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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman, and Behavior Genetics

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Derek Freeman's book[2] about Margaret Mead's account of Samoan adolescence caused a minor sensation when it was released last year but none of the reviews I read at the time more than hinted at its extraordinary interest for students of behavior genetics. The focus of attention, naturally enough, has been on Freeman's detailed refutation of Mead's description of Samoan culture. The purpose of this letter, however, is to draw the attention of behavior geneticists to his succinct and scholarly history of the "nature versus nurture" debate, the context in which he sets Mead's Samoan researches.

Many readers of *Behavior Genetics* frequently find that they are the reluctant heirs of this debate yet have only a hazy notion of its philosophical and scientific origins. Freeman starts with the thesis of biological determinism, promoted by the social Darwinists and brought to fruition in the eugenics movement. The geneticist will blush to read an outsider's view of his heroes Galton and Pearson, portrayed here as rabid race improvers, and of the American Charles B. Davenport, who made claims for the influence of single genes on prostitution, criminality, and the like that would cause even a latter-day segregation analyst to cringe.

The reaction to all this was no less extreme. Franz Boas and his acolytes Kroeber and Lowie asserted, and set out to "prove," that not only genetics but biology as a whole had nothing to do with human culture. The anthropologists were backed up by J. B. Watson, who launched his "behaviorism" as an onslaught on the idea that genes could have any

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[2] Freeman, D. (1983). *Margaret Mead and Samoa. The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., and Australian National University Press, Canberra, xvii, 379 pp.

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influence at all on behavior. To "prove" cultural determinism, Boas dispatched Margaret Mead to Samoa in order to find a "negative instance," an exception to the apparently universal rule that adolescence is an awkward time of life for girls. Not surprisingly, Mead returned to America and reported that adolescence for Samoan girls was totally different from the troubled experience of their Western sisters: free sexual experimentation was encouraged and relaxed attitudes to authority ensured a very smooth transition to adulthood. The fact that two cultures could differ so markedly was apparently taken by anthropologists and many others as "proof" that biology had nothing to do with culture.

Freeman systematically refutes Mead's claims about the uniqueness of Samoan culture (the above are but two of the many of her assertions knocked flat in an impressive piece of relentless, but delightfully readable scholarship). These errors, he suggests, were most probably due to her being deliberately duped by her subjects, apparently a typical Samoan response to overzealous probing of highly embarrassing topics. It is interesting to reflect on the extent to which twentieth-century thought has been shaped by the fibbing of a few Samoan schoolgirls!

There are striking parallels, although Freeman does not comment on them, between the refutation of what Mead saw as her key piece of evidence for cultural determinism and the discrediting of Burt's separated monozygotic twin data on IQ which many saw as the linchpin of genetic determinism. The case for genetic influences on variation in IQ and other facets of human behavior rests on a much broader base than Burt's data and their discrediting, while sharpening the quality of criticism, can hardly be said to have necessitated major revisions of the achievements and methods of behavior genetics. It will be interesting to see the impact of Freeman's revelations on social anthropology in 10 years' time.

In refuting Mead's claims, the author seems to imply that he is thereby reinstating biology to a place of importance in social anthropology. Unfortunately, how ever laudable the sentiment, this belief is as erroneous as the Boasians' belief that by finding a "negative instance" they were destroying the case for biology. Two cultures may be the same, or different, for either genetic or environmental reasons or both. No logical advantage is to be gained for either view by the simple demonstration of sameness or difference. The arguments will be well known to those who have followed the controversy over the causes of racial differences in IQ. Weak inferences can be made from certain comparative studies (American whites, blacks, Orientals, and aboriginals for instance) but the only conclusive evidence could come from interracial hybridization and transracial adoption studies almost impossible to execute in open societies.

Nevertheless, one can only say amen to Freeman's closing plea for the reintroduction of an intelligent biological perspective to social anthropology and add a prayer of our own that its practitioners might take a look at the hitherto despised and neglected sister disciplines of behavior genetics and sociobiology. We are privileged in this book to obtain not only an excellent history of the origins of our own subject but also a glimpse through the curtain at the Popperian turmoil of conjecture and refutation which Freeman clearly hopes will contribute to a more scientific attitude in his own subject. It is difficult in so brief a review to convey the sheer pleasure in reading this scholarly and intellectually versatile but unmistakably evangelistic book.