In his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, Havelock Ellis carefully considered the development of the female sexual instinct during puberty. The girl, he concluded, was especially prone to a volatile adolescence because of the manifestation during the teenage years of a sexual instinct that, while rarely spontaneously experienced, once aroused fluctuated unsteadily between greater ardor and more intense inhibitions than the uniformly aggressive impulse of the boy. Quoting one commentator on the gendered difference in the experience of adolescence, Ellis noted, “Adolescence is for women primarily a period of storm and stress, while for men it is in the highest sense a period of doubt.”¹ For Ellis, this gendered bifurcation of the qualities of adolescence helped to explain the nature and significance of sexual difference, one of his primary aims in the *Studies*. For other contemporary social scientists, however, the comment encapsulated a shift in the overarching terms organizing the concept of adolescence during the early decades of the twentieth century from naturally occurring stress to culturally specific doubt.

Key to the shift in focus was what scholar and reformer Miriam Van Waters referred to as “the anthropological point of view.”² The anthropological work that articulated its terms most assertively was Margaret Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*. Published in 1928, following the young anthropologist’s first trip to the South Sea Islands, *Coming of Age* attracted significant scholarly attention and enjoyed widespread public appeal. Simultaneously rooted in the Victorian ethnographic tradition’s approach to studying the “other” so as to better understand and appreciate “ourselves” and tied to what historian Susan Hegeman describes
adolescent girlhood comes of age?

as the modernist anthropologist’s posture as “delicately poised between social worlds,” Mead’s work was aptly subtitled *A Psychological Study of Primitive Youth for Western Civilization*. Were the difficulties associated with adolescence, Mead wanted to know, “due to being adolescent or to being adolescent in America?”

“Being adolescent in America” was the oft-quoted conclusion she drew, with her cross-cultural comparison serving as both critique and reaffirmation of the norms of western culture. Mead argued that American youth paid a price that their Samoan counterparts did not, in the form of greater psychological maladjustment, for the seemingly boundless life choices offered those coming of age in a highly complex society. Her final recommendation was for social scientists, teachers, and parents to find ways to reduce and manage such socially induced stress among adolescents, without sacrificing the benefits of individuality and freedom that constituted their birthright in modern America.

In its attention to the relative influences over development of the forces of nature and nurture, Mead’s work contributed to the wider interest among social scientists from across the disciplines during the 1920s in discerning the relationship between biology and culture, particularly as it pertained to issues of race, gender, and child development. Placed within this intellectual context, Mead’s early work has been read by historians as constituting a defiance of nineteenth-century scientific racism, an expression of early-twentieth-century feminism, and a challenge to Victorian organicism in ideas about the child. Each of these contributions is most often assessed separately, though, with little attention paid to the ways in which the categories of race, gender, and age informed one another in Mead’s anthropology. Thus, historian of anthropology George W. Stocking, Jr., writes that “the biological determinism Mead confronted in her Samoan ethnography was a generically human rather than a racially specific one,” without considering the ways in which race and gender figured into late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century conceptualizations of puberty and adolescence. Recent scholarship has brought together the categories of race and gender to expose the white liberal bias of Mead’s feminism; but here, there is little interest in the relationship of this problem to the questions about child development that Mead brought to the forefront.

This chapter explores the interrelationships among Mead’s concerns with race, gender, and child development in her early work by focusing on the figures at the center of *Coming of Age in Samoa*: adolescent girls “in primitive and modern society.” To formulate her conclusion that it was the social environment and not biological necessity that determined the quality of the adolescent experience, Mead’s field study focused on the life cycle of the Samoan girl. She justified her
choice of subject with practical and theoretical reasons. As other female ethnologists had discovered before her, being a young woman herself meant that she could achieve a greater access to and intimacy with girls than with boys. As important for the development of her scientific argument as this pragmatic consideration, however, was her attention to the history of ideas about female adolescence. Mead acknowledged that the girl had long been more closely associated with the dangers of puberty than the boy. Mothers, she pointed out, were constantly warned that girls posed a special problem during this age. They were told that “as your daughter’s body changes from the body of a child to the body of a woman, so inevitably will her spirit change, and that stormily.” Claims about the natural stressfulness of adolescence had been established on Victorian conceptions of the civilized girl’s growing body. Mead’s analysis of primitive girlhood authoritatively refuted those claims. Skillfully refashioning notions of gender, race, age, and culture, she rejected earlier associations of adolescence with somatic vulnerability and the attendant feminine qualities of dependence, emotionality, and altruism in favor of the masculine attributes of autonomy, rationality, and individualism. In this way, Mead’s study of primitive adolescent girlhood ironically moved the concept of adolescence closer to the ideals of white, western male culture. To be sure, Mead touted adolescence as an exportable product of that culture, within the reach of both western girls and primitive “others” who were able and willing to adapt to its norms. She also recognized that some fine-tuning of those norms was necessary, noting that there were things that could be learned from other cultures’ approaches to sexuality and the family, for example. Even so, as formulated in Coming of Age in Samoa, Mead’s concept of adolescence was consolidated around a set of expectations for development that, although making gestures toward female and racial “others,” largely ignored the differences in their experiences of growing up that might have posed alternatives to the mandates of adolescence and also left unexamined the potential of various groups of young people to lay full claim to the stage’s privileges.

Mead made the case for the challenging and original nature of her contribution, recalling that she wrote Coming of Age at a time when puberty and adolescence were “firmly equated in everyone’s thinking.” She also contended that ethnologists’ knowledge of primitive girls was “far slighter” in the mid-1920s than their knowledge of boys. The next sections attempt to assess these assumptions, by examining ideas about the girl in “the anthropological point[s] of view” leading up to Mead’s work on Samoa. We begin with Victorian anthropol-
ogy and its core intellectual paradigm, cultural evolutionism. According to the cultural evolutionists, all cultures were organized into the hierarchical stages of savagery, barbarism, and civilization, with a combination of innate racial characteristics and environmental conditions determining whether a culture evolved to a higher state or remained fixed in a primitive condition. The problems of race, gender, and child development intersected in this paradigm—on the child/savage equation and again on the fascination with puberty rites. These intersections were articulated in G. Stanley Hall’s work with greatest effect. Therefore, we briefly revisit Hall’s particular incarnation of the child/savage analogy and then focus on his analysis of the ethnographic literature on female initiation ceremonies. Next, we turn to the reassessment of Victorian interpretations of female puberty rites by scholars Elsie Clews Parsons and Miriam Van Waters. As members of the generation of college-educated women coming of age during the turn of the century, Parsons and Van Waters joined psychologists Phyllis Blanchard, Leta Hollingworth, and Lorine Pruette in positing alternative interpretations of the many changes taking shape in modern girls’ and women’s lives from those of more conservative thinkers like Hall. Intellectually, they were influenced by the work of Franz Boas, the single most important figure in leading American anthropology away from scientific racism and toward a pluralistic concept of culture that interpreted human differences as the product of dynamic social and historical conditions, as opposed to inherent racial (in)capacities. The new idea of culture was incipient, rather than fully articulated, in Parsons’s and Van Waters’s writings on female adolescence. Nonetheless, more than a decade before Mead, each of these scholars followed the general intent of its Boasian meaning to pose the first anthropological challenges to the notions of natural racial hierarchy and essential gender difference that lay at the heart of evolutionary accounts of adolescent development. Finally, we examine Mead’s *Coming of Age in Samoa*. With its primary counterpoint Hall’s notion of natural storm and stress, Mead’s first ethnography barely acknowledged those works in psychology and anthropology that by the mid-1920s constituted a substantial tradition of thought in focusing more attention on the social, rather than the biological, aspects of the adolescent stage of development. More emphatically than anyone had before her, however, Mead articulated a relationship between “adolescence” and “culture” that managed to undermine the gender and racial hierarchies inscribed in evolutionary theory and to valorize goals for adolescent development associated with the virtues of both masculinity and western civilization.
In *Coming of Age in Samoa*, Mead offered her analysis of female adolescence in part as a counterbalance to what she saw as the comparatively greater fascination with pubertal boys by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century ethnographers. In recalling her purposes for writing *Growing Up in New Guinea*, published just two years later, she made the more general case for the necessity of studying primitive children as scientific subjects in their own right: “[I]f, as Freud, Piaget and Levy Bruhl maintained, adult savages . . . were like civilized children, what were primitive children like? This sounds like an obvious question, but no one had asked it. There was an assumption that somehow primitives—child and adult—could be thought of together, while for our own children, the most meticulous attempts to trace their psycho-social development were in order. So, I set out to find out what a set of primitive children were like”17 Although the lives of primitive children that Mead sought to illuminate were largely overlooked in Victorian anthropology, the equation of adult savages and civilized children was one of its central tenets. Indeed, it was an analogy that proved to be equally useful for those expounding on the nature of the savage as for those describing the growth of the child.

For those interested in developmental questions during the second half of the nineteenth century, whether they were of a phylogenetic, ontogenetic, or cultural nature, the comparative method was used as a key explanatory device. The comparative method allowed that in the absence of actual evidence from the historical record, earlier stages of physical, psychic, or cultural evolution could be filled in by observing those currently exhibiting primitive attributes in each of these respective areas.18 Only half-critically referring to its use as “wild work,” the psychologist William James made note of the various natural and social categories metaphorically related by the comparative method: “So it has come to pass that instincts of animals are ransacked to throw light on our own; and that the reasoning faculties of bees and ants, the minds of savages and infants, madmen, idiots, the deaf and blind, criminals, and eccentrics, are all invoked in support of this or that special theory about some part of our own mental life.”19 What all of these groups were thought to have in common were mental characteristics that marked them as inferior on the single linear scale of intellectual and moral development prescribed by evolutionary theory. Chief among these
shared characteristics was the inability to subordinate instinctual urges to human rational control. Notable anthropological thinkers such as E. B. Tylor and Herbert Spencer made ample use of the comparative method as they endeavored to ascertain the stages of sociocultural and psychic evolution and to explain the reflective and causal relationships between culture and mind. Of all of the analogies maintained by the comparative method, perhaps none was more frequently employed than that of the civilized child to the savage adult. According to the British eugenicist Francis Galton, the infancy and early childhood of all races were congruous; then, the conditions of civilization so prolonged individual development that civilized men continued to evolve toward an ever superior level of mental capacity, while their savage counterparts remained “children in mind, with the passions of grownup men.”

