

Conference:

Annual convention of the American Anthropological Association in New Orleans scheduled for November 20, 2010, Saturday, 8:00-11:45 a.m.

Session title:

“History and Education in the Circulation of Ethnographic Knowledge in the Amazon: The Yanomami Controversy a Decade Later”

Session co-organizers:

Leda Martins (Pitzer College) and Terence Turner (Cornell University)

Session Chair:

Brian Ferguson (Rutgers University)

Sponsors:

(Session sponsored by the American Ethnological Society and the Society for Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology).

Paper Title:

**“Is There Any Light in the Darkness in El Dorado Controversy a Decade Later?”**

Author:

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## BACKGROUND

The background of this controversy is very complex. In 2000, at the annual convention of the AAA in San Francisco in the open forum on Tierney's book, I made a statement and posed three questions: First, what have the Yanomami contributed to us? Second, what have we contributed to the Yanomami for good and for bad? Third, how are professional ethics and human rights involved? These questions provide the framework for the present paper.

In addition, I pointed out at the open forum that these three questions also apply to anthropology more generally, including to other cultures and groups with whom anthropologists have worked. I asserted that this controversy is not primarily a matter of science versus postmodernism, sociobiology versus cultural anthropology, Hobbessian vs. Rousseauian interpretations, and the like. These are smoke screens, a tactic deployed by disingenuous individuals to distract attention from the serious issues of professional ethics and human rights involved in this controversy.

From the start of the controversy through to this day my position has been that **it is primarily about the harm done to the Yanomami**, if any of the relevant allegations made by Tierney are true. There is good reason to believe that some are true. For example, on their web site Survival International of London states that the persistent characterization of the Yanomami as "the fierce people" led the British government to refuse a funding request to support an educational program for the Yanomami, and the prominent British anthropologist Sir Edmund Leach to refuse to support a campaign on behalf of land and resource rights for the Yanomami (Albert, et al., 2001).

At the same time, obviously there are ideological, political, theoretical, and methodological issues in this controversy which are important to consider as well, and I will do so in a forthcoming book (Figure 1, Sponsel 2011b). But again, in my opinion, this controversy is primarily about the harm done to the Yanomami as a result of the violation of professional ethics of anthropology, and, in some instances, the consequent violations of the human rights of the Yanomami. Indeed, an AAA Media Advisory on July 2, 2002, states that the Task Force on Darkness in El Dorado concluded that: "Chagnon made numerous flights into the Yanomami area without any quarantine procedures or other protections for

the indigenous peoples. The Task Force maintains that this was unacceptable on both ethical and professional grounds and was a breach of the AAA's Code of Ethics.” Furthermore, this Media Advisory noted that the Task Force concluded that: “Chagnon's representation of Yanomami as "fierce people" conveyed a false image that was damaging, according to the Report. It regrets that Chagnon failed to publicly correct his erroneous depictions and support their human rights.”

Patrick Tierney in his book Darkness in El Dorado in Chapter 3, “The Napoleonic Wars,” alleges that Chagnon distributed large amounts of trade goods in short periods of time in villages in order to gain cooperation for data collection, and that this generated competition and even violence within and among villages. Tierney’s assertion about the impact of trade goods is based on Chapter 13, “The Yanomamo and the Anthropologist: 1960 to 1966,” in Brian Ferguson’s book Yanomami Warfare: A Political History, a most systematic and meticulous analysis of the impact of external agencies on Yanomami aggression. Tierney did not waste a decade hallucinating or fantasizing about such matters; his book is not made out of whole cloth. Furthermore, this allegation was the fifth subject that the AAA Task Force was supposed to research. Raymond Hames was in charge of researching that fifth subject, following the division of labor among members of the Task Force. Because Hames resigned from the Task Force that allegation was left unanswered, neither refuted nor affirmed.

