



Interview with

# Dr. Margaret Mead

Anthropologist

On Social Anthropology • American Character • Primitive Societies

*produced by Howard Langer*

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Descriptive notes inside pocket

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Since 1925, she has studied seven primitive societies. These studies have enabled her to gain a better perspective on American culture.

Dr. Mead is of small build, blue eyes. She's "plain folks." There are no airs about her. You get the impression that she'd be at home anywhere--in an igloo, a native hut, or a Park Avenue penthouse.

Mr. Langer:

Dr. Mead, how did you become interested in anthropology as a career?

Dr. Mead:

When I was a small child, my mother was studying Italian immigrants in the United States, and how they became Americans, and I used to go along. The first wedding I ever went to was an Italian wedding and I used to have my head measured with the instruments that she was measuring all the other children's heads with. So I grew up with a general interest in other kinds of people and the way they lived and realizing that the way they lived was systematic and it was important for us to understand more about other people in the world.

Mr. Langer:

Well how did you first decide to study primitive societies?

Dr. Mead:

Well that was when I was in college. When I was a Senior in College I worked under Professor Franz Boas at Columbia and under Ruth Benedict. And for the first time realized that primitive societies were priceless records that were disappearing and if we didn't study them and study them very fast, they wouldn't be there to be studied anymore. They'd all become converted and civilized and part

Introduction:

Mr. Langer:

This is Howard Langer in New York. Across the table is Dr. Margaret Mead, the world's best-known anthropologist. In a few minutes we are going to ask her what makes Americans tick.

Dr. Mead was born December 16, 1901 in Philadelphia. Her father was an economics professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Her mother was a sociologist. Dr. Mead's initial aim in life was to paint. But finally, she chose anthropology as a career.

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of the modern world and something would be gone forever that we could never get back.

Mr. Langer:

Well how do you go about studying a primitive society? Where do you get your money from? What kind of equipment do you take?

Dr. Mead:

Well, you get grants from foundations. (The) First grant I had was \$1800 and that wasn't meant to go anywhere with. It was meant to stay in the United States so it was a little difficult to try to go somewhere with it. And the first equipment I took was a typewriter, an ordinary camera - an ordinary Junior Kodak and pencils and paper. That was in 1925. Now on my last trip where the expenditures amounted to something like \$30,000 instead of \$1800 and we had generators and tape recorders and movie cameras, and it represented the whole gamut of invention between 1925 and 1953 and of course we went by plane, I took two students with me - we went by plane and it took about 4 days to get there where it took three months in 1925.

Mr. Langer:

Well when you arrived at the place where you're going to study, where do you live and how do you live?

Dr. Mead:

Well, you arrive first, of course, at some kind of a government station and you make your peace with government in one way or another and convince them that you're not going to do anything subversive or (that) will upset the natives. Then you work slowly. Sometimes it may take three or four weeks to get to the actual native community where you want to work because sometimes you have to get carriers; you have to persuade maybe 80 or 100 men who don't want to carry for anybody to come down from the hills and carry your stuff up. Or you have to wait until you can get some kind of a boat that will take you up a river. Then when you get into a native village, - of course we work in places where there've been a few Europeans before. We don't suddenly get dropped right out of the clouds among a group of cannibals.

There are a few people that can talk a little of a Lingua Franca and you know, a sort of a jargon language that falls between their language and English. They usually have been forced to build some kind of a very uncomfortable shack in which travelling government officials and miners and people like that can stay and you move into that first and then you persuade them to build you a house.

Mr. Langer:

Do you have to go native in any way?

Dr. Mead:

No, you don't go native in any of the usual sorts of ways. That is, you keep your own style of living and I wear specially designed clothes, but they're not grass skirts, nor do I ever wear slacks. I wear clothes that are designed with broader and wider skirts than usual so I can tuck it up around my knees if mosquitoes are biting. And you go native in the sense that you treat the people among whom you're working as human beings like yourself; that you learn to care a great deal about them, what's happening to them. I hold their babies in my arms, I sit up at night nursing them in many instances, I learn to value some people and to dislike some people so that I become part of the community where I'm living.

