

The Problems With Coming of Age

Course supplement to an eight-episode season of the SAPIENS podcast about the epic life and controversial work of Margaret Mead in American Samoa.

Course Description

In this course, students will be introduced to early twentieth-century anthropology, focusing on Margaret Mead as a historical figure, her work in American Samoa, and her impact on the discipline of anthropology. Students will discover the history and relevance of Margaret Mead's research in American Samoa, and why, a century later, the controversies and legacies around it, sparked by her fierce critic Derek Freeman, are still so relevant today. Students will explore the overall idea of whether Mead was right about Samoans as a lens through which to explore the key themes of the nature vs. nurture debate, human sexuality, and knowledge production. Identifying the ways that Derek Freeman challenged Mead's groundbreaking anthropological claims, students will explore how neither Mead nor Freeman was entirely correct. This class aims to grapple with the legacy of this controversy and the realization that the sciences and humanities need to include reflexive methods and Indigenous perspectives to see the world in more complex ways.

Course Outcomes

Following this course, students will be able to:

- Examine Mead's role as "the most influential anthropologist in history."
- Explore the Samoan influence on and critiques of Mead's work.
- Identify ways Derek Freeman challenged Mead's groundbreaking anthropological claims.
- Reflect on ideas regarding the difficulties of adolescence, both universally (biological) and locally (cultural).
- Explain the influences of colonialism and Christianity on Samoan history and culture.
- Speak fluently about the complexities of nature versus nurture.
- Articulate how anthropologists approach knowledge production.

Course Learning Objectives

Following this course, students will be able to:

Unit 1: Summarize the development of anthropology. Explore the significance of Margaret Mead's work in American Samoa.

Unit 2: Investigate the emergence of “adolescence” as a social category in the twentieth century and how anthropologists have studied it. Assess Mead’s ideas regarding adolescence.

Unit 3: Define the processes of ethnographic fieldwork. Analyze the impact of Mead’s ethnographic work and findings in Samoa.

Unit 4: Recall the significant milestones in Margaret Mead’s career as an anthropologist. Summarize how Mead’s findings have affected anthropology, Samoans, and the American public.

Unit 5: Compare the different responses Samoans had to Mead’s work. Inspect how “outsider” anthropologists represent “the Other” and the significance of this on global views.

Unit 6: Describe the study of anthropology prior to Mead and the changes in anthropological scholarship after the release of Mead’s work. Evaluate the movement toward inclusivity, the positionality of the ethnographer, self-reflexivity, and multivocality in anthropology and ethnography.

Unit 7: Identify the significant milestones in Freeman’s career. Investigate Freeman’s critique of Mead’s work.

Unit 8: Explore the concept of nature vs. nurture from an anthropological standpoint and the ways the two intersect. Express how Freeman’s and Mead’s writings on Samoa incorporated the idea of nature vs. nurture.

Unit 9: Outline the history of colonialism in the South Pacific. Examine how colonialism and Christianity shape how Samoan people view Mead and Freedman.

Unit 10: Explore the legacies of colonialism in Samoa. Recognize how derogatory language toward Samoans misshaped the global view of Samoa and the Samoan people.

Unit 11: Summarize the timeline of the Mead-Freeman controversy. Review the key points of the critique and controversy.

Unit 12: Assess how the nature vs. nurture debate shaped American society in the 1980s and 1990s. Relate how Freeman and Mead’s ideas shaped American views.

Unit 13: Investigate how cultural, social, and historical factors influence human sexual behaviors and identities. Indicate the challenges of studying sexuality within an anthropological framework, including conducting research in diverse cultural settings.

Unit 14: Evaluate how Sia’s work challenges existing narratives and empowers marginalized voices. Compare the significant themes in Sia’s books, including gender, power, culture, identity, sexuality, colonialism, and coming-of-age experiences.

Unit 15: Identify the challenges to intercultural understanding, such as stereotypes, ethnocentrism, and cultural misunderstandings. Distinguish the role of empathy, active listening, and dialogue in bridging the gap between cultural insiders and outsiders.

Unit 16: Discuss the fundamental principles of ethnographic methods to understand and explore culture. Examine the dynamic nature of culture and its relationship to various social, economic, and historical factors.

Unit 17: Compare the significant themes: sexuality, nature versus nurture, and knowledge production. Reflect on the challenges, possibilities, and responsibilities of studying cultures and societies.