Galton’s statement, however, suggested that the dual defining characteristics of the savage—mental inferiority and sexual potency—could not entirely be squared with prevailing Victorian notions of the innocent child. Hence, some adjusted the comparison to liken savage adults more accurately with civilized adolescents, in whom was recognized an often inept, largely unconscious, and frequently overwhelming sexual passion. In his work *Savage Childhood*, ethnographer Dudley Kidd, for example, positioned the Kafir culture of South Africa perpetually “at the dawn of puberty”: “Not a few observers have pointed out that the imagination in the Kafirs runs to seed after puberty; it would be truer to say that it runs to sex.”

Comparisons of either sort could encompass a certain romantic primitivism that celebrated the innocent child, the carefree youth, and the noble savage. With far greater effect, however, the child/savage equation served to organize and maintain hierarchical and exploitative social relations among the races and to justify imperialistic racial policies of civilized governments that ranged from the paternalistic to the punitive.

Conversely to ethnographers like Kidd, who used notions of childishness to characterize the adult savage, G. Stanley Hall drew on assumptions about savagery as a way to describe and prescribe the development of the civilized male child. The influences of Victorian anthropology loomed large in Hall’s work, and he drew prominently from the cultural evolutionists’ use of the comparative method and their Lamarckian explanations about the interrelationships among individual, biological, and cultural development. Hall’s enthusiasm for recapitulation theory, in particular, vitalized the child/savage equation in a new way for audiences interested in the development of the child. As the highest stage of cultural evolution attainable, civilization involved a fundamental paradox: only white men were capable of achieving it, yet its realization threatened to under-
mine the very manliness that made it possible, by sapping men of their vital nerve force and requiring their undue compliance to existing social norms and conditions. Hall attempted to resolve this contradiction by reorienting the dualistic relationship between savage virility and civilized restraint in developmental terms. Growing boys should, he argued, be allowed to express the more primitive aspects of their masculine natures throughout their childhood and early adolescence. Then, by the mid-teenage years, such primitiveness was to give way to the more refined manly qualities of civilization, with the experiences of boyhood savagery safely inoculating male youth against civilization’s effeminizing tendencies. This combination of primitive prowess and civilized self-control linked the white adolescent boy simultaneously with the past and the future, and as such was to facilitate human evolution’s gradual culmination in a race of the “super-man.”

Hall, then, took the “anthropological point of view” primarily as a way of accounting for and directing the development of the civilized boy. However, in the final chapter of *Adolescence*, entitled “Ethnic Psychology, or Adolescent Races and Their Treatment,” he also turned his attention to the “savage” half of the child/savage equation and to the current status and future prospects of the world’s primitive races. Given his valorization of childhood and adolescence, Hall’s ascription of a child/adolescent nature to primitive peoples opened the way for a critique of certain attributes of modern life, including a modest challenge to some of the more virulent racism of his day. Condemning imperialistic racial violence, Hall warned that the extirpation of primitive peoples could rob all of humanity of some of those qualities necessary for the achievement of evolutionary perfection. “If unspoiled by contact with the advanced wave of civilization, which is too often its refuse, and in which their best is too often unequally matched against our worst,” he averred, “[savages] are mostly virtuous, simple, confiding, affectionate, and peaceful among themselves, curious, light-hearted, amazingly religious and healthful, with bodies in nearly every function superior to ours and frequently models for the artist, and the faults we see are usually those we have made . . . The best of the lower races represent that most precious thing in the world—stocks and breeds of men of new types and varieties, full of new promise and potency for our race, because heredity so outweighs civilization and schooling.” In the decade following the publication of *Adolescence*, Hall fashioned himself an expert on racial pedagogy and advocated for the protection and education of “adolescent races” to both academic and popular audiences. From 1906 to 1908, he served as president of the National Congo Reform Association, which petitioned the United States government to
adolescent girlhood comes of age? intercede on behalf of the Congo against their colonial oppressors. In speaking out about the treatment of racial minorities in his own country, Hall similarly appealed for reform on the basis of a mix of romantic primitivism, optimistic meliorism, and condescending paternalism. Nonwhite races the world over, he maintained, ought to be dealt with in the same “enlightened” fashion as civilized children, with attention to their needs for nurturance, understanding of their developmental inferiorities, and respect for all of the potential, individual and racial, that lay buried within them.27

The child/savage equation thus foregrounded the figures of the civilized boy and the primitive adult. And yet, Mead’s “obvious question” in Growing Up in New Guinea—whither the primitive child?—and her related question in Coming of Age in Samoa—whither the adolescent girl?—did also receive some attention in the Victorian anthropological tradition. As a figure distinct from his or her savage parents, the primitive child appeared in the ethnographic literature most often as a signifier of the cultural inferiority of a particular group of people. Just as the savage woman was almost uniformly presented by the cultural evolutionists as a victim of sexual and economic exploitation, so the primitive child was depicted as appallingly deprived and degraded, whose social and emotional treatment fell far below the child-rearing standards set by the civilized families of the white middle class.28 In the nineteenth-century anthropological tradition’s relentless rendering of difference to establish cultural hierarchy, one group of amateur ethnographers featured the primitive female child, in particular, as a prominent figure. Historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg shows that in the years following the Civil War, the evangelical women of the women’s foreign-mission crusade made the case for the superiority of western Christian civilization by focusing their ethnographic efforts on the female life course. For these female missionaries, one of the most important measures of “heathenism” was the sexual degradation of girls through the early loss of virginity due to child marriage. In a body of widely disseminated missionary literature, these evangelical women provided lurid descriptions of “girlless villages” throughout the Middle East, Asia, and Africa, places in which barely pubertal girls were forced into sexual relationships years before they were physically, socially, or emotionally ready. “The ‘girlless village,’” Brumberg explains, “was the ethnologists’ way of reporting that among the heathen there was no observable period of dependency in which young women capable of reproduction were sheltered and protected by family or community.”29 Thus, the superiority of Christian civilization rested, at least in part, on its allowance of female adolescence.

The discussions of puberty rites in the Victorian anthropological literature
likewise advanced the view that the degree of a culture’s recognition of adolescence measured its place on the cultural hierarchy. Along with this notion emerged a tension between the universality and particularity of adolescence that influenced the work of psychologists and anthropologists interested in child development throughout the 1920s. As one of the first to articulate the terms of this tension, Hall tried to explain the relationship between puberty rites and the adolescent stage of development. “The universality of these rites and their solemn character testify impressively to a sense of the critical importance of this age almost as wide as the race,” he declared. “Here education began and extended up toward more mature years and downward toward infancy almost in exact proportion as civilization and its luggage of cultures and skills increased. The functions of the teacher began genetically with the rude regimentations, tortures, mutilations, instructions often most antihygenic, and immoral ceremonies of these initiations to manhood, womanhood, and often at the same time to nubility, with almost no interval after the first physical signs of puberty, for the slow processes of maturation of body and soul. The progressive increase of this interval is another index of the degree of civilization.” Hall attended to “savage pubic initiations” both to reveal the universal psychobiological aspects of the adolescent stage of development and to rank the cultural differences between civilized and primitive peoples. He represented puberty rites as concentrated versions of the essential tasks of adolescent development and as mere rudiments of the prolonged transition between childhood and adulthood that made modern civilization possible.

In the case of the girl and the meaning of female puberty rites, the tension between the universal and particular aspects of adolescence was worked out along the fault lines of gender and race. To Hall, female puberty rites signified the universally determining influences of biology on the girl’s development. Thus, in his discussion in Adolescence of the initiation rites of primitive peoples from around the globe, he narrowly consolidated meanings of female maturity around the biological moment of the first menstruation. The onset of the menses, he maintained, was recognized the world over as the key determiner of the destiny of the girl. Elements of isolation, confinement, and taboo common to so many female initiation rites testified to the uniformly powerful influence of the girl’s periodic function on her life, as well as to the potential danger to girl and to community if such power was not managed properly. And the rites’ virtually ubiquitous emphasis on preparing the girl for marriage surely indicated that the roles of wife and mother constituted a female biological fate unchanged, and in Hall’s vision, unchangeable, across time and space. Indeed, he referred to the
primitive girl presented for marriage as a “debutante” at her “coming-out feast.” He did so not to make a case for the “survival” of primitive behaviors among civilized peoples who had advanced through the same early stages of cultural evolution where current savages now rested but, rather, to present the meanings and mandates of femininity in an unbroken line of continuity from past to present and place to place. It was thus less significant that debutante balls were similar to primitive initiation ceremonies than that those ceremonies were like debutante balls. According to Hall, comparative evidence from primitive cultures revealed that despite, or more accurately because of, the variety of cultural forms used to express it, girls everywhere shared a singular biological destiny, which could be ignored by themselves or their communities only at great biological, psychological, and social peril. This was not to say, however, that all of these cultural expressions of the essence of femininity served women equally well. Hall was highly critical of what he saw as a uniformly adverse view of menstruation among primitive peoples, and he faulted civilized societies for replicating such ancient repulsions in the form of fear and ignorance. Continued cultural evolution, he hoped, would one day enable the full recognition of the fundamentally positive personal and social power of the menstrual woman. Then, female initiation ceremonies of all kinds would unequivocally celebrate the unique contributions of the girl’s biological destiny to evolutionary progress.

If in his explanation of female puberty rites, Hall relied on the evidence of race to reveal the essence of gender, he also used ideologies of gender to uphold hierarchies of racial difference. In his review of the comparative ethnographic literature on the pubertal girl, he acknowledged that there had long been some debate regarding the correlation between the onset of the menses and geography and climate. Precocity, he affirmed, was as much the product of “nerve strain” induced by the complex conditions of civilized life as it was of the racial characteristics inherent in peoples living in the tropical regions of the world. The real differences between primitive and civilized girls lay less in the timing of menarche than in the degree of ease or difficulty with which the reproductive function was established and, most crucially, in the amount of time a society allowed for the development of sexual difference at this stage of the life cycle. “Menstrual phenomena,” Hall noticed, “seem to be more and more marked as we pass up the scale” of the cultural hierarchy. Savage female initiation rites did reveal a certain reverence for women, he conceded. However, the fact that “after the almost universal pubescent initial seclusion practiced among primitive people” sexual difference was “so commonly ignored” served as both sign and cause of “tribal arrest or decline” in Hall’s mind. The menstruation of civilized girls
was thus more painful and more productive of emotional volatility than among their savage counterparts. Such difficulties were, however, ultimately redeemed by the accompanying physical, mental, and social moratorium thought to enable the refinement of the civilized girl’s complex biological organization and to provide the opportunity for her distinctive development into a preeminent class of woman. According to Hall, then, stressful adolescence was one of the crosses of racial superiority that civilized females were simply meant to bear.