Mr. Langer:

Well what are the major differences between most primitive societies and a complex one - such as America's?

Dr. Mead:

Well of course one of the principal points is that each one of these people command almost the whole of their own culture.

Up to the time that they encountered us, they felt they understood the world, and they understood everything about it. How man happened to be here, how death came into the world, how people should behave, what were the best ways to get food. All of these things they understood so they had a kind of dignity that only a very few people have today. And possibly no one has today, because now we are all of us so conscious of what we don't know that somebody else knows about our own culture.

Mr. Langer:

Well, as an anthropologist, how would you describe the American character? What has shaped it exactly?

Dr. Mead:

Well to begin with, of course, what the anthropologist means by character are those regularities in human behavior that are due to the fact that they grow up in one culture instead of another. That they grow up in America instead of among the Eskimos or on a South Sea Island or in Africa. Because we're all one species and as far as we know at present, any one of us, taken as a baby, somewhere else, could grow up to be - speak the language and act like an Eskimo or a Hottentot or a Samoan or a Frenchman or Russian or an Ameri-

can. So when we talk about American character we mean what children, who grow up in America get out of growing up in America, what kind of people they become.

Now, one of the striking things about American culture is of course that it's a culture that was made very recently from other cultures. It's a culture that's been made by grownup people. People came from other countries to the United States or to the Thirteen Colonies originally and they had to learn how to live in a new country after they were grown up. Now that is very different from living in the same place for a thousand years under the same apple tree, and being born and dying in the same bed. So that American culture has a sense of movement, of change in it that's very rare in the world. Also we think that we can learn anything by reading a book - which is an adult position. If you grow up and learn everything unconsciously and inarticulately as a child, you don't believe you can get a book on how to make friends and influence people, or how to cook, or how to become a successful business accountant, or how to make love, or how to be a great politician. But if you come to a country as a young adult - enterprising, lively, prepared to learn a new language and learn all sorts of new things, well, you get a book and you learn it. So that we're a society in which we think people can learn anything without previous experience.

Mr. Langer:

Well what are our goals in life - we Americans?

Dr. Mead:

Well they change, of course. I don't think one can talk about goals without talking about period, to some extent, without talking about part of the country and about class, about whether people belong to a group that feels it's going up in the world or belong to a group that feels it's going down in the world. At present - and I suppose it's what you really want me to talk about - at present, the goals of this country appear to be good human relations. That is, what young people appear to want today and what older people want for their children is a good early marriage, a nice stable job which has a good pension - people begin asking about pensions now when they come into jobs at 21 - which will make it possible for them to live pleasantly in the suburbs, have several children and enjoy them. And where they won't have to take any responsibility for the city where they work; for the rest of the country or for the rest of the world.

Mr. Langer:

I see, we Americans are encouraged to get ahead and to make good. Is this success formula a unique one in the world?

Dr. Mead:

It isn't unique - part of it came from Northern Europe. Part of it came as a result of the Protestant Reformation where there was a great emphasis that people were rewarded in terms of how they lived. In the older sense the reward was all in heaven, but when people with that sort of character came to the United States and worked equally hard, they were rewarded on earth. And furthermore, you see, in this country we have this need for children to reward their parents by their success which is the only thing very often that the parents can understand about what the children are doing as they move so far ahead of their parents, get so much more education, become so much more Americanized. So that we probably have more of an emphasis on success as such than any other great country today, I think.

Mr. Langer:

America's size and its access to transportation make its population highly mobile. What effect does this have on the American character?

Dr. Mead:

Well everybody has to be prepared to move tomorrow or to stay in one spot for the next 20 years. You have to be prepared for both. So that some students of American character have emphasized this as a kind of living between two poles - ready to leave, ready to stay. You mustn't be too rooted, you mustn't be too insistent on moving.

This is decreasing to some extent, though. Americans are becoming less willing to move than they were on the whole. They begin to worry about whether it's going to upset Junior if he leaves school in the middle of the year.

