

MARGARET MEAD

Bisexual U.S. Anthropologist (1901-1978)



Margaret Mead became world famous for her studies of South Sea peoples, especially *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), which rejected biological determinism to emphasize the inexorable influence of cultural forces on adolescent development. She later expanded her study, which led her to admonish American parents for what she saw as comparatively inept child-rearing practices in the United States. She wrote more than 1,000 articles and 30 books in addition to working as a curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Though she was married three times, in the mid-1920s Mead began a life-long relationship with fellow anthropologist Ruth Benedict which influenced how the two women interpreted what was deemed “normal” in a culture. As a result, Mead came to describe the “deviant” as a person who “demanded a different or improved environment but who rejected the traditional choices” to set up alternate standards. She became one of the earliest proponents of bisexuality, questioning the socio-cultural forces that demand people choose between a lifetime of exclusive homosexuality or heterosexuality.



Lesson Plan

Level 1: Contributions Approach

1. Activate Prior Experience: What do you know about Margaret Mead?
2. Read the biography above and explore additional resources at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/person/margaret-mead>.
3. Mead has been called a “prophet” and “Mother of the World”. Read <http://bcw.barnard.edu/publications/margaret-meads-legacy-continuing-conversations/>
4. Group Discussion: Describe how Margaret Mead became a pioneering spirit in anthropology and why her pioneering work in the study of human societies is still influential today.

Level 2: Additive Approach

1. After reading about Mead’s research, describe the type of expeditions that informed her understanding of culture and Polynesian sexual behavior. View this <https://www.biography.com/scholar/margaret-mead>
2. Mead’s bisexuality was confirmed by her family, which accepted the decades-long relationship Mead shared with Ruth Benedict. Together they redefined our understanding of family dynamics and child-rearing; yet their involvement is rarely mentioned, contributing to bisexual invisibility.
3. Do an advanced search for “bisexuals” at <https://legacyprojectchicago.org/explore/advanced>. Find another bisexual woman who lived during Mead’s time. Compare and contrast their lives. What unique challenges do bisexuals face that lesbians do not?

Level 3: Transformational Approach

1. View <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1525/aa.1980.82.2.02a00010>. In what ways did Mead’s early development and professional pursuits transform her into a “rebel” among anthropologists?
2. How did Mead evolve in her relationships with men and women? <http://www.nasonline.org/publications/biographical-memoirs/memoir-pdfs/mead-margaret.pdf>
3. Mead argued that men and women were shaped by culture, not just heredity. View number two at this link <https://massivesci.com/articles/anthropologist-margaret-mead-our-science-heroes-cultural-sexual-revolution/> and present your own evidence for the “power” of her statement.

Level 4: Social Action Approach

1. Read <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/culturalanthropology/chapter/margaret-meads-gender-studies/>. How did Mead’s findings significantly impact our understanding of gender?
2. View <http://faculty.webster.edu/woolfilm/margaretmead.html#image>. How did Mead illustrate her different insights into marriage, women’s position in society, and lifestyle?
3. Based upon your exploration of this “change-maker”, would you advocate for a progressive view of women in society today? Why or why not?