

**Error Detected and Corrected:  
A Singular Case**

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**ABSTRACT**

In the new edition of *False Prophets: Fraud and Error in Science and Medicine*, Alexander Kohn omits his account of the Samoa controversy because Derek Freeman showed it to be in error. An examination of this unusual case, based on the Freeman-Kohn correspondence, suggests that the error phenomenon is not an exception to normal science but is pandemic.

The Preface to the paperback edition of Alexander Kohn's highly regarded *False Prophets: Fraud and Error in Science and Medicine*, states that "so many stories of misconduct" have come to light since the first edition that "the author has added a chapter, Where Does it End?"<sup>1</sup>

Kohn turns this disquieting question to effect by revealing a fresh case of culpable error: his own.

He states that his description of the Samoa controversy has been withdrawn because evidence presented by Derek Freeman showed "that I had erred in some of the opinions I had expressed in this section." He acknowledges that Mead's conclusion in *Coming of Age in Samoa* "that the behaviour of Samoan adolescents was entirely determined by the social environment was in error, as has, I now recognize, been quite definitely shown by Prof. Derek Freeman in his book *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*."<sup>1</sup> In a letter of apology, Kohn acknowledged that Freeman had produced evidence that "I was not even-handed in the treatment of this story and therefore I sincerely apologize for any embarrassment I might have thus caused to you."<sup>2</sup>

The admission of culpable error committed by an accomplished virologist in a book devoted to combatting such error is a sobering illustration of its increase. Something may be learned from this singular example by following the case method Kohn uses in *False Prophets*. The method is to reconstruct events in order that the factors leading to error or misconduct may be identified.

The evidence is two letters Freeman wrote to Kohn and Kohn's responses. In his first, exploratory letter, Freeman detailed a number of statements in *False Prophets* that were, he maintained, contrary to fact; Kohn was asked to produce the evidence for them.<sup>3</sup> Freeman also maintained that the false statements were configured so as to

imply that his refutation of the principal findings of *Coming of Age in Samoa* slandered Margaret Mead.

In response, Kohn "express[ed] . . . regret that perhaps the standards of scholarship which I maintain in my professional scientific publications were indeed not always applied here."<sup>4</sup> He acknowledged several unfactual statements due to failure to verify sources and admitted as well several errors of judgment. He apologized and proposed to amend them in subsequent editions of *False Prophets*.

Freeman had objected that the chapter heading, "Criticism or Slander?", together with the dustjacket information and other such matter suggested that his criticism was slanderous.<sup>3</sup> Kohn denied intending to convey this impression, but acknowledged that "in the light of your letter I see that this chapter heading might be interpreted as raising the question whether your criticism . . . was slanderous--a possibility that had not occurred to me at all. In future editions I propose to rename the chapter "Critics and Challengers" and to reword the introductory paragraph."<sup>4</sup>

Freeman's response to these concessions and partial self-defense was a lengthy letter detailing about twenty errors in Kohn's fifteen hundred word published account. They ranged from minor but gross errors indicative of haste, to major errors indicating that Kohn had not grasped his subject. Freeman rejected as "disingenuous in the extreme." Kohn's claim to have intended a balanced account since "an objective scrutiny. . . reveals bias of the most pronounced kind."<sup>5</sup>

Freeman's scrutiny was a formidable assemblage of details that left no doubt about the bias of Kohn's account. Among many other things, he pointed out that Kohn's summary of his statistics on homicide and rape in Samoa contained four transcription errors, one so gross that it would suggest to "any knowledgeable social scientist . . . that I am professionally incompetent."

Freeman further identified in Kohn's account seven "charges" against his character and scholarship. Among them were:

1. Although Freeman had "actually assembled the material for his book in the 1960s, he waited until after Mead's death to publish it. Professor Washburn's view was that it was unfair of Freeman to have published the book only after Mead's death."<sup>6</sup>

2. Freeman's criticism was unfair because it judged Mead's ethnography by standards accepted in the profession after her Samoan researches. "Subjecting her to criticism in historical perspective would seem to be unfair."<sup>6</sup>

3. Freeman maintained that Mead's ethnography of Samoan adolescent sexual behaviour was derived from "'counterfeit tales of casual love' provided by her teenage informants."<sup>6</sup>--an interpretation commonly regarded as jaundiced.

Freeman demonstrated that by consulting *Margaret Mead and Samoa* and other relevant publications, Kohn could have determined that these charges are not only false, but malicious, for they insinuate a state of mind the opposite of his published, verified

statements. Thus, in the Preface to *Margaret Mead and Samoa* and elsewhere, Freeman described the fifteen year history of his communications to Mead about the variance between their respective Samoan findings.<sup>7,8</sup> The history shows a continuing spirit of collegial exchange in which there is an element of rivalry but none of stealth or malice.<sup>9</sup> The research required for the book was not completed until after Mead's death in 1979.<sup>7,8</sup> And so on.

In saying that Freeman traced Mead's erroneous account of Samoan sexual mores to adolescent tall tales, Kohn committed a major reporting error. Freeman stated that this is a common Samoan opinion, but that in the absence of independent evidence, he could not accept it.<sup>7,8</sup> (Recognition of the gap between Samoa hearsay and substantial evidence has paid off. Recent investigations in Samoa have yielded what Freeman claims to be conclusive evidence that Mead was indeed deceived by her informants)<sup>10</sup>

Freeman concluded his withering cannonade by pronouncing Kohn derelict from the standards of truthfulness that he purported in *False Prophets* to uphold. "If ever an author was hoist on his own epigraph," he wrote, "that author is you." Freeman cited British and Australian defamation law, and stated three conditions, none monetary, that Kohn and his publisher Basil Blackwell must meet.