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF YANOMAMI TO ANTHROPOLOGY

What have the Yanomami contributed to anthropologists and anthropology? The answer is an enormous amount! In 1972, Luis Cocco published in Spanish the most comprehensive ethnography on the Yanomami after 15 years of living with them as a missionary. On pages 47-102 he details the history of Western research with the Yanomami. By now at least 45 anthropologists, missionaries, and others have worked with the Yanomami. **Only one of these 45 focused on aggression. Only one of these 45 has been the subject of controversies for some four decades, often scandalous ones, and many involving ethics.** That one exceptional individual among the 45 is Napoleon Chagnon (Table 1).

Several dozen films have been made about the Yanomami. There have been museum exhibits. Most cultural anthropology textbook authors and

course instructors discuss the Yanomami. Careers have been developed thanks to work with the Yanomami. The Yanomami have contributed to individual wealth. In the recent film, "Secrets of the Tribe," Chagnon claims that 3-4 million students in America alone have read his book. One wonders what kind of impression they gleaned, probably that the Yanomami are "Hobbesian savages" with ubiquitous violence and warfare. His case study has gone through five editions since 1968, and probably a sixth is in the works. His memoir is forthcoming. In short, the Yanomami have helped make him a millionaire. What has he done to help the Yanomami in return? (This question will be addressed later with the example of the Yanomamo Survival Fund).

More than 60 books have been published in addition to other types of publications such as articles in periodicals. John Peters (1998) is exceptional in channeling royalties from his book to an organization which funds health care for the Yanomami. Robert Borofsky (2005) did likewise for his edited book on the controversy.

There is even something of a Yanomami industry in the sense of a distinctive group of productive enterprises about them. The anthropological component of the Yanomami industry includes dissertations and publications by ethnographers and linguists, accounts of the Yanomami by textbook authors, editors of anthologies and periodicals, publishers, and filmmakers. Chagnon and Timothy Ash made some 20-40 films on the Yanomami, the number depending on the publication source. Others have made films on them as well.

Thus, the question arises, **at what point does anthropology become exploitative and unethical?** In my opinion, the Yanomami deserve much more genuine reciprocity from field researchers who have developed their career at least in part based on their indispensable and generous hospitality and cooperation. Also, they deserve more from the AAA and profession in general who are to some degree part of the Yanomami industry.

In the AAA Code of Ethics of June 1998, Part III.A.6 states: "While anthropologists may gain personally from their work, they must not exploit individuals, groups, animals, or cultural or biological materials. They should recognize their debt to the societies in which they work and their obligations to reciprocate with people studied in appropriate ways."

## CONTRIBUTIONS OF ANTHROPOLOGISTS TO THE YANOMAMI

What have anthropologists contributed to the Yanomami? Actually, anthropologists have contributed relatively little to the Yanomami in proportion to their contribution to anthropology, with a few notable exceptions. The most notable of those exceptions include various NGOs advocating the survival, welfare, and human rights of the Yanomami: Pro-Yanomami Commission in Boa Vista, Brazil; Cultural Survival in Cambridge, Massachusetts; Survival International in London, England; and the Work Group for Indigenous Affairs in Copenhagen, Denmark.

In addition, the AAA instituted a Special Commission to Investigate the Situation of the Brazilian Yanomami. It was chaired by Terence Turner. Other members were Bruce Albert, Jason Clay, Alcida Ramos, Stephan Schwartzman, and Anthony Seeger. Albert and Ramos are Yanomami specialists. Consultants included Claudia Andujar, Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, and Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, the latter the most outstanding leader of the Yanomami. This commission's report was published in 1991 and is available among the documents of the Committee for Human Rights on the AAA web site. The commission's work led to very significant improvements in Brazilian government policy toward the Yanomami and probably helped to avert genocide, ethnocide, and ecocide.

