traits are additionally associated with being either male or female.

Mead's final chapters, with her conclusions, make for fascinating reading. She argues that when certain traits are tied to a particular gender, people in a culture who don't have those traits are then see as being "unmanly"

or "unwomanly", rather than just atypical of that culture.

Michelle says

I learned that I live in bubble, and that exploring other worlds, cultures, beliefs, as well as adopting a multiple truths approach to life...should climb up to the top of my to do list.

Fishface says

Interesting study of sexual mores and beliefs in "primitive" societies. They seem a lot less primitive than some Americans I know, frankly. Only the chauvinsim of the age allowed the author to describe them that way. There's more to living than cars and flush toilets!

Dolly says

I feel like it's unfair to give such an important anthropological work a low rating, but in terms of my personal enjoyment of the book, it really was "just okay." Like most early anthropological texts, the writing is dry. Margaret Mead positions herself distantly from her "subjects," and looks at the three New Guinean societies with an etic perspective. I think it's worth looking at if you're a student interested in how the early study of anthropology impacted feminism or gender roles (i.e. the impact of studying another culture on one's own) -- but I would look for other sources if you're interested in the actual societies themselves.

Lorenzo says

Il carattere antropologico del libro è già un punto a favore nel mio giudizio. Amo i saggi e le costruzioni narrative intorno ad esso, le esplorazioni più inconsuete ed approfondite. La fortuna di questo libro impegnativo è che riesce a sfatare la naturale convinzione che il sesso dia origine di per sé a differenti temperamenti. Il pensiero che possano trattarsi di condizioni socialmente realizzate anziché biologiche è difficile da comprendere, ma avventurandosi nella lettura attenta di diverse tribù africane si potrà capire come la donna non sia estranea a comportamenti "maschili" e viceversa. Interessante e sorprendente.

Melissa Dawdaughter says

This ethnography is great in so many ways. Mead’s descriptions of life in three different societies are wonderful, balancing analysis of social structure with details of the day to day life of her subjects in a way that makes it an easy and enjoyable read, unlike the dry tomes of so many of her contemporaries.

However did I manage to pass a course in gender and sexuality without reading this wonderful book? All I can say is that my then anthropology lecturer had the most animated, strange facial expressions and intricate make-up, that I spent most of the lectures watching the way she spoke, rather than actually listening to what

she said. Not much of an excuse, it’s true.

Actually, it was R.A. Wilson’s book “Prometheus Rising” that introduced me to Mead’s work. In it, Wilson asks the readers to check out Mead and then write “a five page proof demonstrating that the taboos in our tribe make more sense objectively than the taboos of the tribes she studied”. Wilson’s aim is, I think, to encourage The Reader to question the extent to which ideas we hold as innate and scientific, are actually a result of cultural conditioning.

The questions that Mead addresses regards gender stereotypes are more relevant than ever today. Mead’s hypothesis, having studied three societies (two of which don’t have concepts of male and female temperaments but see both men and women as equally nurturing –in the case of the Arapesh- or equally aggressive and hostile – in the case of the Mundugumor) is that perceived sex differences are a result of social conditioning and not a result of biology.

Considering the sudden increase in people reporting body dysphoria, it is interesting to see a study that examines social constructs of sexuality and also gives a fair amount of time to analysis of people who, due to their individual characters, cannot meet the expectations of their society.
I am sure that there are criticisms of Mead’s work and method to be made. In fact, having read this I am now interested to read other books on this subject to understand to what extent Mead’s hypothesis is borne out by other studies, and what criticisms have been levelled at her methodology. To me, this is a sign of a really good book: stimulating the mind, encouraging the reader to learn more about the topic, and asking us to question our assumptions.
I love this book. If you are interested in human nature/nurture and gender constructs, then you should read this.

Vanessa says

I hate to say this but it just didn't capture my attention for very long. I suppose the problem is that I went into this reading it as a lay person but the writing was a bit too dry for me to be swept up into it.