The female initiation rites of primitive peoples interested Hall for their crude indications of the invariably precarious nature and paramount importance of female puberty in the girl’s development. They also illuminated the distinctive and more refined biocultural adolescent stress produced by modern civilization, as well as alluded to the possibility of an advancing western civilization’s potentially more humane ways of dealing with this crucial life stage. Conceiving of female adolescence as a stage of development with universal and particular elements that could be illuminated through cross-cultural comparison, Hall presented that which was uniformly shared among girls around the world to be the product of the biocultural evolution of gender and that which was distinct the result of the biocultural evolution of race. Two scholars, Elsie Clews Parsons and Miriam Van Waters, in the years between the publication of Hall’s Adolescence and Mead’s Coming of Age in Samoa, drew on Franz Boas’s ideas about culture to offer up the first anthropological alternatives to such cultural evolutionary conceptualizations of female adolescence.

Margaret Mead set out for Samoa in 1925 under the tutelage of Franz Boas, the founding father of cultural anthropology in the United States. Boas proposed that Mead investigate the problem of the relationship between individual development and cultural distinctiveness for her first ethnography, which had antecedents in Boas’s own work as an anthropologist. From his liberal German Jewish family, Boas imbibed the values that would inform his life’s work: equality of opportunity, political and intellectual freedom, commitment to the search for scientific truth, and dedication to furthering the progress of all of humankind. Trained in geography and physics, he gradually formulated his ideas about the role of historical processes in shaping and transmitting what would come to be understood as cultural phenomena, as well as his conceptualization of those phenomena in relative terms, during his first ethnographic field trips to Baffin-
land and British Columbia in the 1880s. Following his immigration to the United States in 1886, Boas combined his ethnological orientation with the problems and methods derived from physical anthropology, which had long been primarily concerned with the physical measurement and classification of immutable racial types. Although bound by many of the same assumptions about heredity and evolution held by scientific racists, his efforts as a physical anthropologist were motivated by an interest in understanding the processes of racial formation and undertaken with a critical stance toward arbitrary classification.36

It was from this particular intellectual vantage point that Boas focused some of his attention on the physical growth of the child. Some of the original impetus for this work most likely derived from G. Stanley Hall’s interests in child development. As president of Clark University, Hall named Boas docent in anthropology in 1889, the first such appointment at an American university. Hall’s own considerable occupation with charting the norms of physical growth notwithstanding, in a letter some months before making his appointment, he expressed to Boas his prediction that “the physical part of anthropology is a little stagnant and that the myth customs and belief side is the next to grow.”37 Nonetheless, during his brief tenure at Clark and for the next two decades, Boas developed his theoretical orientation in part under the aegis of physical anthropology.38 He challenged some existing assumptions about biological growth and also laid the broad foundation for cultural anthropology’s subsequent interest in the relationships among race, gender, culture, and child development.

Conceptualizations of the growth process had long been implicated in theories of gender and racial difference and hierarchy. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the widely acknowledged early and rapid growth spurt of the pubertal girl, along with the tremendous physical energy thought to be expended on its realization, justified limiting the civilized adolescent girl’s pursuit of educational opportunity. At the same time, the commonly accepted notion of the arrested growth of primitive peoples at the cusp of adolescence accounted for racial inferiority. For both groups, deficient physical growth held serious consequences for mental development. In the case of the girl, the growth of her mind and body were thought to compete fiercely for vital energy, with the needs of her body prescribed to prevail over her educational ambitions. In the case of savages, it was argued that the cessation of the physical growth of the brain in early adolescence determined a lack of mental complexity in adulthood.

Boas first questioned these assumptions in a series of studies on the growth of school children conducted during the 1890s, with the findings reported in the journal Science.39 His starting premise was that influences operative during the
growth process accounted for the differences among various groups of adults. Thus, he proposed, the study of growth during childhood and adolescence constituted “a most important branch of anthropology,” and, conversely, “a study of the anthropology of children” was “of the greatest importance for a knowledge of the conditions and laws of growth.”

Challenging the customary “cross-sectional” approach to the study of growth, which relied on simultaneous measurements of children of different ages, he pioneered in the use of longitudinal analysis of the growth of the same individuals over several years. He discovered a variation in the growth rates of individual children that were not seamlessly correlated to differences in nationality, social class, or gender. Introducing the concept of the “tempo of growth,” a fundamental contribution to growth theory, Boas concluded that each child’s growth represented a distinct pattern of acceleration and retardation that was the result of three factors: heredity, the life history of the individual, and environmental conditions. He also took to task one of the “most fundamental deductions” of growth theorists—that favorable or deficient physical development “establish[ed] a basis of precocity and dullness” in mental development. What all the measurements of the development of children’s bodies and minds revealed, he pointedly qualified, was “that mental and physical growth are correlated, or depend upon common causes; not that mental development depends upon physical growth.” He further asserted that children’s intelligence could not be categorically characterized as “bright” or “dull.” Maintaining that the measurement of a child’s intellect at any particular moment did not serve as an indication of the child’s essential capability, Boas argued instead that it reflected his or her individual pace of development, which if “retarded” could be caught up by the time of maturity.

In an address given before the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1894, he suggested the implications of his growth studies for the question of racial differences. The meaning of the purported arrested growth of primitive peoples, he argued, depended on the rate of growth during the growing period. If that growth were more rapid, the fact that it ended early should have no effect on mature physical form, or by connection, on adult mental capacity. His findings from the growth studies were also worked into the argumentation of his best-known work, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, published in 1911.

Following the growth studies, Boas turned to what would be his most important examination of the effect of the environment on physical growth, a study of immigrants and their children conducted for the U.S. Immigration Commission between 1908 and 1910, the results of which were published in 1912 as *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants*. The study involved the
analysis of various bodily measurements of some eighteen thousand individuals, drawn from the populations of Eastern European Jews, Bohemians, Sicilians, and Neapolitians, and in smaller numbers, of Poles, Hungarians, and Scots, in New York City. From this data, Boas made comparisons between foreign-born and native-born children, between both of those groups of children and their parents, and between individuals born in Europe in a particular year and children of immigrants who left Europe in that same year. He discovered what he considered to be surprising changes both in the rate of the development of children growing up in the United States, as well as in the physical “type” of each immigrant group. Most important, he found changes in the cephalic index, or ratio of the length to the width of the head, of the children of immigrants, thereby undermining one of physical anthropology’s most cherished assumptions—that particular head forms corresponded to specific racial types and that such forms were fixed by heredity and passed on unchanged across generations.  

In the growth studies and the immigration report, Boas made the case for the plasticity of human types and for some measure of influence of the social environment on mental and physical phenomena then widely accepted as entirely the products of biological heredity. The critique of racial formalism propounded by these investigations provided some of the basic ammunition for his own understanding and elaboration of the culture concept. These studies also paved the way for the relationship between cultural anthropology and child development studies that would begin to unfold in earnest during the third decade of the twentieth century. Boas returned to the study of growth curves during the 1930s, when he was largely concerned with the timing and intensity of the adolescent growth spurt and the effect of these factors on adult stature. The explicit problem of the relationship between physical growth and culture, however, would not be taken up until the 1940s, when Margaret Mead brought cross-cultural analysis to bear on the work of psychologist and growth theorist Arnold Gesell. Meanwhile, as Boas and his students formulated innovative methodological approaches and theoretical orientations toward the “myth customs and belief side” of their discipline, they entertained new possibilities for the ways in which the culture concept and the developing child might offer insight into one another. Mead would again ultimately engage in the most avid effort to understand and explicate this relationship, in both the scholarly and popular realms. Before her initial pursuit of such questions in *Coming of Age in Samoa*, however, two scholars influenced by Boas revisited the ethnographic evidence on female puberty rites to offer the first anthropological critiques of Victorian assumptions about female adolescence.
The first of these scholars, Elsie Clews Parsons, showed signs early on that she might be inclined to take on the ideas about female adolescence propounded by nineteenth-century ethnographers. Born in 1874 to wealthy New York parents, whose marriage was both bitterly unhappy and doggedly conventional, the young Elsie Clews questioned and defied the expectations for conservatism and quiescence placed on her by her family and social class. Despite her parents’ disapproval of higher education for girls, her determination and intelligence reluctantly convinced her father to allow her to enroll in the newly founded Barnard College in 1892. Her primary intellectual influence was Franklin Giddings, a founder of academic sociology in the United States. A proponent of evolutionary explanations of social organization and social change, Giddings nonetheless rejected Spencer’s valorization of unbridled individualism as the driving force of evolution. Instead, he posited that social advancement was propelled by human beings’ ability to identify with one another, with the contact among heterogeneous groups fostering the highest evolutionary ends of social cohesion and individual self-realization. Although Giddings did not expect women to reach the maximum potential for individual freedom, even in a fully evolved society, his theories held great appeal for the iconoclastic and socially conscious Elsie, as did his emphasis on the special role to be played by the social scientist in diagnosing and transforming society’s ills. Inspired by her mentor, Elsie married her enthusiastic study of sociology with involvement in the fledgling settlement house movement in New York City, establishing a chapter of the College Settlements Association at Barnard during her junior year. In these years, she was also profoundly intrigued by the ideas of the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde, whose bold challenge to nineteenth-century notions of biological determinism went further than Giddings in emphasizing the importance of respect for individual differences and the individual’s capacity for freedom and invention as the foundation for social harmony and the impetus for social change. Following her graduation in 1896, Elsie went on to do graduate work in sociology and education at Columbia University. On receiving her doctoral degree, she accepted a fellowship that supported her work as the director of student fieldwork for Giddings’s sociology courses and also began teaching her own course on “Family Organization.” In 1900, she married the lawyer and political and social reformer, Herbert Parsons. With the hopes of creating a modern marriage founded on sexual egalitarianism, she continued her teaching and settlement work after the wedding and again following the birth of her first two children, until her husband’s election to Congress moved the family to Washington in 1905.
During her tenure as a teacher, Parsons laid the groundwork for her subsequent careers as both professional ethnographer and public intellectual. Viewing the family as “a particularly well-chosen subject for the elementary student of society,” she directed her students in amassing data on the customs, beliefs, practices, and organization of immigrant families living in New York’s West Side. In 1906, she published her guidelines for leading students in such fieldwork, along with her extensive lectures from her course on the family, as a textbook intended for use by college lecturers and directors of home-reading clubs. Although Parsons began The Family by warning her readers that the passion for classification in evolutionary thought “may lead to non-scientific just as well as to scientific results,” she nonetheless conceived of the changes in family life from the “primitive simple family,” to the “matriarchate,” the “patriarchate,” and finally the “modern simple family,” largely in linear and progressive terms. Where she parted company from previous ethnographic renditions of the evolution of the family was in her rejection of the view that the modern family represented a state of near perfection. Instead, she argued that the civilized family had much evolving still to do, most particularly in shedding its vestiges of patriarchy and the release of control by husbands and fathers over women and children. She thus explicitly cautioned her students against conflating “what is” and “what ought to be” in family life and offered her own set of prescriptions for the treatment of women and children in modern society, which, while often corresponding to biological “facts,” were also derived from deliberate “ethical interpretation,” consideration, and choice.