In 1988, Chagnon established the Yanomamo Survival Fund (YSF). In 1992, he advertised it in his books Yanomamo: The Last Days of Eden (Chagnon 1992:293) and Yanomamo (Chagnon 1992: 246). Linda Rabben (2004:184) examined the publicly available tax records of his organization and found no evidence of any activity on behalf of the Yanomamo since 1993. A letter sent to this organization in 1997 was marked "Returned to Sender, Not Deliverable" (Rabben 2004:44). On October 23, I sent a letter to the address listed in Chagnon's book, it was returned marked "Return to Sender, Unclaimed, Unable to Forward." A second letter sent to another P.O. Box listed for the Yanomamo Survival Fund on the AAA Committee for Human Rights inventory of NGOs was likewise returned by the post office. Furthermore, there is no web site for this organization which is highly unusual now for any NGO. Chagnon continues to list this organization as one of his affiliations on his Facebook page.

The Media Advisory of the AAA on the occasion of the release of the Final Report of its Task Force on Darkness in El Dorado on July 2, 2002, states: “The key finding of the Task Force that dwarfs all others relates to the devastating health conditions of the Yanomami Indians. The most critical thing we learned is that these people are really in terrible danger, Jane Hill says. This is a critical situation that threatens their very existence.” This revelation is most remarkable for two reasons. First, this has nothing to do with the principal charges for the inquiry by the Task Force. Second, this fact has been established and documented since the 1970’s in several major reports by the above mentioned NGOs and others (Ramos and Taylor 1979, Colchester 1985, Chiappino and Ales 1997). But apparently the fact of the dire health condition of the Yanomami and lack of adequate health services from the government was new to some members of the Task Force like Jane Hill (see Ritvo 2010).

**What specific action has the AAA pursued to help the Yanomami since the Task Force concluded its inquiry in 2002? Nothing! Not one thing!** I hope I am wrong about this gross negligence. However, I asked by email three former chairs of the AAA Committee for Human Rights (Janet Chernela, Barbara Johnston, Laura Graham); the AAA Director of Public Relations (Damon Dozier); an anthropologist who has worked closely with Yanomami in Brazil (Gale Goodwin Gomez); and another in Venezuela (Hortensia Caballero Arias); and not one of them could cite any specific action that the AAA has implemented to help the Yanomami, this in spite of principle III.A.6 in the Code of Ethics. Again, this is another example of the gross asymmetry between the enormous amount that the Yanomami have contributed to anthropologists and the relatively limited amount that anthropologists have contributed to the Yanomami, with a few notable exceptions. In my opinion, this gross inequity is immoral and unethical (cf. Sponsel 1992).

Among exceptions to this deficiency in reciprocity are Alcida Ramos (1995) in her book documenting the epidemics and other crises experienced by the Yanomami that she worked with for many years, and the bilingual Yanomami-Portuguese medical manual researched and co-authored by Bruce Albert and Gale Goodwin Gomez (1997) to facilitate the efforts of health care workers among the Yanomami (see Ritvo 2010). Incidentally, that health manual is a clear demonstration of the fact that basic and applied research can be mutually reinforcing. Applied research must be based on solid empirical evidence because it can affect human lives in the real world,

unlike the findings of much basic research which can be merely for general knowledge, intellectual entertainment and fashions, and/or egocentric careerism. However, as Tierney and others have demonstrated, basic research can have a negative impact on human subjects, even if its findings are largely or completely irrelevant to them.

## **VIOLATIONS OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS CONTINUE**

**Since the publication of Tierney's book there have been numerous and diverse violations of professional ethics in this ongoing controversy, including the spread of disinformation and just plain lies by some of Chagnon's defenders.** Take, for example, the Referendum (Gregor and Gross 2005). It passed by a vote of 846 in favor of rescinding the Final Report of the Task Force of the AAA. Votes against the Referendum numbered 338. Thus, only 8.1% of the AAA membership voted in favor of the Referendum. (The total number of members varies annually from 10,000-11,000 individuals). Obviously the vote in favor of the Referendum is hardly an overwhelming endorsement by the membership, this in spite of the disingenuous claims of some of the defenders of Chagnon. Moreover, the Referendum was only for rescinding approval of the Final Report by the Executive Board of the AAA, not for its removal from the AAA web site.

