

# Margaret Mead and Agenda-Driven Social Science

Recently, Japanese universities started [moving away from](#) liberal arts and social sciences, sending global “shivers down academic spines.” The official reason given was a need to focus on disciplines more needed by society.

There’s been considerable [self-examination](#) about the direction of science at the highest levels, including in recent [editorials](#) in top science journal *Nature*. That’s a good sign: we can’t fix what we can’t discuss.

Social science, our “science of us”, is more susceptible to self-deception than other sciences. It is very much softer than particle physics and it has been especially hard hit by recent scandals.

One factor may be the [almost universally admitted](#) progressive bias that makes frauds and hoaxes easy to perpetrate. There’s a technical term for that: [“confirmation bias”](#), a tendency to attach more weight to evidence that confirms one’s own view. Much social science research seems to exist in order to [provide evidence for](#) theses that are already believed because they confirm the progressive worldview of the researchers.

This background is helpful in understanding the fate of whistleblowers in the field, including Mark Regnerus (an objective look at gay parenting, 2012). But long before that, there was Derek Freeman (an objective look at teen promiscuity, 1983). So when students sign up and pay for “social science” in the fall, what are they signing up for?

Derek Freeman (1916–2001) exposed a mid-20th-century hoax that teen promiscuity was healthy. A critical cultural event in 20th century anthropology was sociology *grande dame* [Margaret Mead’s](#) *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928). Her portrayal of Samoan teens as casually promiscuous without ill

consequences launched Mead (1901–1978) as one of the foremost anthropologists [worldwide](#).

She was quoted everywhere. Few wondered if the story was accurate. It was just too good. As a much later anthropologist [put it](#),

*Occasionally a message carried by the media finds an audience so eager to receive it that it is willing to suspend all critical judgment and adopt the message as its own. So it was with Margaret Mead's celebrated "Coming of Age in Samoa."*

In 1983, Mead's once-colleague [Derek Freeman](#), also considered a Samoan culture expert, published his own study, *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*. Freeman was pretty sure that Mead could not have observed in 1925 and 1926 what she published in 1928.

Freeman and other later researchers found [much to doubt](#) about Mead's claims of a guilt-free sexual idyll in the South Seas, where a girl "thrusts virtuosity away from her as she thrusts away from her every other sort of responsibility with the invariable comment, "Laititi a'u" ("I am but young"). All of her interest is expended on clandestine sex adventures..."

He found that Mead's Samoa was largely a work of the imagination. Teen sex life was in fact fairly restricted and offenders were punished. Restrictions for girls [included](#) age, family social status, and "whether or not the girl lives in the pastor's house." He could not support Mead's claim that Christianity was a thin veneer, "without reverence or real need." Her own field notes sometimes contradicted her widely publicized claims. It didn't help that the 1920s in American Samoa were not idyllic but comparatively violent.

Freeman soon found himself encircled by academic enemies, so much so that the controversy became the subject of a satirical play, *Heretic*, by the Australian playwright David Williamson, who found it ironic that "Their treatment of Derek was

identical to the treatment a chimpanzee troupe gives to one of its outcasts.”

Anthropologist Martin Orans, also a Samoa researcher, used Mead’s actual field notes for his 1983 book *Not Even Wrong* which acknowledged, “The greatest fault lies with those of us like myself who understood the requirements of science, but both failed to point out the deficiencies of Mead’s work and tacitly supported such enterprise by repeatedly assigning it to students.”

One scholar of the controversy [concluded](#), with cogency and charity,

*Facts aside, when different individuals view the same picture, it is not uncommon to have two interpretations. Everything is not purely black and white, with the dividing line clearly and indisputably drawn. Maybe Mead was duped, maybe she was not. Both perspectives exist within her work, imperfect as it is. This is the only defense of Mead that I can give. I will not give her an excuse.*

It’s sobering to recall Mead’s inspirational quote (a staple of such collections): “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it is the only thing that ever does.”. Yes, for worse as well as for better, but especially when many are eager to credit a convenient falsehood.

And some defend her today, as Alice Dreger did in [The Atlantic](#) in an article titled “Sex, Lies, and Separating Science From Ideology”:

*Some background: In her popular 1928 book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Mead presented Samoan culture as a social system that, without much fuss, allowed many adolescents to fool around before marriage. Contemporary scholars of Mead’s work agree that, in her presentation of Samoa to American readers, Mead*

*was motivated by a particular political agenda. As a sexually progressive individual, Mead saw (and portrayed) in Samoa the possibility of loosening social strictures on sexuality – something she suggested could lead to more pleasure, and less pain and suffering.*

That should have caused far more suspicion than it actually did. But then she admits,

*While it is true that, in Coming of Age, Mead downplayed some of the uglier aspects of Samoan sexuality – including violent rape and physical punishment bestowed on those who violated sexual norms – it is not true that Mead essentially invented a false cultural portrait from a couple of informants' sexual fish tales.*

No, it was much broader than that. She helped invent North American culture (single-parent [in which half of](#) children grow up without fathers, with predictable consequences. Not so good for the kids but a bright future in jobs for helping professionals).

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