And many people are refusing better jobs. They're refusing the foreign service. They're refusing jobs overseas for business overseas. Because they don't want to move and they're so worried for fear that if their children grow up somewhere else they won't somehow be part of America. This is a rather new and rather frightening development in this country.

Mr. Langer:

If the late Dr. Kinsey is to be believed, we Americans tend to teach our children one thing about morals but do another. Is this true of other societies as well?

Dr. Mead:

It's true of any society that has any ideals. The only society that teaches its children just how bad everybody is so they can be equally bad is a society with no ideals at all. This was one of the things

that sometimes happens in the kind of societies that we call fascist, in that they try to go back to the kind of behavior that people are practicing at the moment and say we'll make this the norm instead of always setting up something further.

If parents are to bring up children to be truthful, they have to insist that people always tell the truth. Now they don't always tell the truth. There's no society in which people always tell the truth. If they're to bring children up to be law-abiding and at the same time are fudging their income tax, or in the days of Prohibition were also breaking the law by having a drink, they have to work out some method of convincing the children that the laws they aren't keeping, the rules they aren't keeping are nevertheless worth keeping. So that when their children will grow up they in turn will insist to their children that these ideals are worth following.

But what one means by an ideal is something that people don't do but would like to.

Mr. Langer:

Well what kind of an instruction about sex and morals, if any, do you think should be given in public schools.

Dr. Mead:

I think it's important. I think it's serious - that we have to give instruction about sex in public schools, on the whole, I think it would be better if it were diffused sufficiently through the adult population so parents could train their children. And could talk easily to their children about these things as a great many parents can today. But because this country is made up of so many layers of people with different religious beliefs who've come to this country at different times, or have different degrees of knowledge, there are whole sectors of young people in any city today who haven't been given any of the training that's necessary if they're going to meet the existing conditions within which they're going to have to move around.

So that, on the whole, I think that sex education in the schools is rather like teaching first aid. Ideally, everybody would grow up knowing how to stop bleeding from a wound or how to give first aid to a broken bone. We shouldn't have to have classes to do it. We do because at present we're a rather illiterate population. And the same thing's true about sex. We haven't absorbed sufficiently into our adult group a knowledge of how to tell children about what are called "the facts of life", so that they will be prepared to be healthy, happy functioning adults. And until we do that we're going to have to do something in the schools.

Mr. Langer:

How does the kind of training we give our children

differ from that given a child in a primitive society?

Dr. Mead:

Well the principal point is of course, that we train them in schools. In primitive society you don't need schools. Most of what a boy needs to know he learns from his father and the girl learns from her mother or other relatives. The few skills there are such as - oh, hunting or fishing or being able to recite a whole series of magic charms or knowing the history of the tribe or something of that sort, a few youngsters will decide they want to know and go and persuade someone to teach them. And nobody is trying to catch people and teach them things they don't want to know.

Whereas in a society like ours today where parents haven't the time or the knowledge, even to teach the things everybody has to know, we have to put people together in schools and tell off certain people to teach them for a quarter of their lives, in many instances.

Mr. Langer:

Do you think that the primitive training for the primitive boy is better than the training we give our boy for his society?

Dr. Mead:

Yes, but of course it's much simpler. A society that changes very, very slowly, and may not change at all for 400 or 500 years, everybody in the society's behavior is so adjusted that everytime you turn around you learn the same things from otherpeople. When we have to teach people new things almost every year, we haven't yet devised a way in which our teachers can catch up fast enough, our parents can catch up fast enough. We've got to work out a scheme for bringing people up to live in a world that nobody has seen yet.

Mr. Langer:

How can we Americans better adapt ourselves to get along with each other and with the rest of the world?