A small book by Princeton University philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt (2005) titled On Bullshit is highly recommended for any one involved or just interested in the controversy. He distinguishes between liars and "bs'rs." A liar retains some conscience; whereas, a "bs'r" has no conscience, only an agenda, the truth is irrelevant.

**As far as I am aware, neither Chagnon nor any of his defenders have ever admitted that he and any of his research associates ever violated a single principle of professional ethics in anthropology in particular or in scientific research in general.** Apparently they think that all of his critics are wrong, and only he is right. That simply defies common sense as well as the accumulated record of empirical evidence. The Task Force found otherwise, as have other investigations (e.g, see Borofsky 2005).

**In addition, neither Chagnon nor any of his defenders have ever admitted that there is actually anything correct in Tierney's book. Yet,**

whatever percentage is incorrect, the remainder is correct. Science and scholarship do not progress by throwing the baby out with the bath water. Moreover, **a substantial portion of Tierney’s book is actually a reiteration and elaboration of criticisms that have been made and documented by numerous and diverse critics of Chagnon for some four decades, several of them specialists working with the Yanomami in the field for many years longer than Chagnon.** They cannot be so readily dismissed, they remain on record in publications, and these publications cannot be censored by threats of legal action or any referendum or resolution within the AAA (see Sponsel 1998, 2010).

Since as early as 1976, and through subsequent decades right up to the present, Chagnon has been involved in one controversy after another; sometimes quite scandalous; and often involving ethics. None among the more than 44 individuals who have worked with the Yanomami have attracted such recurrent controversy (Table 2).

**A perennial issue of contestation has been the depiction of the Yanomami as the “fierce people,”** a characterization which continues over the decades including in remarks in the recent film “Secrets of the Tribe.” Bruce Albert, Alcida Ramos, Kenneth Taylor, and Fiona Watson (2001) state on the Survival International web site that: “We have, between us, spent 80 years working with the Yanomami. Most of us speak one or more Yanomami dialects. Not one of us recognizes the society portrayed in Chagnon’s books, and we deplore his sensationalism and name-calling.” Several other Yanomami specialists have published similar statements (e.g. Good 1991). The claim that the Yanomami are “the fierce people” ignores the wide semantic range of the word *waiteri* in the Yanomami language. It may be glossed as aggressive, brave, fierce, proud, or wild, depending on the sociolinguistic context. An individual may even be called *waiteri* for kicking an annoying dog (Kenneth Good, personal communication).

In the research in preparation of this paper I sent an email to the Executive Director of the AAA, Bill Davis, requesting a copy of the Final Report of the Task Force. Damon Dozier, Director of Public Relations, responded in an email on October 12 as follows: “Because of a legal claim, the AAA is unable to print, make copies of, or distribute copies of the report your [sic.] requested.” Regardless of whatever might be the specifics, if any, of the legalities involved, there is absolutely no question; **this is, in effect, censorship, and that is contrary to science and scholarship. Moreover,**

**this censorship violates several principles in the mission statement and Code of Ethics** of the AAA including the following: the dissemination of anthropological knowledge through publications; help to educate AAA members about ethical obligations and challenges; consulting actively with the affected individuals or group(s) with the goal of establishing a working relationship that can be beneficial to all parties involved; the general moral rules of scientific and scholarly conduct; attempting to prevent reporting of misconduct; obstructing scientific and scholarly research; disseminating findings to the scientific and scholarly community; considering all reasonable requests for access to data and other research materials for purposes of research; and making every effort to insure preservation of their fieldwork data for use by posterity. The above reflects some of the exact wording of the Code of Ethics, but examine it for yourself and consider whether or not this censorship with the cooperation of AAA officials contradicts these ethical principles of the AAA. In my opinion, this is a serious breach of the AAA Code of Ethics that should be considered by the President, Executive Board, and Committee on Ethics of the AAA, if they are ethical and responsible to the membership. One can imagine what someone of the moral character, integrity, courage, and leadership qualities of a Franz Boas would do in this situation. **In effect, one anthropologist who is no longer a member of the AAA has prevented up to 11,000 members from having access to the Final Report from their professional association, a document that was prepared on their behalf and funded by them.**

