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THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

## Today's News

Tuesday, June 28, 2005

## Anthropologists Rescind Report That Examined Allegations of Misconduct by Researchers in the Amazon

By [DAVID GLENN](#)

The American Anthropological Association has voted to rescind its acceptance of a 2002 committee report that reviewed allegations that two prominent American anthropologists had committed serious misconduct in Brazil and Venezuela between 1967 and 1990.

The reversal is the latest twist in a complex dispute that had been simmering for decades but exploded into prominence in 2000, with the publication of *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon* (W.W. Norton), by the freelance reporter Patrick Tierney ([The Chronicle](#), September 29, 2000).

In his book, Mr. Tierney charged that Napoleon A. Chagnon, who is now a professor emeritus of anthropology at the University of California at Santa Barbara, and the late James V. Neel, a longtime professor of human genetics at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, had badly mistreated an indigenous group, known as the Yanomami, in the upper Amazon.

Among other things, Mr. Tierney asserted that during a 1968 measles epidemic among the Yanomami, Mr. Neel's research was driven by scientific curiosity rather than sound medical practice and that dozens of indigenous people had needlessly died. (In prepublication galleys, Mr. Tierney even suggested that Mr. Neel had spread measles himself by administering a certain vaccine.)



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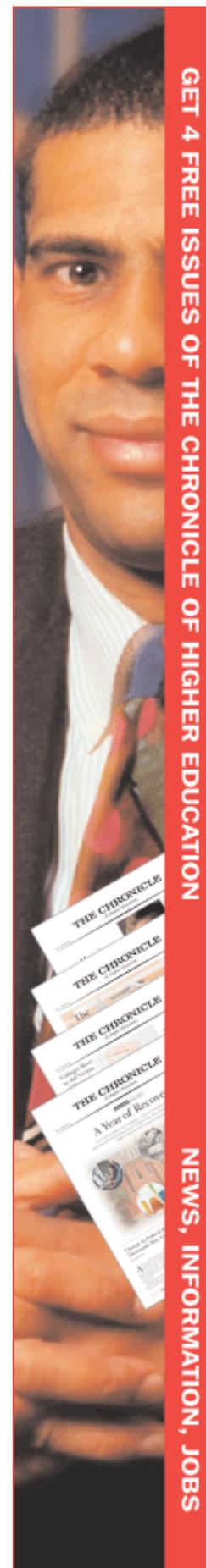
**Anthropologists** rescind report that examined allegations of misconduct by researchers in the Amazon

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Mr. Tierney also charged that Mr. Chagnon had tacitly encouraged violence among the Yanomami and that he had staged violent scenes in several famous ethnographic films.

Mr. Tierney's book received a huge amount of publicity, and leaders of the anthropology association felt a need to respond. In 2001 they appointed a small committee, known as the El Dorado Task Force, that was instructed to assess the issues raised by the controversy and to recommend ways to improve anthropologists' practices in the field.

The task force was dogged by its own controversies. Critics complained that two of its members had prejudged the case by publicly criticizing Mr. Chagnon's conduct. Another member, Raymond Hames, a professor of anthropology at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, resigned from the committee because he believed that his past professional association with Mr. Chagnon raised the appearance of a conflict of interest.

The low point may have come in November 2001, when the anthropology association released a preliminary report by the committee. Two of its six members promptly objected, saying that the report contained material that they had neither read nor approved (*The Chronicle*, December 3, 2001). At the association's annual meeting that month, several scholars complained that the report appeared to ignore certain serious allegations in Mr. Tierney's book.

The committee's [final report](#) was completed in May 2002 and released to the public two months later. Like other investigative bodies, the committee found that Mr. Tierney's most sensational allegation -- that Mr. Neel had acted negligently during the measles epidemic -- was false. The report found merit in several of Mr. Tierney's other charges, however. The committee encouraged the association to take steps to improve scholars' ethics in the field and the discipline's relationship with indigenous people (*The Chronicle*, July 2, 2002).

The final report came under immediate and heavy criticism from several scholars. Chief among them were Thomas A. Gregor, a professor of anthropology at Vanderbilt University, and Daniel R. Gross, a staff researcher at the World Bank. Mr. Gregor and Mr. Gross charged that the committee's report amounted to a formal inquiry into Mr. Chagnon's and Mr. Neel's behavior, and that, as such, it violated a 1998 resolution in which the association vowed that it would not adjudicate charges of misconduct against its members.