Kohn offered neither rebuttal nor excuses to Freeman's scathing second letter. He said simply that the chapter would be withdrawn in subsequent editions, and that Freeman would receive the letter of apology he demanded.<sup>11</sup> Blackwell's correspondence with Freeman and

others involved in the matter was open, courteous, and concerned for the truth.

Let us look now to the thread of error. The abundant minor errors, such as calling Franz Boas "Frank" and Samoa an "island," signify haste in dealing with an unfamiliar subject. Kohn's awareness of his vulnerability in this regard is indicated by the fact that he asked anthropologist Mary Katherine Bateson to check his story in draft.<sup>4</sup> It was therefore within range of his self-checking to ask Freeman to comment on the draft as well. The accuracy and even-handedness he sought in dealing with an acrimonious debate would have been served. Bateson, as Mead's daughter, would comment on the draft from the perspective of Mead's defenders. Freeman would comment as the critic. Yet Kohn did not contact Freeman.

The reason may be related to the fact that Kohn's "charges" against Freeman are standard moves in the defense of Mead's Samoan ethnography. Freeman has rebutted them many times. These rebuttals are never answered. Instead, the orthodox defense obdurately repeats the charges without acknowledging that rebuttal has been made.<sup>12, 13, 14, 15</sup> This exercise produces the impression on casual readers that Freeman has no counter-arguments. That Kohn's view of the controversy was obstructed by this evasion is implied by his statements in the new Preface and in the letter of apology: he truly had no idea of how thoroughly Freeman had answered Mead's defenders. Consequently, he adopted the orthodox defense of Mead unaware of its deep bias, which is consistent with his belief that he had dealt with the case impartially. The failure to consult Freeman could then be due to any number of random factors, such as time

budgeting (the Samoa episode is about 1 percent of the text of *False Prophets*); or the chance that he knew Bateson but not Freeman; or to a wish to avoid becoming embroiled with Freeman.

The random factor explanation is also to be preferred in regard to Kohn's fudging of data, although Freeman vigorously confronted Kohn with it as clinching evidence of his bias. Randomness is evident from the chance manner in which Freeman detected that Kohn had fudged by altering a quotation. In his published account, Kohn quoted Bateson as stating that "the tragedy is that Freeman's critique is far more ideological and tendentious than the work he criticizes." Freeman asked whether the source was a personal communication. Kohn confirmed that it was, and obligingly quoted the full context from which the published quote had been taken.<sup>4</sup> Freeman, but not Kohn, noticed that the sentence in Kohn's letter did not match the sentence published. The sentence quoted in the letter was: "the tragedy is that Freeman's critique suffers, after 50 years of progress in the discipline, from many of the same theoretical and methodological weakness which more understandably characterized hers." Kohn evidently forgot that he had used his editor's pencil to eliminate Bateson's wordiness and sharpen her point.

That Kohn groomed the data of *False Prophets* to achieve clarity and succinctness is stated three times in his first response to Freeman's objections. Thus, he preferred a *Time Magazine* writer's coinage "self-delusion" to Freeman's more elaborate description of Mead's error-state because "I think the word self delusion summed up fairly well the matter. The quotation marks [ascribing the phrase to Freeman] should indeed be omitted."<sup>4</sup> In regard to Kohn's failure to

mention a point that Freeman deemed to be critical to any accurate description of the controversy, Kohn excused his procedure by saying that it was not essential from his broad perspective, "where considerable compression and condensation of material has been necessitated." Kohn's data-grooming was merely an application of the principle that in presenting evidence, one *should* sacrifice pedantic accuracy when it obstructs clarity. Kohn intimated, but was too polite to say, that in his view most of Freeman's objections were nit-picking. The random factor in the fudged quotation is simply that in processing a great deal of data for his book, Kohn sometimes groomed to the point of falsification. It could happen to anyone.

That appears to be the lesson of this singular case. Even Kohn's egregious errors are readily understood as outcomes of the working conditions of normal science and scholarship. They do not require a supposition of marked predisposing bias or exceptional negligence. The bias that Freeman detected in Kohn's account is merely his faithful reflection of the opinion of American anthropologists. In accepting the "consensus" of the experts, Kohn followed an established procedure. The abundance of errors derives from his attempt to reduce, with reasonable dispatch, the glut of information to a coherent image--a problem that besets us all. Kohn's errors were not detected by reviewers and could not be detected by any but a few knowledgeable persons. They pass muster as knowledge.

What makes this case singular is not the errors, but their detection. Behind Kohn's errors stands the monumental error of American anthropology in its judgment of Mead's Samoan ethnography. That this error was detected is due to a random factor: the rarity of



Derek Freeman's scholarship. Freeman was prepared to research the problem for as long as was necessary to get the facts straight. Four decades were needed. When at length he presented his findings, he confronted normal science in the form of the prejudices and opinions of anthropologists, few of whom are Samoanists. The record of the controversy is now in. Professional anthropology in the United States could not countenance Freeman's public correction of the record.<sup>15</sup> Stonewalling the evidence has been preferred to welcoming Freeman's correction.

Challenged by the exceptional Freeman, Kohn has done an exceptional thing himself. His admission of error makes him a significant witness in the Samoa controversy, as one who recognized, on the basis of a detailed demonstration, that Freeman has conclusively proved his case. Normal science among American anthropologists nevertheless continues the indignity of persisting in error--to save face. This, alas, seems to be the all too normal way of normal science.<sup>16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22</sup>

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- 3 Freeman, Derek. 1987. Letter to Alexander Kohn, March 19.
- 4 Kohn, Alexander. 1987. Letter to Derek Freeman, May 1.
- 5 Freeman, Derek. 1987. Letter to Alexander Kohn, June 25.
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