In spite of all of the negatives and ugliness in this scandalous controversy, there are some positive and hopeful developments. As just one example, a search for the term “ethics” in the Anthropology Index Online reveals that, since 2000 when Tierney’s book was published, there have been at least 1,396 articles dealing with some aspect of ethics. This amounts to 74% of the total number of 1,888 articles that deal with some aspect of ethics since 1950 (Figure 2). A similar trend is apparent in the programs of the annual conventions of the AAA in the topical index for the word “ethics.” Prior to Tierney’s book, very few sessions identified “ethics” as a key word, after his book was published there has been a significant increase in the number of such sessions, at the 2006 convention as high as 16. Numerous edited books have dealt with the controversy, albeit of varying quality and honesty, some disseminating misinformation and even disinformation. In addition, there has been a marked increase in the number of books on professional ethics in anthropology in general in the last ten

years (Sponsel 2009, 2011a). **Obviously, since 2000 in anthropology in general there has been a greatly elevated level of information, concern, and, hopefully, responsibility, regarding professional ethics.** The continuing controversy may not account for all of this, but a parsimonious hypothesis is that they have had substantial influence. It is unlikely that this marked increase is totally unrelated to the controversy. However, documentation is needed to ascertain how much of the discourse on professional ethics has been applied in action.

## CONCLUSIONS

In my view, the following conclusions may be drawn from this discussion of the limited light in the Darkness in El Dorado controversy after a decade:

1. This controversy is primarily about the violation of the professional ethics of anthropology and the human rights of the Yanomami, everything else is secondary at most.
2. Tierney's multitude of diverse allegations of the violation of professional ethics in anthropology and science and in some instances the consequent violation of the human rights of the Yanomami by Chagnon and some of his research associates reflects a unique history of some four decades of controversy erupting around him, this in striking contrast among the more than 44 other individuals who have worked with the Yanomami.
3. The totality of Tierney's multitude of diverse allegations cannot be dismissed as revealed by the Task Force Report and the books edited by Albert (2001) and Borofsky (2005), among other sources. Many of the allegations were previously made by other Yanomami specialists, several of whom have worked in the field far longer with the Yanomami than Chagnon.
4. The view that Chagnon and his partisans are right, and that all of the critics are wrong, simply defies common sense and the accumulated record of empirical evidence.
5. Censorship in this controversy is antithetical to science, scholarship, and ethics include the Code of Ethics of the AAA; yet ironically, censorship has

been pursued, among others, by some of the individuals who arrogantly label themselves scientists and their critics as anti-science, one of the tactics deployed to distract attention from ethical issues.<sup>1</sup>

6. The response of most of the AAA leadership to the controversy and to the Yanomami has been grossly inadequate, and, in some instances, obviously just plain incompetent and irresponsible. Specific guidelines need to be added to the AAA Code of Ethics regarding leadership. The President, Executive Board, and Committee on Ethics of the AAA need to consider the violation of the Code of Ethics by the censorship of the Final Report of the Task Force, if they are to be ethical and responsible to the membership that elected them to office.

7. The Yanomami industry exposes the grossly disproportionate benefits anthropologists and others have received from the Yanomami in contrast to the benefits that the Yanomami have received from them, with only a few notable exceptions. This is a major moral and ethical problem.