Dr. Mead:

Well one of the first things we need to learn is that our culture is one among many cultures - that our language is one among many - that our alphabet is only one form of writing - and that all the people in the world belong to the same species, and simply do things differently from the way in which we do them. Now if we once learn that very thoroughly, for one thing we could learn foreign languages which we can't do at present. We train people not to be able to learn foreign languages, in the most fantastic way. Because what we teach a child is -

you see if you take this pencil here - we teach a child this is a pencil. Now this isn't a pencil. This is an object made of wood and lead designed for writing which we call a pencil and other people call it other things.

And if we can once get over to our teachers and our parents and our children this understanding that human culture is something that people have built up historically, that it's different from other people's just because of the historical conditions, and also it's something we can change, and learn other people's cultures, then our problem of getting on with other people in the world would be quite different.

Mr. Langer:

Well how do we tend to react to other cultures when we travel? How can we learn to tolerate other people's cultural differences?

Dr. Mead:

Well I don't think the word tolerate is a good word to use at all. You know what the word tolerate means? To bear. Now how can we bear the fact that somebody into whose country we have gone - usually not at their request - because we want to travel or we want to conquer something or we want to make some money. How can we bear the fact that they eat different food? (You) See? I don't think the word tolerate is good. I think the word tolerate is a good word to use if a Republican's thinking about a Democrat, or a Democrat about a Republican. They've got to tolerate each other's differences because they feel differently about important things. People of different religions have to tolerate their differences of opinion. But other cultures are other whole things - other whole ways of life which we have to learn to appreciate and understand. Now if we insist on having our kind of plumbing and our kind of food and expecting everybody to speak English when we travel, we're going to be a little annoyed because they don't do it quite as well as it's done in the Midwest.

And so when we get there we're annoyed if we can't an egg for breakfast. Which is an extraordinary provincial, tiresome approach to travel.

Mr. Langer:

I'd like to shift to another subject now and that's - well the mass media of communication have come upon us pretty quickly. I was wondering how this is going to affect not only the United States but the rest of the world as well. What will it do to primitive societies - what will it do to other countries? Will it tend to bring us together do you think?

Dr. Mead:

Well, it brings us into contact. Now bringing people into contact doesn't necessarily bring them together. If all of one is small political disagreements or one's minor political assassinations are broadcast over the world the minute they occur, the whole world participates in what were once domestic affairs. It means that for every person who listens to radio or watches TV, or reads the daily press that is dependent on wire services, after all, they have to get up every morning now facing what's happening all over the world.

This a weight of knowledge, a weight of worry that human beings have never had to stand before. And we haven't learned how to do it yet. Certainly modern communications mean that we have a chance of building one world. It means that if one of us goes down, all of us go down together. Whereas, well if you take the days for instance when - before the discovery of America, and of course characteristically the discovery of America means Europeans discovering America. Quite a lot of people had discovered it before that and had got here. But there were thousands of years when the American continent was cut off from the rest of the world.

And the rest of the world could have blown itself up and America would never have known - or the civilizations over here could have blown up and the rest of the world wouldn't have known. And the future of mankind would have gone on. Now today, an explosion anywhere in the world - anywhere at all, endangers the whole and that is, perhaps the most important part of our inter-locking communications system.

Mr. Langer:

Well, do you feel that primitive societies have a better chance for survival in a nuclear age such as ours?

Dr. Mead:

Better chance than what?

Mr. Langer:

Well, than someone, let's say right here in New York City.

Dr. Mead:

No. If we have a nuclear war, I don't think anybody's going to survive at all. Not even an Eskimo.

Mr. Langer:

Well, you've studied, oh, maybe half a dozen different societies and then some. How do you choose the society you want to study?

Dr. Mead:

Well we choose them on the whole for rather academic reasons. To start with, I'm a specialist in the Pacific. I wrote my doctor's thesis on Polynesia which meant I'd read all the voyages of Captain Cook and all the modern accounts of the different South Sea Islands so this was something I knew about and it was naturally therefore, the place that I wanted to go. That was for my first trip. Then afterwards, of course, I knew even better how to live in the South Seas and my job is in charge of Pacific Island cultures for the American Museum of American History so I go back to a different area of the South Seas each time, trying to pick a place where we need general scientific information and then studying particular problems in that spot. We can't pick a culture to fit a problem if we're going to go and study a culture nobody's seen yet. And no one knows anything about it. In the cultures I've studied in New Guinea, no one spoken their language, no one knew anything about them so you just decided, well, we'll take the first culture up the next river from the river up which Thurnwald, who was a German anthropologist went. Now nobody knows anything about the next river there so we'll go up that river. And you are exploring the unknown at the same time that you're doing systematic work on some problem.