Like previous ethnographers, Parsons saw the family as the crucible of evolution, with the extension of infancy and the prolonged education of children a primary cause of individual development and social advancement. She also similarly recognized initiation ceremonies as “extremely significant in the study of culture,” affirming that they functioned largely to inculcate “the personal traits thought to be necessary to successful manhood or womanhood in the given group.” She did document some variation in the expectations for womanhood that were passed on through these ceremonies—such as the somewhat unusual emphasis placed on the girl’s physical strength and productivity in the puberty ceremonials of the Thomson River Indians. In what would become a hallmark of her later work, though, she was also careful to note that the parental power that accompanied filial dependence almost universally weighed more heavily during this period of life on girls than on boys. Indeed, one of the most formidable ways parents the world over exerted control over children was in their efforts to preserve the chastity of their unmarried daughters. In the “most advanced type of
family,” which was, according to Parsons, yet to be completely evolved, children were to be afforded a prolonged period of dependency that furthered not only the needs of parents for familial preservation and of society for group cohesion, but their own interests as independent individuals as well. “[I]mmature offspring,” she asserted, “must be supported, protected, and educated throughout the period of immaturity in such a way that they will be perfectly adapted to their total environment, and will also be able to avail themselves of whatever opportunities for progressive individual variations may spring from their own natures and be tolerated in their environment.” For Parsons, the “ethical fitness of given traits of family structure” were to be judged by how well those traits promoted the “equal opportunity for all for the development of personality.” Such a “golden rule of democracy” was, she further insisted, to apply especially to the growing girl, who if she was to become a “fit” mother of an advancing generation of offspring required even greater “opportunities for personal development” than her brother. Such opportunities included an equal chance to become “a producer as well as a consumer of social values,” along with the right to sexual information, enjoyment, and expression, which were to be realized through work outside the home, sex education, contraception, and trial marriage.56

The Family was immediately and vociferously denounced by the clergy and the mainstream press for its deviant ideas about sex and marriage, which were deemed all the more blasphemous because they were advocated by the ostensibly respectable wife of a congressman. In a reaction in part to the criticism, Parsons wrote little in the years following its publication, devoting her intellectual energies instead to reading widely in the ethnographical literature and observing the manners and mores of the her own social class in Washington, D.C., which to her constituted as fascinating a subject for anthropological fieldwork as any primitive culture.57 When she returned to New York City in 1911, she developed a relationship with Franz Boas, his students, and supporters, most notably Alexander Goldenweiser, Robert Lowie, Paul Radin, A. L. Kroeber, and Edward Sapir, who were on their way in transforming anthropology around a newly conceived concept of culture. Especially important to their thinking was the critical positivism espoused by the Austrian physicist, mathematician, and historian of science Ernst Mach, who rejected abstract theorizing and posited that all knowledge was constructed out of provisional experience and need. At the same time, Parsons also joined in other currents of intellectual radicalism that flowered in Greenwich Village in the years leading up to World War I,
sharing ideas about feminism, socialism, and psychoanalysis with the likes of Walter Lippmann, Max Eastman, Margaret Sanger, and Randolph Bourne.  

Guided by these intellectual influences, Parsons became increasingly suspicious of evolutionary sociology’s speculative schemes and relentless classifications, as well as its underlying faith in progress. She now considered what an anthropology rooted in empiricism and critical positivism might reveal about the varied customs and beliefs shaping the meaning and experience of femininity that were such a central part of every culture, including her own. One thing such an approach laid bare, she discovered, was the sheer constancy of the limitations circumscribing female development across widely different cultural milieus. Cross-cultural comparisons of femininity were not, of course, new to the anthropological tradition. Victorian anthropology had manipulated the ethnographic evidence on woman to remark on both the naturalness of femininity and the evolutionary distance the civilized woman had traveled away from the savagery of her primitive ancestors. Hall’s descriptions of female puberty rites in Adolescence followed this same pattern, reinforcing the cultural evolutionists’ claims about the biological basis of both femininity and racial hierarchy. Parsons fundamentally challenged this sort of cross-cultural comparison. Locating primitive and civilized customs on the same analytic plane, she rejected evolutionary theory and anticipated subsequent functionalist approaches to the study of human behavior. As she explained it, human nature was shaped less by the distinct biologies of sex, race, and age than by a constellation of universally shared unconscious psychological motivations. It was two of these motivations—the fear of change and the desire for control—that invariably led to the sort of invidious classifications and exertions of power responsible for the universally oppressive character of the female experience.

Parsons’s first work to explore this set of themes was The Old-Fashioned Woman: Primitive Fancies about the Sex, a walk through the female life cycle that drew together existing ethnographic evidence on primitive cultures with her own original observations of middle- and upper-class American society. In her examination of the customs of femininity governing the early stages of the woman’s life, Parsons’s emphasis was on the ubiquitously repressive character of all female initiation ceremonies. Hall, too, had acknowledged the harsher elements of female pubic rites, as well as what he saw as civilization’s foolish replication of them in the modern negative attitude toward menstruation. Significantly, though, he also procured these rites as evidence of what he saw as the essential significance of the girl’s coming of age, the initial personal and social recognition
of the inevitable biological destiny of woman. Parsons’s scathing review of ancient cloisters and modern debutante balls would brook no such interpretation. Instead, she viewed the customs of girlhood worldwide as indication of a universal social investment in stifling female potential and in channeling whatever remained toward limited purpose. Thus, Japanese taboos restricting the girl’s use of her brother’s possessions; the custom in New Ireland of shutting girls up “in dark cages for four or five years”; and the preference of the Mexican nobility to sequester their girls in convent schools were all of a piece with this universal tendency. Yet these customs were no more barbaric, Parsons insisted, than the West’s modern approach to sex education, which kept the girl cloistered in mind as in body and which based her social desirability on her remaining “truly a virgin in her soul.” In fact, in acknowledging that “among many savage tribes adolescent girls are without any hesitation carefully instructed about marriage and maternity,” Parsons described the valorization of female sexual ignorance as a uniquely modern phenomenon. All the more insidious, she seemed to suggest, were the shared unconscious motives of human behavior when exhibited by a society ostensibly devoted to the exercise of rationality and the democratic sharing of knowledge.

Following the period of seclusion that uniformly attended the onset of the first menstruation, the girl was required to “come out” of her confinement and embrace the narrow role society prescribed for her adulthood. This was the moment in the girl’s life when “a rigid line is drawn,” a line which “determines her dressing, her hygiene, her occupations, her friends, her name, her behaviour, her point of view.” Every culture, Parsons noted, treated the “debutante” in similar fashion. Everywhere attention was paid to her looks and to the modification of the girl’s body to meet her particular culture’s idealized standards of femininity. Everywhere girls were put on display, judged against one another by themselves and others to determine their suitability for the narrow role now expected of them. Despite these overwhelming cross-cultural similarities, however, Parsons did acknowledge that modern debutantes tended to be older than those girls coming out in primitive cultures. “More primitive debutantes also seek the reputation of being a belle—sometimes in ways more convincing and consequential than ours; but whatever their plan, they are unable to devote much time to it because they invariably do what is expected of them and—get married,” she noted. “Realising that the object of their coming-out, of their finery and ‘make-up,’ of their dancing, parading, and visiting is to advertise themselves as marriageable and to allure suitors, they know better than to linger on in that limbo of the ‘older girls’ in which impatient parents and a disappointed public find it so
difficult to take an interest.” Counter to Hall’s claim that an extended adolescence served as a measure of the virtues of civilization, Parsons viewed modern female adolescence simply as a longer period of preparation for more of the same. Primitive girls may have been more compliant than their modern sisters in accepting the limitations placed on them, but, to their credit, they were also considerably less naive. Civilized girls, on the other hand, may have been able to maneuver through the mandates of youthful femininity with slightly more agency and capacity for choice, but they also remained woefully ignorant of their complicity in their own oppression. Modern girls, Parsons lamented, blissfully engaged in the frivolity of the adolescent years with little awareness of the restrictions that invariably followed from the period of female initiation in all times and all places.

Missing from An Old-Fashioned Woman was any substantive explanation about why the experience of female development, and the ceremonials that marked its various stages, should be so similar across cultures. Over the next several years, Parsons more fully explicated her ideas about the universal motivations that governed the human mind. Fear and Conventionality, Social Freedom, and Social Rule were her major works on this theme, each exploring a different set of psychological dynamics that helped shape the customs, institutions, and relations that composed social life in all cultural milieus. Sex and age, Parsons asserted, were “the two greatest sources of difference between its members society has to apprehend.” She explained that because human beings both dreaded innovation and longed to connect with one another, and also because they possessed an instinctive “will to power,” whatever “natural differences” existed between men and women or children and adults came to be managed in all cultures through the creation of arbitrary group identities. The result was the regulation of the expression of authentic personalities and the restriction of truly intimate relationships between individuals. The “ceremonial of growing up” functioned as one key cultural tool for this sort of hegemonic classification. As Parsons explained it, both the severity of primitive puberty rites and the difficulties of modern adolescence were products of the generic human “reluctance . . . to meet change.” All adults, she further contended, approached adolescence as a period of crisis not because of any characteristics essential to biological puberty but because they were reluctant to relinquish any of their own power to the next generation. Thus, Parsons insisted that the ‘ordeal’ entailed in the puberty rites of primitive girls and boys were “not so much tests as expressions of social control.” For girls and boys in “less primitive cultures,” schools fulfilled the function of categorizing and containing the “junior age-classes” in strikingly
similar ways. “Apprenticeship or school discipline,” she comparatively noted, “is maintained through the usual social instruments of subjection—through ridicule, privations, compulsory labour, imprisonment, and in some school systems through torture.”

Parsons’s early body of work challenged previous anthropological interpretations of female adolescence. Most significant was her suggestion that the difficulties marking the girl’s adolescence the world over revealed less about the biology of female puberty than about the essential nature of the human mind. In her hands, then, the ethnographic evidence on female adolescence moved some distance away from the evolutionary paradigm that had long contained it. For Parsons, the counterpoint to biological distinctions of sex, race, and age was a psychological unity that bound all human beings together. The product of universally shared fears and desires, female adolescent stress was likely, but not necessarily inevitable, with remedies to be found in a collective change of mind about both growth and gender. While Parsons acknowledged that the achievement of such change would not be easy, she also noted that the early signs of an “unconventional society” were already beginning to show themselves. “No more segregated groups, no more covetous claims through false analogy, no more spheres of influence, for the social categories,” Parsons prophesized about such a society in her conclusion to Social Freedom. “And then the categories having no assurances to give to those unafraid of change and tolerant of unlikeliness, to those of the veritable new freedom, to the whole-hearted lovers of personality, then the archaic categories will seem but the dreams of a confused and uneasy sleep, nightmares to be forgotten with the new day.”