Finally, I end with a quote from Pat Caplan (2003:3) stressing the importance of professional ethics in anthropology: **“Yet the ethics of anthropology is clearly not just about obeying a set of guidelines; it actually goes to the heart of the discipline; the premises on which its practitioners operate, its epistemology, theory and praxis. In other words, *what is anthropology for? Who is it for?*”**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In my own case, my 1965 BA is in geology; my 1981 dissertation is on the behavioral ecology of Yanomami predation; I co-taught a course on human ethology at Cornell University with fellow graduate students including Bruce Winterhalder (a founder of human behavioral ecology approach); began my career studying primate ecology in the field; and for decades in research and teaching have pursued ecological anthropology with a strong emphasis on the ecology component (= biology); and so on. Personally, I do not summarily dismiss biological and evolutionary approaches to human behavior and culture, but view many as simplistic and reductionistic, especially Chagnon’s explanation of Yanomami aggression. No doubt his numerous and diverse other critics could provide details from their own

careers to refute these smoke screens, and likewise, anybody who is objective need only examine their resumes and publications.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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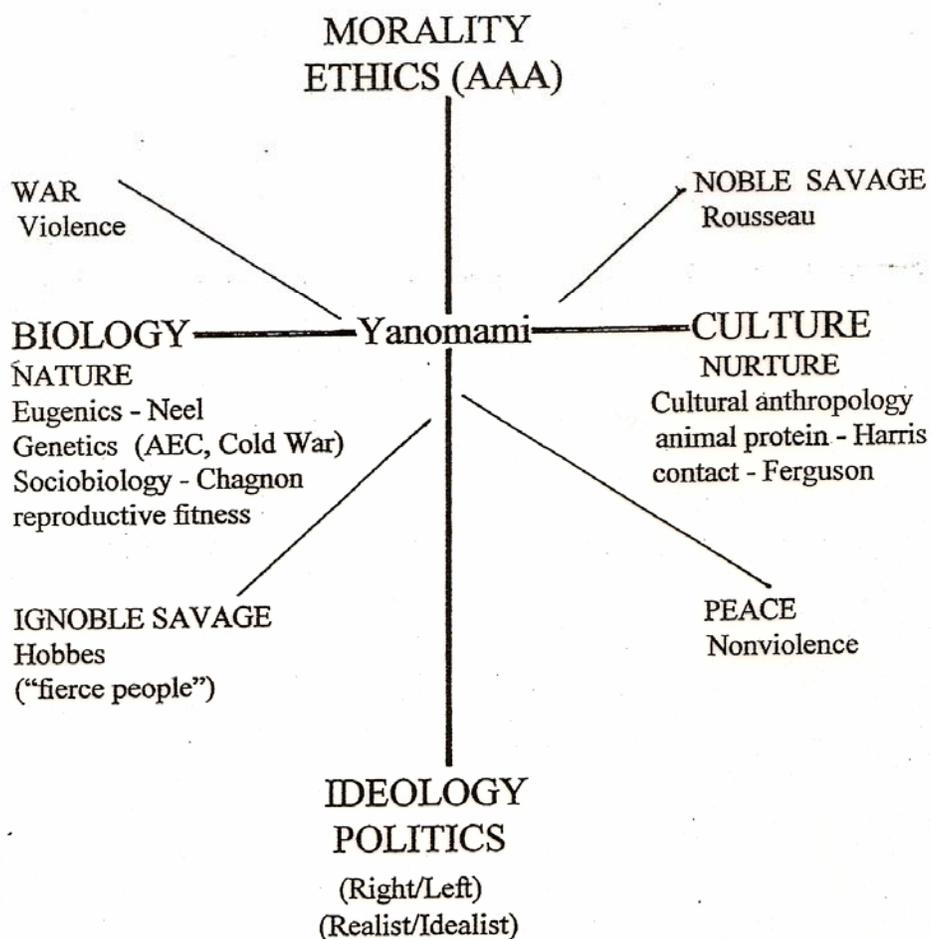
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Figure 1.

