BENEDICT, RUTH (1887–1948) from Historical Dictionary of the Lesbian and Gay Liberation Movements

Benedict was Margaret Mead's professor, mentor, and lover. She was the first woman to hold the rank of full professor of political science at Columbia University, where she taught cultural anthropology. Benedict and Mead wrote about deviancy in culture, trying to change how society conceived of abnormal behavior and traits. Benedict also worked for and wrote about racial equality. Her works include Patterns of Culture (1993) and The Races of Mankind (1943). Benedict also wrote poetry under the pseudonym Anne Singleton.

Ruth Fulton Benedict was one of the best-known American anthropologists of her generation. Her book Patterns of Culture (1934) made the ideas of anthropologists available to a wide general audience, and in The Chrysanthemum and the Sword (1946), she attempted to explain Japanese culture to Americans after World War II. Ruth was married to chemist Stanley Benedict, but both had affairs, she with other women as well as one man. After their divorce, Benedict's relationships were all with other women. Lesbianism was seen in society as pathological then, but Benedict saw herself and her circle of friends as normal, and she explored this paradox twice in her scholarly work.

In the 1930s, when most social scientists saw homosexuality as an abnormal and dysfunctional innate trait, Benedict pioneered the idea that homosexuality might instead be a cultural trait and that at certain times and in certain places, it had been considered normal.

Benedict's article “Anthropology and the Abnormal,” published in Journal of General Psychology in 1934, aimed at influencing the ideas of psychologists as a profession. The article invited her readers to rethink what was abnormal and what was normal, through examples of activities like trance, cataleptic states, and homosexuality. She gave examples of societies in which each of these, considered abnormal in Western culture, were part of normal life. Concerning homosexuality, she used as an example Ancient Greek and Native American cultures, which allowed what anthropologists called berdache, or cross-gender living. Although scholars have since discovered women among many Native American peoples who had similar roles, Benedict talked of men who assumed the dress and occupations of women and sometimes had relationships with other men.

In modern society, according to Benedict, internal conflict over being perceived as deviant, not homosexuality itself, caused psychological problems for individuals. In places where homosexuality had not been perceived as deviant in the past, homosexuals had lived honorable lives and were accepted by society. Normality, she concluded, was what a culture decided to accept as normal. Since American society had categorized homosexuals as abnormal, she suggested that psychologists be more tolerant with disturbed homosexual patients and help them to resolve their internal conflicts so they could see themselves more positively, not as pathological, but merely as out of step with their cultures in a

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certain place and time.

A short time after the appearance of this article, Benedict’s book Patterns of Culture (1934) was published. Written for a general audience, the book again presented homosexuality as a cultural trait rather than innate and as something that historically had been accepted as normal by certain cultures. Benedict suggested the need to educate society to tolerance and to educate homosexuals to self-acceptance through the knowledge that within themselves they were not abnormal though they were perceived so in the culture within which they lived.

Within Patterns of Culture, Benedict also suggested that male traits and female traits were cultural rather than biological. Through examples, she showed that male dominance and female subordination were not innate traits. Among the Dobu in the Pacific, she wrote, families lived alternate years with the wife’s and husband’s clan, and in any given year, that person was considered the head of the family, regardless of gender. Among the Zuni in the American Southwest, women owned the fields and the houses, and their husbands worked the land. By showing that other peoples had expectations of men and women that were different from those in American society, she undermined the idea that American ways were the only ways men and women could relate to each other, stressing the relativity of gender traits across cultures.

See also
Berdache (Two-Spirit); Biological Determinism; Boston Marriages; Homosexuality

Further Readings

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