Where Parsons saw only relentless similarity in the cross-cultural treatment of the adolescent girl, Miriam Van Waters drew attention to the highly complex and variable ways in which primitive peoples approached the phenomenon of female puberty. “Recognition . . . of the diversity of the problem,” she wrote in her meticulously researched article “The Adolescent Girl among Primitive Peoples,” “is the first needful conclusion.” No single theory, she argued, could adequately interpret the range of ethnographic evidence on girlhood without “do[ing] violence to the conditions of primitive life.” And the least effective of such singular theories was that which conflated biological puberty with social adolescence. “The human element, as distinct from the purely sexual,” she admonished, “has not been sufficiently emphasized in the study of primitive concepts of puberty.” Hereby rejecting the reductive biologism of Victorian anthropology, Van Waters became the first scholar to highlight the multiple and overlapping social, religious, pedagogic, esthetic, and physical functions served
by the customs of adolescent girlhood. Her early scholarly work on the adolescent girl from “the anthropological point of view” was never as popular as that of Hall, Parsons, or Mead. She did, nonetheless, hold true to the general conclusions she drew here as she reached out to wider audiences in her later reform efforts as a leading administrator of Los Angeles’s juvenile justice system and as a writer of popular works on juvenile delinquency, which did earn her national recognition. Even more significant for the history of anthropological ideas about female development, however, was Mead’s recognition of Van Waters’ influence on her own approach to the topic. “The Adolescent Girl among Primitive Peoples’ had been the only existing material in the field when I started my work,” Mead admitted, for which, she acknowledged, she had “always been grateful.”

Van Waters’s attention to cultural diversity and social environment in her study of female adolescence grew out of a family background quite different from Parsons’s. She was born in 1887 into a solidly middle-class family and was raised by loving, liberal parents and the close-knit community of the Portland, Oregon, evangelical Episcopal church where her father served as pastor throughout her childhood and adolescence. From her father, especially, and from the array of visitors who passed through the rectory of St. David’s Church, from church officials to theological students, to itinerant workers of all kinds, the young Miriam was encouraged toward, and eagerly embraced, a love of learning, ecumenicalism, a respect for social scientific inquiry, and a commitment to social justice. Growing up was not without its stresses and strains, however, as she also assumed a heavy load of domestic and child-care responsibilities during her mother’s frequent bouts of physical and nervous exhaustion. In 1905, she enrolled at the coeducational University of Oregon, where her professors further fostered both her academic ambitions and her devotion to social service. As a philosophy major, she took courses in literature, social history, economics, and psychology, hereby receiving ample exposure to the evolutionary theories of Darwin and Spencer. Her own interpretation of these theories, as expressed in her commencement address of 1908, however, emphasized the importance of both individualism and social responsibility to the process of social change. Van Waters also increasingly pondered and spoke out about the “woman question” in these years; as editor of the campus magazine, she urged her fellow female students to take a more active role in asserting their right to equal treatment in the university’s sponsoring of extracurricular activities.

In 1910, Van Waters left Oregon for Clark University, where she intended to pursue doctoral work in psychology under Hall’s direction. In Worcester and its
environ, she became acquainted with more radical social theories, including socialism and cultural relativism. She also developed an ardent enthusiasm for woman suffrage. One of the most important influences for Van Waters at this stage of her academic career was Jane Addams, whose work inspired her thinking about the possibilities for an active role for women in public life and also directed her attention to the problems of youth in modern society. Despite these many opportunities for intellectual stimulation and growth, however, Van Waters’s match with Hall proved to be an incompatible one. During the first two years of her graduate study, she found herself increasingly at odds with Hall’s autocratic teaching methods and his biologically based theories. Particularly troublesome were his efforts to push her intellectual endeavors toward what she considered the narrow arena of experimental psychology and away from broad philosophical questions and social reform. After an aborted attempt at a thesis topic on female juvenile delinquency designed to meet Hall’s methodological demands, Van Waters switched both fields and advisors, turning instead to the study of anthropology with professor Alexander Francis Chamberlain. Chamberlain had been a student of Franz Boas at Clark, receiving the first doctorate in anthropology offered in the United States, and succeeded his mentor when Boas resigned from the university in 1892. His scholarship on folklore, childhood, and Native American peoples emphasized the environment and learning to account for racial differences. Also appealing to Van Waters were Chamberlain’s progressive politics and his avid effort to combine scholarship and social engagement in his own life and work. With the supportive guidance of her new mentor, Van Waters combined research on delinquent girls from the Portland Municipal Court with a study of the ethnographic literature on puberty rites. “The Adolescent Girl among Primitive Peoples” was the condensed version of this dissertation, a two-part installment piece published under the coeditorial direction of Hall and Chamberlain in the Journal of Religious Psychology.74

At the outset of her analysis, Van Waters declared her break with evolutionary theory. In this exploration of the diverse customs of adolescent girlhood, Hall’s recapitulation theory, she stated, “is not, of necessity, assumed.” Thus, her method of cataloguing native attitudes toward puberty in girls was not intended to provide evidence of the origin and development of puberty customs but was meant to furnish “insight into the present significance of these customs in the mind of the people who practice them.”75 Van Waters’s functionalist approach challenged the notion that any one theory could serve to explain female puberty rites. Predominant among such totalizing explanations, she pointed out, was the theory that all customs surrounding the girl’s coming of age were derived from
physical necessity and revealed the essential biological nature of femininity. Contrary to widely accepted belief, she argued, all primitive cultures did not mark the onset of the menses with a special ceremony and of those that did, there was by no means a consensus about what this physical phenomenon meant to the girl or her community. Drawing attention to numerous cultures that did not maintain the alleged universal association between menstruation and impurity, she unmoored female puberty rites from their conceptual grounding in the biological limitations of femininity. “Sex does not dominate here completely, as so often asserted,” she claimed. “The human element is supreme.” For Van Waters, complex social, religious, economic, educational, and physical priorities shaped the meanings and experiences of female adolescence across cultures. In every culture it was the interaction of a specific set of such priorities, not the inherent nature of sex or race, that determined the treatment of the adolescent girl and the significance of her coming of age.

Van Waters acknowledged that some previous theories of puberty rites did take into account the broad social functions of these customs. Most such interpretations, however, were generally only applied to ceremonies for male adolescents. Indeed, the boy’s coming of age had long been seen as signifying more than the essential nature of male physiology; rather, male puberty rites were recognized for their role in individuating an adult self and in situating that self in appropriate relationship to society and the supernatural. Largely ignored in these interpretations, Van Waters argued, was the presence of such concerns displayed in female puberty rites as well. Thus, the element of seclusion that in many cultures attended the girl’s arrival at puberty was generally assumed to derive from universal acceptance of the essential impurity of menstruation. In Van Waters’s reading, such seclusion was as likely to mark the girl’s arrival at social maturity and her right to personal freedom as to signify the limitations of her sex. She noted that like the boy the girl’s confinement was often self-chosen, and like the boy her period of isolation frequently involved important pedagogic instruction and rigorous tests of her capacity for independence. Indeed, from a painstaking examination of some three hundred constituent elements of puberty ceremonies from around the globe, Van Waters discovered that only 13 percent of the total number were modes of treatment that applied exclusively to girls. Her data showed that the vast majority of puberty customs was not only shared by both sexes but also had much in common with those rites that attended other groups in the community occasionally receiving special attention, such as warriors, shamans, hunters, mourners, and pregnant women. Drawing on the work of French ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep, who argued that each type of
primitive ceremony had to be studied as part of the whole sequence of a community’s rites of passage, Van Waters insisted that “customs relating to the adolescent girl cannot be studied apart from their relation to other social groups and classes.” She did, nonetheless, admit that “sex discrimination,” by which she meant both the differential and unequal treatment of girls in a society, was organized through and reflected in many of the ceremonies that marked the girl’s coming of age. What was important for Van Waters, however, was that the marking of sexual difference not be uncritically accepted as an inevitable, and hence “natural,” component of female puberty ceremonies, especially at the expense of pursuing understanding of the social and religious values that produced such differentiation and gave it specific form in each culture.

Despite her focus on the unrecognized diversity in primitive attitudes toward female puberty, Van Waters nonetheless felt compelled in her conclusion to “reduce the facts to their simplest general terms” and discern some common tendencies from among her data. She discovered that three concerns emerged as pervasive in all female puberty ceremonies: attention to periodicity, to individuation, and to socialization. Those trying “to envisage clearly the problems centering in the adolescent girl in modern society,” she argued, would do well to acknowledge these “universal” facets of adolescent development and strive to accommodate them as best as a complex civilization would allow. Relating her anthropological findings to two case studies of girls in trouble with the Portland Municipal Court, Van Waters advocated that those undertaking work with the delinquent girl, in particular, ought to take their first cue from primitive societies and provide appropriate outlets for the “essential traits” of “energy, activity, [and] independence” manifested by all adolescents. Admittedly, one normal manifestation of such adolescent energy was sexual desire. While keeping with her ecumenical approach of cataloguing the range of sexual behaviors, attitudes, and customs of primitive peoples from around the globe, Van Waters also clearly registered her preference that modern civilization learn from those cultures that rejected the sexual double standard, provided for sex education, and even accepted homosexuality.

Like Hall before her, then, Van Waters used cross-cultural comparison to account for both the particular and the universal aspects of the adolescent stage of development. Her analysis of that which was shared by all adolescents and that which was distinct to certain groups resisted the reductive biologism of previous cultural evolutionists’ accounts of female development, however. Van Waters’s overwhelmingly dominant concern with the dissimilarities in the form and function of female puberty rites around the globe, along with her interpretation of...
adolescent girlhood comes of age?

these particulars as the product of dynamic cultural influences, allowed her to challenge the cultural evolutionists’ notions of natural racial hierarchy and essential gender difference. Likewise, her broad application of the “universal” attributes of adolescence as facets of a common human nature undermined the exclusivities of race and gender that prevailed in earlier interpretations of puberty rites. Thus, Van Waters noted that the recognition of “periodicity” in these ceremonies referred not only to the establishment of the female menstrual cycle but also to the “alternating levels of adolescent mental growth” characteristic of both male and female psychology at this stage of development. Her most significant contribution was her explicit extension of the task of individuation, with all of its associations with individual freedom and competent maturity, to girls as well as boys. “The tendency of primitive observance of puberty to mark and set forth the individuality of the girl,” she stated, “is very apparent.” Van Waters did recognize the role played by such ceremonies in initiating the girl into sexual life and in assimilating her to the social life of her gender, virtually the only aspects of female adolescence attended to by the cultural evolutionists; but she was also especially careful to emphasize the ways in which even these seemingly inevitable facets of the girl’s development were variably shaped by the “human element” in every culture.