Mr. Langer:

So you don't really know what you're going to study until you're there?

Dr. Mead:

Well you know what area you're going to look at - whether you're going to study adolescence, or child thought or roles of men and women or something of that sort.

Mr. Langer:

Well what have been the reactions of the people - of the natives, when you're going about your activities? How do they react?

Dr. Mead:

Well each one reacts differently - you know I've worked with 7 different primitive peoples who are extremely different. In Samoa they enjoyed - they always enjoy the fact that one learns their language, is interested in their culture, and instead of throwing one's weight around as a

superior, sits down and is taught. This is something that is flattering to all people, really. You have to do something pretty terrible to people before they regard - come to regard you as a spy rather than as an interested explorer. So that all the places that I've been they've been flattered that I learned the language, they've enjoyed teaching me the etiquette. In Samoa I learned to dance, and learned to talk a very elegant language and in return for the help they gave me, information about all sorts of things, why I made elegant speeches and dances, and conformed to many of the styles of their society.

The next group I studied, the Manus, were mainly interested in having a people they could trade with. That saved them a two day trip in canoes because there was tobacco in the village that they could trade their fish for. And this was a good commercial thing. Up the Sepik River, I think that our main contribution to the village was really that we were a continuous circus. We were somewhere to go every afternoon when they were bored - about 80 women who'd been working all day would then get all smartened up and wash their babies and bring them all along and just stand around and just see what we were doing now.

Primitive life, unless there's an epidemic of war, and of course war had been stopped in the places where I worked, can be pretty dull. It's a little bit like small town life. New people who have a lot of new things are interesting. And then of course we always do a lot of medicine. (We) Take a great many different remedies with us and I sometimes spend five or six hours a day bandaging up wounds and curing ringworm and getting scabies off babies' skins, and giving castor oil to recalcitrant babies and so forth. I've gone all the way through from the period when we used to lose so many people - when we had nothing but quinine for malaria to the post-antibiotic and sulfa period when one can save so many people that we couldn't have saved before.

Mr. Langer:

What was the most challenging study you made?

Dr. Mead:

Well I don't know quite what to do with the word challenging. I think my first field trip was in a sense the most difficult because I did a kind of work nobody'd done then, so there weren't any models at all. I was just told not to waste my time doing conventional things and that I was to learn the language and get acquainted with the adolescent girls and find out what they were up to. So I had never learned any foreign language to the point of really speaking it and this was a very different sort of one. I'd never even



eaten any food except American food and I had to learn to eat Samoan food and also there weren't any styles of work then. So in some ways that was the most difficult. On the other hand, if by challenging you mean most exciting, I think my last trip in 1953 when I went back and studied the people I'd studied 25 years before - and found the children I'd studied grown up - and found people that I had not expected even to be able to ever learn to read and write, able to read and write, and managing their own lives and understanding what the United Nations was about, this was, in a sense, the most challenging in the sense that it was the most exciting material that I'd ever worked with.

Mr. Langer:

What are your plans for the future?

Dr. Mead:

What I'm trying to do now is capitalize on my age. You see, I made my first field trip 37 years ago. I was very young when I started and I worked on children, which gave me sort of a double position because most anthropologists work on older people and then when they go back 10 or 15 years later, those people are dead. As I worked on children, the people I studied 25 years ago, 30 years ago are still alive. And so I'm now beginning to capitalize on this nice long age span and I've gone back and studied the Manus after 25 years. This winter I went back for a quick trip to Bali after 20 years and I don't think I want to do a very intensive study there for another 10. I've promised the Manus that if they make as much progress in the next 25 years as they did in the last I'll come back again in - what would that be - let's see 25 years after 1953 will be 1978.