Course Structure

This course is designed as a supplement to [season 6](#) of the SAPIENS podcast. Active participation in discussions, questions, and activities is expected. A series of units accompany each podcast:

- Season 6 Episode 1: Unit 1 and 2
- Season 6 Episode 2: Unit 3 and 4
- Season 6 Episode 3: Unit 5 and 6
- Season 6 Episode 4: Unit 7 and 8
- Season 6 Episode 5: Unit 9 and 10
- Season 6 Episode 6: Unit 11 and 12
- Season 6 Episode 7: Unit 13 and 14
- Season 6 Episode 8: Unit 15, 16 and 17

Syllabus Variations

- 17 Week Class: Units 1-17
- 8 Week Class: Units 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 17
- 2 Week Intensive Class: Units 3, 4, 8 (Week 1); Units 11, 12, 17 (Week 2)

Suggestions for Handling Difficult Topics

- Race and ethnicity may enter the conversation when discussing “outsider” anthropologists. Be prepared for ethnicity and race to come up in the discussion of inclusivity.

- Some students may question the suggestion that you must belong to a culture to study it. Emphasize the importance of community and participant consent, no matter the anthropologist's own background and position, and also the benefits of inclusivity and collaborative methods.
- This course touches on the early theories held by many disciplines, including some historically problematic ones. For example, there is a discussion of eugenics, which is genetically modifying the human race to be "better," and the idea that human evolution consists of a hierarchy of different people. Be sure to emphasize that such theories are incorrect without a trace of scientific legitimacy. It is important to note that although these theories are lumped in with the "genetics" supporters of the time, not every scholar who believed genetics determined human behavior was or is racist or sexist.
- Avoid casting individuals as "bad" people or "good" people. Speak with students about the context in which people lived, the limits of knowledge, and the human propensity to discriminate. However, do not excuse poor behavior and unjustifiable ideology; acknowledge people's flaws and flawed decisions, and emphasize what can be learned so that we can be better.
- Colonialism and religion are sensitive topics that could cause controversial discussions. Encourage discussions to be civil and constructive.

Suggestions for Select Units

Unit 6: The Professor should break up the content over two days. The first day should focus on theories in anthropology. The second day should focus on inclusivity in anthropology.

Unit 7: This unit focuses on Freeman's career and his critique of Mead's work. To avoid making it solely a history lesson, try to pull out concepts and apply them to how the anthropology field progressed or to current work.

Unit 8: Incorporate multiple points, especially if an issue seems black and white. Remember that often, there are numerous factors at work.

Unit 9: Outline the history of colonialism in the South Pacific" is very straightforward since history is mainly based on facts. Examine how colonialism and Christianity shape how Samoan people view Mead and Freedman" may not be so straightforward. Individuals may interpret the view of Samoans on Mead and Freeman differently. Encourage varying viewpoints that are based on sound arguments.

Unit 10: Ensure all your students are familiar with the content of Unit 9. That way, they have a

basic understanding of colonialism in the South Pacific. Discussing how Samoan culture is not just based on colonial legacies is important. Samoans were able to preserve significant parts of their culture and traditions throughout the colonial era. Make sure to emphasize that as well.

Evaluation Methods

Student Discussion Questions: Each unit will have discussion questions in which students are expected to participate during weekly classes. (45% of grade)

Weekly Activities/Assignments: Each week, there will be one to three activities that students can do in the classroom individually, in a group, or as a small homework assignment. These can be creative and critical, and they can involve the unit readings or closely related resources. (45% of grade)

Reflection: In the final reflection paper, students are expected to reflect on the challenges, possibilities, and responsibilities of studying cultures and societies and compare the significant themes: sexuality, nature vs. nurture, and knowledge production. (10% of grade)

Suggested Assessment Questions

Unit 1

- What was the central question Margaret Mead sought to answer through her work in American Samoa?
- Why did Mead focus on studying adolescent girls in American Samoa?
- How did Mead gather data in American Samoa?

Unit 2

- Consider this scenario: A child is an avid reader. Since the child was a baby, their parents read to them every night before bed. Is the fact that the child loves to read most likely a result of nature or nurture?
- Describe the distinct characteristics of adolescence.
- Describe Margaret Mead's perspective on differences between adolescents in American Samoa and those in the United States.

Unit 3

- Describe the value that comes from ethnography.
- Compare whether an ethnographic expedition is more aligned with colonization or participation with another culture.
- What is cultural anthropology?
- What is ethnography? Define the process for ethnographic work.

Unit 4

- What were some of the key moments in Margaret Mead's career?
- What is *Coming of Age in Samoa* about, and what are some of the claims Mead makes in it?
- What is social constructionism?

Unit 5

- List three responses to Margaret Mead's work.
- Why is inclusivity important in anthropology?
- What does it mean to be an "outsider" in anthropology?
- What are three changes anthropology has undergone since the publication of Mead's work?
- What was Americans' opinion of Samoa after reading Mead's book?