Elsie Clews Parsons’s and Miriam Van Waters’s anthropological accounts of female adolescent development thus differed from one another in significant ways. While expressing some hope that human beings had the capacity to overcome their fear of change and desire for control, Parsons determined the passage from childhood to womanhood thus far in the history of human societies to be mostly a uniformly grim affair, with adolescent girls depicted primarily as victims of deeply held psychological attitudes toward age and gender. In contrast, Van Waters’s analysis of female adolescence emphasized diversity of experience and complexity of meaning. She sanguinely recognized in existing female puberty ceremonials the possibility of paths of development that affirmed the growing girl’s femininity, as well as her wider humanity, even amid the prevalence of various cultures’ enactments of “sex discrimination.” Despite these differences, however, both scholars drew on the work of Franz Boas to counter the prevailing evolutionary explanations of female adolescent development. In neither of these scholars’ works was “culture” a fully articulated concept. Nonetheless, each offered a compelling counterpoint to biological reductionism by reanalyzing female development in terms of both human universals and social differences. Beyond these initial publications, however, neither Parsons nor Van Waters continued on with this particular line of research. Parsons remained in
anthropology but turned her attention to detailed expositions of Pueblo and New World African cultures. Van Waters maintained a focus on the problems of adolescent development, but left academic anthropology for a career as a professional reformer in the field of juvenile justice. It would, then, be left to yet another of Boas’s students to build on the broad implications in these works and to elaborate more fully the relationship between female adolescence and the culture concept.

ADOLESCENCE AND CULTURE IN MEAD’S COMING OF AGE IN SAMOA

Like Parsons and Van Waters, Margaret Mead experienced her own mix of inspiration and limitation during her formative years that helped to germinate her thinking about race, gender, and child development and pave the way for her life’s work as a scholar and public intellectual devoted to understanding and to educating others about these themes. As biographer Lois W. Banner explains, Mead’s autobiographical writings optimistically recall a childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood marked by strong familial support, good luck, and boundless opportunity, while recounting a fair measure of personal insecurity and suffering, as well. Born in 1901, Mead spent her early childhood moving between numerous homes in the Philadelphia area, where her father was a professor at the Wharton School, and the town of Hammonton, New Jersey, where her mother conducted research for her doctoral thesis on the lives of the Italian immigrants in that community. Emily Fogg Mead hailed from a privileged Chicago family, received an undergraduate degree from the University of Chicago, and pursued graduate work in sociology at that institution as well. The demands of marriage, motherhood, and social reform work, including efforts on behalf of the American Association of University Women and the Women’s Trade Union League, prevented her from finishing her dissertation. She did, however, complete a master’s essay carefully documenting the social organization and culture of Hammonton’s Italians. Mead admired her mother for her intellectual acumen, her progressive child-rearing techniques, and her liberal ideas about racial and ethnic difference. She also rejected her mother’s elitism and her tendency toward emotional restraint and sexual repression.

Mead responded to and characterized her father with similar ambivalence. Brilliant and liberal-minded like his wife, Edward Mead avidly encouraged the intellectual prowess of his oldest child. However, he was also selfish, demanding, contemptuous, aggressive, controlling, acquisitive, and unfaithful. By Mead’s
account, the most important influence in her young life was her paternal grandmother, Martha Mead, who lived with the family for some twenty-seven years. Mead unabashedly praised her grandmother’s loving and generous manner, but even she provided complicated fodder for Mead’s thinking about gender and her efforts to fashion an identity and role for herself as a woman in the modern world. Martha Mead had attended college and worked as a teacher for many years (with decidedly progressive inclinations), supporting herself and her only son after the untimely death of her husband. Her devotion to education and her independence were, however, complemented by her enthusiasm for all things feminine and domestic, aspects of a woman’s life that Emily endured but did not actively embrace.

Despite some arbitrary threats by Mead’s father that he would not support her educational endeavors, the women in her life fully expected that she would go to college. Mead spent one mostly difficult year at DePauw University in Indiana, her father’s alma mater, where she undertook Herculean (and ultimately successful) efforts to fit in to the sorority and fraternity student culture that dominated the place. She then transferred to Barnard, a college that by the 1920s was renowned for its intellectually stimulating atmosphere, emphasis on career achievement for women, and first-rate undergraduate curriculum in the social sciences. Mead took courses in psychology from Harry Hollingworth, in sociology from William Fielding Ogburn, and in anthropology from Franz Boas, all of whom encouraged her to think about new ways to integrate cultural and psychological approaches to the study of human behavior and social phenomena. She graduated in 1923 with a bachelor’s degree in English and, with half-hearted hopes of becoming a high school psychologist, immediately began work toward a master’s degree in psychology at Columbia, where Boas provided the key direction for her work. Conservative social scientists in control of the National Research Council had condemned Boas’s pacifism during World War I. With the advent of intelligence testing during the war, these social scientists faulted him for failing to attend adequately to biology in explaining human differences. In this climate of hostility, he encouraged Mead to focus her master’s thesis research in psychology on the mental capacity of the Italian immigrants of Hammonton, New Jersey. Challenging the assumptions of IQ testers that English proficiency made no difference in measurements of immigrant groups’ mental abilities, she argued that some combination of biological and environmental factors accounted for various groups of children’s performance on intelligence tests.

As she completed her thesis, Mead realized that the life of an educational
psychologist was not for her. Inspired by Boas and incited by his teaching assistant, Ruth Benedict, she began advanced graduate work in anthropology. To support herself, Mead worked as a research assistant to William Fielding Ogburn, who was joining with such liberal sociologists as William I. Thomas in issuing critiques of the nuclear family. For her doctoral thesis, written under Boas’s tutelage, she examined whether Ogburn’s concept of “cultural lag,” or the notion that technological change preceded change in traditional attitudes and beliefs, was applicable to the primitive peoples of the South Pacific. Even before she completed the thesis, Mead began planning her first trip to the field, which was arranged as a compromise with Boas. Mead was determined to visit Polynesia intending to continue the research into the processes of cultural change she had begun in her dissertation. Boas was satisfied that enough work had been done about cultural borrowing. Engaged as he was with directing anthropology toward new questions about the workings of human culture, Boas wanted Mead to explore individual development, preferably among the native peoples of the United States. Mead was reliant on Boas for intellectual and institutional support, and Boas was ultimately sympathetic to Mead’s ambitions. She therefore acquiesced to the subject matter; he agreed to the location, and Mead made her way to Samoa to conduct an anthropological study of the adolescent girl.

Samoa, a U.S. protectorate with a naval base, met Boas’s standard as a field site where Mead’s health and safety would not be unduly at risk. She began her nine-month stint of fieldwork in the fall of 1925 on the main island of Tutuila and then moved to the more remote island of Ta’u. Her research consisted of a combination of observation of and interviews with inhabitants on three villages on Ta’u, including detailed interviews with some fifty girls ages 8 to 20. In a letter he wrote to Mead before her departure, Boas identified the specific components of female adolescent life he hoped she would consider. Most importantly, he wanted to know how young girls in Samoa “react to the restraints of custom.” He also wanted her to investigate the “excessive bashfulness of girls in primitive society,” as well as and the “interesting problem[s]” of “crushes among girls” and “the occurrence of romantic love.” With Boas’s overarching intellectual problem and particular concerns as her guide and Hall’s evolutionary biologism as her foil, Mead laid out the fundamental questions of her fieldwork: “In the course of development, the process of growth by which the girl baby becomes a grown woman, are the sudden and conspicuous bodily changes which take place at puberty accompanied by a development which is spasmodic, emotionally charged, and accompanied by an awakened religious sense, a flowering of idealism, a great desire for assertion of self against authority—or not? . . . Can
we think of adolescence as a time in the life history of every girl child which carries with it symptoms of conflict and stress as surely as it implies a change in the girl’s body?”

On the basis of her findings of the smooth, uncomplicated development of Samoan girls, the answer was decidedly “no,” although that, of course, begged her next question: “If it is proved that adolescence is not necessarily a specifically difficult period in a girl’s life—and proved it is if we can find any society in which that is so—then what accounts for the presence of storm and stress in American adolescence?” Culture, and not the exigencies of growth, race, or sex, was responsible for the prevalence or absence of difficulties among the young, Mead maintained, and her proposal hereby placed the culture concept and the developing child in reciprocal relationship with one another. An understanding of culture, she promised, would illuminate the process of ontogeny far better than a race- and gender-based biology had in the past. Likewise, respectful appreciation of the sundry processes of child development among different peoples would provide insight into both the fundamental “personality” of any culture under investigation, as well as the mechanisms by which such a culture was reproduced.

As with Parsons and Van Waters, Mead’s use of the culture concept challenged the racism and sexism inscribed in evolutionary theory and endemic in American society. At the time of her writing, African Americans faced continued political, social, and economic discrimination, maintained by the constant threat of physical violence, in the South, along with dashed expectations in those northern cities to which they had migrated in the years surrounding World War I with hopes for greater racial equality. Anti-immigrant sentiment resulted in a series of quota laws aimed at limiting the numbers of southern and eastern European immigrants entering the United States. While a new generation of new girls (particularly those of the white middle class) were beginning to take for granted opportunities for education, work, political participation, self-expression, and even sexual pleasure, they still bucked up against a gender-stratified economy, a persistent sexual double standard, and the increasing commodification of female sexuality.