The critics also said that the panel's composition was biased, that Mr. Chagnon had not been afforded due process, and that the association's Web site had propagated (in "comments" pages associated with the task-force report) a new stream of lurid and unsubstantiated allegations against Mr. Chagnon.

Last fall, Mr. Gregor and Mr. Gross offered a resolution to rescind the association's acceptance of the report. The association's members voted on the resolution by mail in April and May, and the results were announced late last week. The resolution passed, 846 to 338.

The resolution requires the association to widely publicize the decision to rescind the report, and to explain the reasons for doing so. It also affirms that "the association will follow its own policies prohibiting ethics adjudications."

Reached by telephone in Uruguay on Monday, Mr. Gross said that he was very pleased by the vote. "The association wasn't equipped to carry out adjudications," he said. "It didn't have the machinery, it didn't have the procedures in place. In any of these cases where grave accusations are made against a colleague, we need to have fair procedures in place."

Mr. Gross suggested that the institutional review boards at Mr. Chagnon's and Mr. Neel's universities were better placed to assess Mr. Tierney's allegations.

Mr. Gross said that he would have no objection if the association continued to post the report on its Web site. He simply wanted it to be made clear, he said, that the report is "the opinion of a group of people, and not the association's official position."

Jane H. Hill, a professor of anthropology and linguistics at the University of Arizona, who was the chair of the task force, said on Monday that she was very disappointed in the referendum's outcome. "We should have done more work to educate people about the meaning of this," she said.

Ms. Hill said that she could have accepted a narrower resolution that affirmed the association's prohibition on adjudicating ethical allegations against its members. But she believes that Mr. Gregor and Mr. Gross's resolution, which rescinds the task force report in its entirety, goes much too far. The committee's recommendations for ethical reforms in anthropological fieldwork have now been struck from the record, she said.

"I think this sends an appalling message," she said. "I'm afraid that the resolution will be read in Latin America by our anthropological colleagues and by politically aware indigenous people as a direct slap at the kinds of agency that they're trying to achieve with international science."

Another scholar said the saga had much to teach the field. "I hope we can move on now to really get a good sense of where ethics lie in the discipline, and how we can evaluate anthropologists fairly and honorably," said Robert Borofsky, a professor of anthropology at Hawaii Pacific University and the

author of *Yanomami: The Fierce Controversy and What We Can Learn From It* (University of California Press, 2005).

Mr. Borofsky, who was not a member of the El Dorado Task Force, said he agreed with Mr. Gross that the committee's due-process procedures were inadequate. But he strongly disputed the notion that the association should not adjudicate cases of alleged misconduct among its members. He said that he and a colleague would like to revisit some of the material in the report. "We would like to find exact data -- criteria that everyone can agree on -- that we can use for evaluating the accusations against Chagnon," he said, "and decide what might be a fair and honorable way of evaluating Chagnon's actions."

"We need to have procedures in place before the next storm, before the next time the media hounds us with another crisis," Mr. Borofsky said. "We cannot take an ostrich-like view of ethics."

Mr. Borofsky also said that he was startled by how few people voted in the referendum. The association has more than 10,000 members.

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Background articles from *The Chronicle*:

- [Anthropological Association's Report Criticizes Yanomami Researchers and Their Accuser](#) (7/2/2002)
- [Anthropologists Dealing With Yanomami Report Take Steps to Improve Work With Indigenous Groups](#) (5/23/2002)
- [Anthropologists Criticize Release of Preliminary Report on Controversy Over Research on the Yanomami](#) (12/3/2001)
- [Anthropology Panel Accepts Some Findings, Rejects Others in Controversial Book on Study of the Yanomami](#) (11/27/2001)
- [Academic Scandal in the Internet Age](#) (1/12/2001)
- [Allegations of Misconduct Roil Anthropologists](#) (9/29/2000)

Opinion:

- [Charges of Wrongdoing by Anthropologists](#) (8/9/2002)
- [Anthropology and the Search for the Enemy Within](#) (7/26/2002)

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