Unit 6

- Write a definition for the diffusion theory of anthropology.
- Compare the two theories of anthropology in the nineteenth century.
- Identify two examples of inclusivity in anthropology.
- Outline one key theory of anthropology in the twentieth century.

Unit 7

- Identify two reasons Derek Freeman believed Margaret Mead's work in Samoa caused her to draw incorrect conclusions.
- Give an example of cultural determination.
- Around what point (date and events) did Freeman begin to shift his perspective from cultural determinism toward evolutionary theory publicly?
- List reasons Freeman felt confident in his knowledge and understanding of Samoan culture.
- How did the American Anthropological Association react to Freeman's 1983 book?

Unit 8

- How did eugenics give rise to the cultural determinism movement in anthropology?
- Describe the nature-based argument for human development.
- List some vocabulary often used interchangeably with "nature" in the nature versus nurture discussion.
- Describe the nurture-based argument for human development.
- In *Coming of Age in Samoa*, did Margaret Mead completely disregard biological influences on human behavior, as Derek Freeman claims? Support your answer with excerpts from the text.

Unit 9

- Discuss how the Mau a Pule influenced Samoa's sovereignty.

- Margaret Mead published *Coming of Age in Samoa* in 1928, while Derek Freeman's first response was published in 1983. Discuss how the difference in time could have influenced Freeman's response to Mead's book.
- Outline how Christianity influenced Samoans and their way of living.

Unit 10

- Explain how the introduction of Christianity affects Samoan cultures and traditions to this day.
- Discuss the influence of derogatory language on the view of Samoan people around the globe.
- Describe how derogatory language can influence our perception of people.

Unit 11

- During an interview, Margaret Mead said, "In anthropology, you only have to show once that it is possible for a culture to make, say, a period of life easy, where it is hard everywhere else, to have made your point" (quoted in Freeman, 1996, p. 77). Is this true within the Derek Freeman versus Mead controversy?
- In *The Trashing of Margaret Mead: Anatomy of an Anthropological Controversy*, Paul Shankman states, "Although popular and influential in the public realm, *Coming of Age in Samoa* was not a foundational text for anthropologists. Freeman simply confused the book's popularity with its professional credibility." What do you think of this claim? Provide examples to support your answer.
- What were Freeman's points of criticism of Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa*? How did these points push his agenda of a more biological approach to anthropological study?
- Given Freeman's disputes with American anthropologists before publishing his criticisms of Mead, do you think prejudice played a role in ostracizing Freeman's ideas in the American anthropological field? Provide examples to support your answer.
- Where did Freeman's criticisms of Mead's work fall flat? What did his critics say he could have done better, or where he erred?

Unit 12

- Discuss one example that trickled from the nature versus nurture debate during the 1980s to 1990s to explain people or a state of being and the repercussions for those individuals.
- What were Derek Freeman's published critiques of Margaret Mead's work, and what were his main arguments?
- Why do nature versus nurture discussions tend to become prejudiced?
- Has the nature versus nurture discussion changed since the 1980s? Why or why not?
- Did Freeman's work affect Mead's reputation among the American public? Provide examples to support your answers.

Unit 13

- Explain what is meant by the idea that sexuality is relative.
- What is one challenge of studying sexuality from an anthropological framework?
- Describe how sexuality in Samoa has seemingly changed since Margaret Mead completed her work in 1926.
- Describe the three factors that influence human sexual behaviors and identity. Provide one example for each.

Unit 14

- What is the difference between sex and gender?
- Provide one example of how Sia Figiel used her writing to empower marginalized voices. In your answer, include the title and a brief summary of the work chosen.
- Explain coming-of-age experiences relating to gender, identity, sexuality, and power.
- Why are coming-of-age experiences meaningful in cultures?

Unit 15

- Explain why intercultural communication is important in a globalized world. Discuss the impacts of failed intercultural communication.
- Describe a situation arising from different communication codes that an English-speaking student may encounter on a summer exchange program in Greece.
- Describe the elements that make up culture. Compare these elements in American culture to another culture.

Unit 16

- In your own words, define ethnography and its goals.
- What methods does an ethnographer use to gather data? Explain each method, its purpose, merits, and limitations.
- Describe the role of a participant observer.

Unit 17

- What traits are solely influenced by nature?
- What obstacles may present when an anthropologist seeks to study concepts of self in a different culture?
- What are at least two of the ethical responsibilities of an anthropological researcher? Explain the purpose of each responsibility.
- How have knowledge production methods changed in anthropology over the past hundred years? How do these changes better help anthropologists understand culture and humanity?

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