Coming of Age made the case for racial tolerance and gender equality on several grounds. Mead’s choice of subject matter demanded that the lives of nonwhite children—and girls, no less—were worthy of attention, detailed exposition, and respect. Going even further than Van Waters, who sought to complicate earlier interpretations of female puberty rites, Mead was the first anthropologist to take seriously the significance of all aspects of girls’ lives, primitive and modern, including their work, play, education, friendships, family
and community relationships, and sexual attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, Mead asserted, as a unique and valuable social organization in its own right, and not as a mere representative of an earlier stage of cultural evolution, Samoa had things to teach modern civilization. Although an initial chapter describing the languid rhythm of “A Day in Samoa” smacks of romantic primitivism, Mead was, for the most part, interested in documenting those specific Samoan child-rearing attitudes and strategies that might be useful in enabling modern children to adjust to the complexities of their lives, not escape them. The first area where the Samoan way stood to improve on modern life was in the realm of family relationships. Mead found that Samoan society was organized into large households composed of near and distant relatives and presided over by chiefs, in which age, not relationship, bestowed authority. In such an arrangement, she explained, the adolescent girl “stands virtually in the middle with as many individuals who must obey her as there are persons to whom she owes obedience.” Overseeing the activities of her younger relatives in the household provided her with an “ample outlet for a growing sense of authority.” Equally important, the authority adults had over her was diffuse. Indeed, if a girl was dissatisfied with her home environment, she simply moved to another residence within the household group. Samoan girls were thus freed from the intensely emotional relationships of the “tiny, ingrown biological family” experienced by modern girls. Whether one ascribed to the psychoanalytic view that such relations entailed sexual conflict, Mead declared, they surely had a tendency toward pathological dependence. The larger point, though, was that counter to the psychoanalytic proposition about the inevitability of parent-child discord, the Samoan case held out the hope that the emotionality of adolescence that was the product of intensive family connections could be mitigated through the adjustment of the child’s social environment.

The second aspect of Samoan society better attuned to optimum development was its laid-back attitude toward sexuality in general and female sexuality in particular. As several of her reviewers noted, Mead’s depiction of “free love” among primitives was not so new either to ethnographers or to the general public, both of whom were accustomed to interpreting the sexual license of primitive peoples as both sign and cause of their inferior position in the evolutionary hierarchy. Building on the work of British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski, Mead reversed this precept, now holding up Samoa as a model for a far more repressive American culture to follow. In childhood, she described, Samoan boys and girls were amply exposed to the range of bodily functions related to birth, sex, and death. In addition to witnessing numerous postmortem
Cesareans, miscarriages, and autopsies, Samoan children made a game out of searching the palm groves for lovers and practiced masturbation with abandon. Adults interfered with children’s observation of sexual activities not because they deemed the behaviors wrong in themselves or children to be essentially innocent but because spectatorship of any “emotionally charged” event by a nonparticipant was considered unseemly. None of this, Mead assured, resulted in precocious heterosexual activity because of the taboo proscribing close relations between girls and boys of the same age. Rather, early sex education inoculated children against shocking revelations about sexuality and the neuroses that accompanied them later in life.97

Although by no means a matter of cultural consensus, Mead’s call for sex education and her acknowledgment of the importance of sex adjustment for the healthy development of the personality trod ground made familiar by a range of reformers and intellectuals since the end of the nineteenth century, from social purity advocates to anarchists. Bolder still were her claims about the insignificance of female puberty and her endorsement of casual, experimental sexual activity for adolescent girls. As Van Waters had found to be the case for many of the societies whose puberty ceremonies she examined, Samoa was a place where the girl was not singled out at her first menstruation for any special rite or ritual. In comparing the treatment of the prepubertal and pubertal girl, Mead observed, “No ceremony had marked the difference between the two groups. No social attitude testified to a crisis past.” In the Samoan experience, the dynamics of female biological development did not debilitate the girl or threaten the community and so did not require that she be secluded, protected, policed, or limited in her activities in any way. Rather, the several years following her unremarkable arrival at puberty constituted “the best period” of the her life, when her responsibilities for baby tending ended and the routine tasks now expected of her such as weaving and cooking exacted neither great ambition nor concentrated effort.98

With so few demands on her, much of the teenage Samoan girl’s energy could be directed toward clandestine sexual adventuring. Mead found that the majority of Samoan adolescent girls and boys, for whom social rank was not an issue, engaged in numerous brief, often simultaneous affairs conducted surreptitiously “under the palm trees” or in their own homes, which their parents for the most part ignored. A public elopement, in which a couple openly consummated their relationship by running to one set of relatives or the other, was motivated by “vanity and display,” conducted when “the boy wishe[d] to increase his reputation as a successful Don Juan, and the girl wishe[d] to proclaim her conquest.” Admittedly, the virginity of daughters of chiefs and village princesses was
guarded more carefully than average girls. However, even they shared with their sisters of lesser rank a “definite avoidance of forming any affectional ties” with their sexual partners, along with a broader acceptance of what constituted “normal” sexual behavior, both of which made sexual neuroses almost unheard of among Samoans. Indeed, some Samoan girls and boys also engaged in “casual homosexual relations,” although these “never assumed any long-time importance,” since Samoans regarded them merely as “imitative of and substitutive for heterosexual” activity. The downside was that Samoan girls never experienced the sort of romantic love prized by their western counterparts. Yet, Mead wondered whether Samoans’ treatment of sex as “something which is valued in itself” better enabled them “to count it at its true value.” Whereas some old-fashioned American girls discounted the importance of sexuality in their lives and other more modern ones naively conflated sexual desire with the all-encompassing love relationship, Samoan girls experienced their sexuality as more than nothing and less than everything and were far better adjusted as a result.99

By arguing that the shared human process of ontogeny was variously managed by culture, holding up certain aspects of Samoan child rearing for western emulation, refusing to see girls as determined by biological puberty, and claiming for them sexual pleasure and autonomy, Mead undermined some of the assumptions about race and gender long figured into the concept of adolescence. Yet her Samoan ethnography actually did as much to further earlier evolutionary associations between optimal adolescent development and the attainments of western civilization. Through the culture concept, Mead authoritatively organized the adolescent stage of development around the opportunities and problems associated with individual freedom. Modern, heterogeneous societies, she argued, offered the young a dizzying array of choices of how to be and act and what to think and believe. Such conditions could present enormous difficulties for youth, which could be lessened somewhat by drawing on some of the child-rearing methods practiced by primitive societies. Cultural complexity, however, also guaranteed the incomparable opportunity for modern adolescents to question, to weigh, to challenge, and ultimately to choose ways of life that would bring them individual success and personal satisfaction, as well as poise them to maintain a fortuitous balance between cultural continuity and cultural change. In making such contentions, though, Mead also failed to recognize that “storm and stress” had long been identified as a problem peculiar to civilized youth. Indeed, despite Victorian anthropology’s emphasis on the brutal trials imposed on the young during pubertal ceremonials, it was certainly not novel for Mead to
characterize a primitive people as unencumbered, or to find that the children among them had easy access to sexual knowledge and that their daughters experienced few difficulties at the onset of menstruation. Nor was it new to consider American youth as besieged by the complexities of modern life or to deem the challenges faced by such adolescents paradoxically as threats to personal and social stability and as sources of individual and cultural renewal. For Mead, the contrast between carefree Samoan youth and troubled American adolescents did not imply an inherent hierarchy of capacity or worth. Nonetheless, her analysis continued to privilege the cultural complexities and developmental difficulties independently negotiated by modern youth and to equate such negotiation with individual and social superiority.100

According to Mead, it was largely because Samoans grew up in a “simple, homogeneous primitive civilization” that they were not called on to exercise the capacities for autonomy, individuality, and rational choice that were mandated of their western counterparts during the adolescent stage of development. Instead, Samoan children and youth were uniformly trained in “traditional” tasks appropriate to their gender and continuous with previous generations, exposed to a single worldview complicated at most by the presence of the Christian pastor in the village, discouraged from displaying ambition or precocity, and channeled into friendships based on household relationship as opposed to voluntary association.101 While Mead did praise the sexual freedom Samoan adolescents were able to realize, she saw this to be a necessary and desirable, though not sufficient, condition for the highest development of the personality. Thus, her reading of the role of the dance in Samoan culture revealed it to be the exception that proved the rule. The dance was, Mead averred, the only activity in which Samoans displayed the kind of competitive self-cultivation promoted in the rearing of American children. “Each dancer moves in a glorious individualistic oblivion of the others, there is no pretense of co-ordination or of subordinating the wings to the centre of the line,” she explained. “Often a dancer does not pay enough attention to her fellow dancers to avoid continually colliding with them. It is a genuine orgy of aggressive individualistic exhibitionism.” Mead acknowledged that as the dance progressed, it often became “flagrantly obscene and definitely provocative in character.” Such a likelihood was not as significant, however, as its function “in the development of individuality and the compensation for repression of personality in other spheres of life.”102

Vestiges of cultural evolutionism in Mead’s work were reinforced by her suggestion that Samoan adolescents lacked the biological wherewithal to sustain the prerogatives of individualism that the dance briefly held out to them. The
accounts of child development in Mead’s early work explicitly rejected evolutionary theory’s notion of innate racial differences and argued for the importance of environmental influence on all manner of growth. Advocating for the contributions the study of the “primitive child” could make to the field of social psychology in the first edition of *A Handbook of Child Psychology*, she clearly asserted her position: “Assuming then that the primitive child starts life with the same innate capacities as the child of civilized parents, the startling differences in habit, emotional development, and mental outlook between primitive and civilized man must be laid at the door of a difference in social environment.”  

The reductive interpretation of this guiding assumption by some readers of Mead’s work notwithstanding, however, Mead never sought to replace biological with cultural determinism. Indeed, biology maintained an important hold on her work through her belief in both a common human nature and innate individual differences that took form in each person’s unique temperament.