Mr. Langer:

You talk about progress. What kind of progress do you mean?

Dr. Mead:

By progress I mean moving forward in a direction they feel is good and transforming their society so that it reaches more effectively the values that they regard as important.

Mr. Langer:

Can you be a little more specific? I mean, could you take one specific thing?

Dr. Mead:

The things that Manus want - and they got their specific desires primarily from watching the American Army in World War II - they want the kind of society where people don't have to quarrel all the time in order to get things done. They regard us as that kind of society and we are, from their point of view. We don't walk around with spears in our hands. And/or threats of sorcery. They want a society in which the children who are born can live to grow up - they want a society in which people don't die of overwork, where one can use modern technology and they want a society in which they say the place is "straight" that is, where each man, woman and child is valued as an individual and where each human individual is more important than any number of material things. Which is what they learned from Americans. If you go back to the point you made about Kinsey earlier, you see, they saw over a million Americans and from watching them, they found out what we thought we wanted to be rather than just what we were.

Mr. Langer:

Dr. Mead, do you have any advice to the young people of America?

Dr. Mead:

I don't have any advice that I can give to all young people, because young people differ so much among themselves. I have some advice for those young people who are wondering what they're going to do and who would like to do something more than marry, and have children and bring up their children well, and be good local citizens. For those young people who feel they would like to do something more with their lives, to have more of a career rather than a job, I would suggest that they look very hard at the world they're living in; realize that we're living in the most significant age that the world has faced yet; and try to decide what kind of a task will fit best their capabilities on the one hand, and the demands of this beginning of the space age on the other.

Mr. Langer:

Thank you very much, Dr. Margaret Mead.

STUDY QUESTIONS

Bibliography

Dr. Margaret Mead's major works are available in Mentor (paper-bound) editions. These include Coming of Age in Samoa, the story of Dr. Mead's first field trip; Growing Up in New Guinea, a study of primitive adolescence; Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies, covering the Arapesh, Mundugumor, and Tchambuli tribes of New Guinea; Male and Female, which compares and contrasts the sexual patterns of seven South Seas societies and America's; and Cultural Patterns and Technical Change, edited by Margaret Mead.

During World War II, Dr. Mead wrote And Keep Your Powder Dry, spelling out what comprises the American character. (Morrow, 1942).

There is quite an extensive bibliography in Male and Female--covering not only Dr. Mead's own publications, but a wide variety of materials on American culture. (Mentor editions 50 cents from New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 501 Madison Avenue, New York 22, N. Y.)

1. Distinguish between the terms "society" and culture."
2. What makes a society "primitive"?
3. Dr. Mead says that young people today want a good early marriage, a nice stable job which has a good pension, a home in the suburbs, several children, and no responsibility "for the city where they work, for the rest of the country, or for the rest of the world." Do you agree or disagree? Why?
4. What influence has the automobile had on American culture? Why hasn't the auto had a similar influence on other cultures?
5. Discuss the problems of what happens when law-abiding citizens disobey laws they don't like (Prohibition, the income tax, gambling, etc.) What effect does this have on the nation's moral fiber?
6. Why is it easier for a tribal chief to prepare a primitive youngster for his society than it is for an American teacher to prepare an American boy or girl for their society?
7. Dr. Mead takes strong exception to the interviewer's use of the word "tolerate" in referring to other cultures. Discuss the full meaning of "tolerance." What are its implications?
8. Dr. Mead says the mass media will bring people "into contact" but won't "necessarily bring them together." What does she mean?
9. If you were an anthropologist today, which society would you like to study? Why?

Howard Langer is managing editor of Scholastic Teacher magazine. He is producer of the Folkways recordings Interview with William O. Douglas, FC-7350; Interview with Margaret Chase Smith, FC-7352; Interview with Robert M. Hutchins, FC-7351; Human Rights, a Documentary on the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, featuring Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, FH-5524; and Interview with Al Capp, FC-7353.

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