In *Coming of Age*, Mead argued that it was the combination of social conditions and the capacity for temperamental variation within a group of people that accounted for the presence or absence of adolescent difficulty in any culture. Adolescents in western culture had such an array of life options available to satisfy their varied temperamental inclinations, she admitted, that they should actually have a better chance at adjustment than Samoan youth who came of age within a much more limited field of social opportunity. A measure of hypocrisy in American culture helped to explain the prevalence of distress and rebellion among its young. America promised its adolescents extraordinary freedom of lifestyle, Mead accused, without providing the proper means of “education for choice” and while continuing to insinuate a “single standard” for thought and behavior. Comparable lack of Samoan youthful maladjustment Mead credited to the particular alchemy of a simple, static society and a people without the range of temperamental variation that would lead to either individual or collective upsetting of traditional mores:

Samoa’s lack of difficult situations, of conflicting choice, of situations in which fear or pain or anxiety are sharpened to a knife edge will probably account for a large part of the absence of psychological maladjustment . . . Furthermore the amount of individualization . . . is much smaller in Samoa. Within our wider limits of deviation there are inevitably found weak and nonresistant temperaments. And just as our society shows a greater development of personality, so also it shows a larger proportion of individuals who have succumbed before the complicated exactions of modern life.
Mead therefore was neither a cultural determinist nor a cultural relativist. Thus, her reinterpretation of adolescence through a cultural lens in no way precluded her from valorizing one society’s set of values or way of life over another. The values she endorsed were associated not only with modern civilization but with masculinity as well. Indeed, one of the primary contributions of *Coming of Age* was to normalize for modern girls the same claims to independent selfhood long enjoyed by boys of the white middle class. As their behaviors attested, Mead declared, modern girls had the same developmental needs and rights as boys to experiment with sexual partners, exert autonomy from their parents, ascribe to and reject belief systems, and weigh vocational options. Yet her furthering these goals also perpetuated the notion of western cultural superiority. For it was not only the prevalence of choice in western society but the prospect that the modern girl might share in her brother’s capacity for choice for the first time in history that was one of the surest signs of the ultimate promise of western civilization.\textsuperscript{108} Mead granted that the development of the Samoan girl was made easier by her culture’s casual approach to sexuality. However, her development was also more severely limited by that same culture’s lack of capacity to offer girls a broader range of opportunities for individuality and choice. As Mead described her, the Samoan girl grew up “slowly and quietly like a well-behaved flower,” maintaining “a very nice balance between a reputation for the necessary minimum of knowledge and a virtuosity which would make too heavy demands.” Expectations for her development were clear and relaxed, with the outcome, marriage, “to be deferred as long as possible,” but “inevitable” nonetheless.\textsuperscript{109} In contrast, nothing was inevitable about the development of the modern American girl. Her unlimited choices to think, to feel, and to behave frequently rendered her baffled and neurotic, but ultimately established her as a claimant to individualism and rationality, the most valuable gifts, according to Mead, any culture could bestow.\textsuperscript{110}

Although Samoan girls were reared to be passive and compliant and to give little effort and less thought to cultivating a unique self, they were also, paradoxically, noticeably individualistic; they were less capable of engaging in cooperative effort or of experiencing specialized affection, particularly in friendships with fellow females. Mead admitted that this led to fewer of the “crushes” that were so prevalent in American girls’ experiences, as well as a decided absence of female adolescent “gangs.” But it also resulted in a female sphere held together neither by individual preference nor a sense of social solidarity, but by “regimented associations” of relationship groups, over which the girl herself exercised little control.\textsuperscript{111} Both the lack of female independence and of voluntary female
solidarity, Mead concluded, were symptomatic of a society in which too great a pronouncement of sexual difference prevailed. A “rigid sex dichotomy,” characterized by antagonism and avoidance from childhood on, meant that no Samoan, male or female, ever regarded the other “simply as individuals without relation to sex.” In registering her distaste for such a social arrangement, Mead turned earlier anthropological accounts of gender difference on their head. In Victorian anthropology, the less sexually differentiated a people, the less advanced the culture. For Mead, however, exacting adherence to sex roles precluded recognition of individuality and was to be rejected out of hand by modern society. “The strict segregation of related boys and girls, the institutionalised hostility between pre-adolescent children of opposite sexes in Samoa are cultural features with which we are completely out of sympathy,” she stated. “For the vestiges of such attitudes, expressed in our one-sex schools, we are trying to substitute coeducation, to habituate one sex to another sufficiently so that difference of sex will be lost sight of in the more important and more striking differences in personality.” Unlike Van Waters, then, who sought out evidence in female puberty rites of nonwestern cultures’ encouragement of the girl’s individuality and independence, Mead declared female autonomy to be a vital sign and measure of the advancement of modern civilization.

Mead’s rendering of autonomy as a normal attribute of modern female adolescence made important contributions to the liberal variant of early-twentieth-century feminism, which made claims for women’s equality on the basis of their common humanity with men. Her assertion that a society’s achievement of gender equality was directly proportional to the attention it paid to the development of personality, however, compromised the egalitarian potential of that contribution by depending on a kind of cultural comparison that recalled earlier anthropological claims to racial hierarchy. It also served to undermine that current of ideas about adolescence that had valued, if always ambivalently, the “feminized” attributes of this stage of development. Hall conceived of adolescence as the one time of life when boys were as inclined as their sisters toward selfless service and religious devotion. He described in loquacious terms how the reproductive potential of the establishment of the sex instinct awakened all adolescents to their connection with the past and future of the human race, as well as with the wider mysteries of the universe. By the 1920s, such a notion seemed quaint, at best, as the dominant cultural ethos came to stress the importance of individual success, self-fulfillment, and personal pleasure. While feminist psychologist Phyllis Blanchard held out for an alternative set of values that esteemed altruism over egoism, even she pulled back from deeming these to be
universal to girls and boys. More developmental thinkers of the 1920s rendered the feminine “love ideal” subordinate to the masculine goal of self-realization.114 For her part, Mead enthused that modern adolescents were, indeed, disposed toward selflessness, idealism, and religiosity but determining what cause to support or church to join were seen as more opportunities for the adolescent to exercise choices in the process of fashioning a unique personal identity. So, a modern girl looking to her family members as sources of inspiration for her own beliefs, values, and activities might turn to a father who was “a Presbyterian, an imperialist, a vegetarian, a tee-totaler, with a strong literary preference for Edmund Burke,” an aunt who was “an agnostic, an ardent advocate of woman’s rights, an internationalist who rests all her hopes on Esperanto, is devoted to Bernard Shaw, and spends her spare time in campaigns of anti-vivisection,” and so on.115 Girls—and boys—were no more or less inclined toward service than what they might choose to eat or to read. Most important was that all of these possibilities for doing and being existed as coequal, if sometimes contradictory, choices for the personality in the making.

Mead’s analysis also sought to qualify the emotional experience of adolescence. Adolescent girls and boys were emotionally volatile, she argued, because of the difficult choices they faced in a complex society, not because of the exigencies of biological puberty. That established, she also wanted to free American adolescents from the specific emotional poignancy that arose out of the “evils inherent in the too intimate family organization,” the effects of which the large, heterogeneous Samoan household protected against. While not willing to relinquish the specialized affection between parents and children (and especially between husbands and wives) that enabled the expression of the unique personality, Mead warned that it had to be acknowledged that this came “at the price of many individuals’ preserving through life the attitudes of dependent children, of ties between parents and children which successfully defeat the children’s attempts to make other adjustments, of necessary choices made unnecessarily poignant because they become issues in an intense emotional relationship.” Mead herself did not identify this as a distinctly female problem, nor did she ascribe it to an unfortunate weakening of the patriarchal family. Indeed, she was as concerned with the effects on the girl of the “domineering, dogmatic” father as with the protective and solicitous mother.116 In this way, she was able to draw on psychoanalytic assumptions about the centrality of family dynamics in the life of the child while also rejecting sexist remedies for family conflict. Nonetheless, the point drew on a long history of negative associations between emotionality, (inter)dependence, and femininity. Perhaps more importantly, it fed into the
larger trend currently being advanced by both psychoanalytic and behavioristic interpretations of child development about the emotionally crippling nature of motherhood and the failures of girl children, in particular, to achieve “psychological weaning” from their families.\textsuperscript{117}

In deliberately seeking to include modern girls among the adolescents who were to enjoy the opportunity to realize autonomous selfhood, then, Mead also contributed to the theoretical exclusion of developmental processes and outcomes that resonated with alternative ways of knowing and being during the experience of coming of age. She also failed to consider adequately the ways in which the American adolescent girl bore resemblance, in terms of limited cultural expectations for her development, to Samoa’s “well-behaved flower.” Mead briefly reflected on the ways in which “our American theory of endless possibilities” and “our myth of endless opportunity” might produce “bitter rebellion” in those individual adolescents for whom the choices they had to make were “in contrast to the opportunities which they are told are open to all Americans.”\textsuperscript{118} However, in \textit{Coming of Age}, the problem of girls, and other social groups, facing restricted choices in a choice-oriented society was only minimally addressed in favor of an ultimately optimistic vision of the equal potential of all modern adolescents to shape themselves as they would.

Mead’s observation that the Samoan girl faced “neither revelation, restriction, nor choice” in her coming of age allowed for appreciating and scrutinizing both primitive culture and western civilization.\textsuperscript{119} Samoan culture was to be emulated for its gradual approach to child development that avoided any sudden revelations about sexuality at the onset of biological puberty and the cusp of social adolescence. However, lack of opportunity for individual choice in Samoa, which helped to account for the absence of conflict among Samoan adolescents, Mead rejected as a wholly undesirable solution to the challenges modern youth faced. In this trio of comparative cultural characteristics, “restriction” presented the most thorny problem for Mead. In Samoa, the combination of few restrictions and fewer choices worked well to produce ease of adjustment among its young and to assure the continuity of a simple, homogeneous society. In Manus, the subject of Mead’s next study, a rigid set of social expectations, largely enforced by the inducement of shame, also guaranteed cultural continuity, but at the expense of frustrated youth who grew into profoundly unhappy adults.\textsuperscript{120} In the case of American adolescents, Mead maintained that neither a strict set of social expectations, which mired the young in tradition, nor a lax set of social expectations, which never required them to impose larger meaning on disparate
adolescent girlhood comes of age?

choices, would preserve and further the most valued attributes of modern society. Needed above all else, she concluded, was for modern youth to become aware of themselves as cultural beings, to learn to recognize the ways in which every culture, even ones premised on freedom of choice, demarcated certain limits and the ways in which purposeful individuals could affect their social environment to make a better world:

. . . we have one great superiority over . . . all primitive peoples. To them their customs are immune from criticism—given, ordained, immutable. They move unselfconsciously within the pattern of their homogeneous, self-contained societies. We, caught almost as completely in a far more complex pattern, have acquired the ability to think about it. Our young people pay the price of heterogeneity in the choices which they must make . . . But it is possible for us to give them in some slight measure the benefit of that heterogeneity also. It is choice which makes us culture-conscious, which makes it possible for us to see our society as a complex of possible courses.¹²¹

Deeming the edge obtained by modern adolescents to be a function of their “culture-consciousness,” Mead coded her own versions of the concepts of “adolescence” and “culture” with a remarkably similar set of expectations. She declared the ideal adolescent to be capable of exercising autonomous choice and the ideal culture to be able to sustain possibilities for freedom through its heterogeneity and dynamism. In the same way, according to Mead, just as adolescent deviance was never to languish as utter aimlessness, culture was not to devolve into absolute relativism. Indeed, purposeful adolescent rebellion was, she proposed, one vital impetus to progressive cultural change. Even as Mead echoed Hall’s vision of the felicitous relationship between a plastic adolescence and the evolution of civilization, she updated her predecessor’s Lamarckianism with an “anthropological point of view” that presented the promises and difficulties of the adolescent stage as a product of culture rather than biology. As Parsons and Van Waters had begun to do, Mead too undercut reductive race- and sex-based theories of ontogeny by emphasizing the overriding importance of the “human element” in shaping the meanings and experiences of child development among different peoples. She also, however, renewed the idea of a privileged relationship between optimum adolescent development and the distinctly masculine achievements of western civilization.