A Heuristic Model of Tierney's Darkness in El Dorado:  
Territoriality, Competition and Conflict in/over the Amazon



Western contact/change  
(trade goods > competition)  
(epidemic diseases > revenge)

anthropologists, film makers, journalists, missionaries, miners (Hashimu)

Table 1. Yanomami Field Studies  
(beginning year, not all are anthropologists)

1911 Theodor Koch-Grunberg

1950 James Barker

1954 Otto Zerries

1955 Hans Becker

1957 Padre Luis Cocco

1958 Ernesto Migliazza, John Peters, Johannes Wilbert

1960 Daniel de Barandiaran, Donald Borgman,  
Inga Steinvorth Goetz

1961 Miguel Layrisse

1962 Ettore Biocca

1964 Napoleon Chagnon

1966 James Neel, Richard Ward

1967 Judith Shapiro

1968 Jacques Lizot, Evelyn Montgomery, Alcida Ramos, Kenneth I. Taylor

1970 Irenaus Eibl-Eibesfeldt, William Smole, Jose Bortoli

1974 Leslie Sponsel, Jean Chiappino

1975 Catherine Ales, Bruce Albert, Eric Fredlund,  
Kenneth Good, Raymond Hames

1979 Marcus Colchester

1984 Gale Goodwin Gomez, Marco Antonio Lazarin

1985 Jesus Ignacio Cardozo

1989 Hortensia Caballero Arias

1990 Javier Carrera Rubio, Patrick Tierney

1992 Alejandro Reig

1996 Maria Ines Smiljanic

1998 Rogerio Duarte do Pateo

2001 Jose Antonio Kelly Luciani

2003 Rosangela Biserra

2008 Marcos Pellegrini (since early 1980s as M.D.)

2009 Helder Perri-Ferreira

2010 Gerson Levy-Lezzaris

Table 2. Main Previous Controversies and Criticisms Surrounding Napoleon Chagnon

1976 Criticisms of Time article as bestialization of Yanomami in sociobiological comparison with baboons (Susan Landes, Gerald Berreman, Kathleen Zaretsky, Micaela de Leonardo, Lawrence L. Michalak, Katherine S. Newman, James S. Boster, Maria Eugenia Villalon, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Teresa J. Paris, Kathleen Granpierre 1976)

1975-85 Debates over animal protein hypothesis (Stephen Beckerman, William H. Durham, Kenneth R. Good, Daniel Gross, Raymond Hames, Marvin Harris, Jacques Lizot, Eric B. Ross, Jane B. Ross, Leslie Sponsel)

1988-90 Criticisms over Science article, as well as professional ethics (Bruce Albert, M.M. Carneiro da Cuna, R. Brian Ferguson, Kenneth R. Good, Marvin Harris, Jacques Lizot, Alcida Rita Ramos)

1991 Criticized as "the fierce person" (Timothy Asch)

Criticized on many points, but especially that he exaggerated and sensationalized the violence and stigmatized the Yanomami (Kenneth R. Good)

1992-96 At 1994 AAA convention Chagnon "debates" Padre Jose Bortoli over Salesian missions impact on Yanomami morbidity and mortality (E.J. Cappelletti, Teo Marcano, Luise Margolies, Frank Salamone, Greg Sanford, Terry Turner, Cesar Dimanawe and other Yanomami)

1993-94 While trying to investigate Hashimu massacre Chagnon expelled from Yanomami territory and advised to leave Venezuela by government authorities in 1993 (Robin Fox, Magdalena Hurtado, Davi Kopenawa Yanomami, Jacques Lizot, Terence Turner, Eric Wolf). Various articles appeared in the New York Times and AAA Anthropology News.

1994-96 Criticized for sexism (Sharon Tiffany, Kathleen Adams)

1995 Criticized as contributing to factionalism and violence among Yanomami (R. Brian Ferguson)

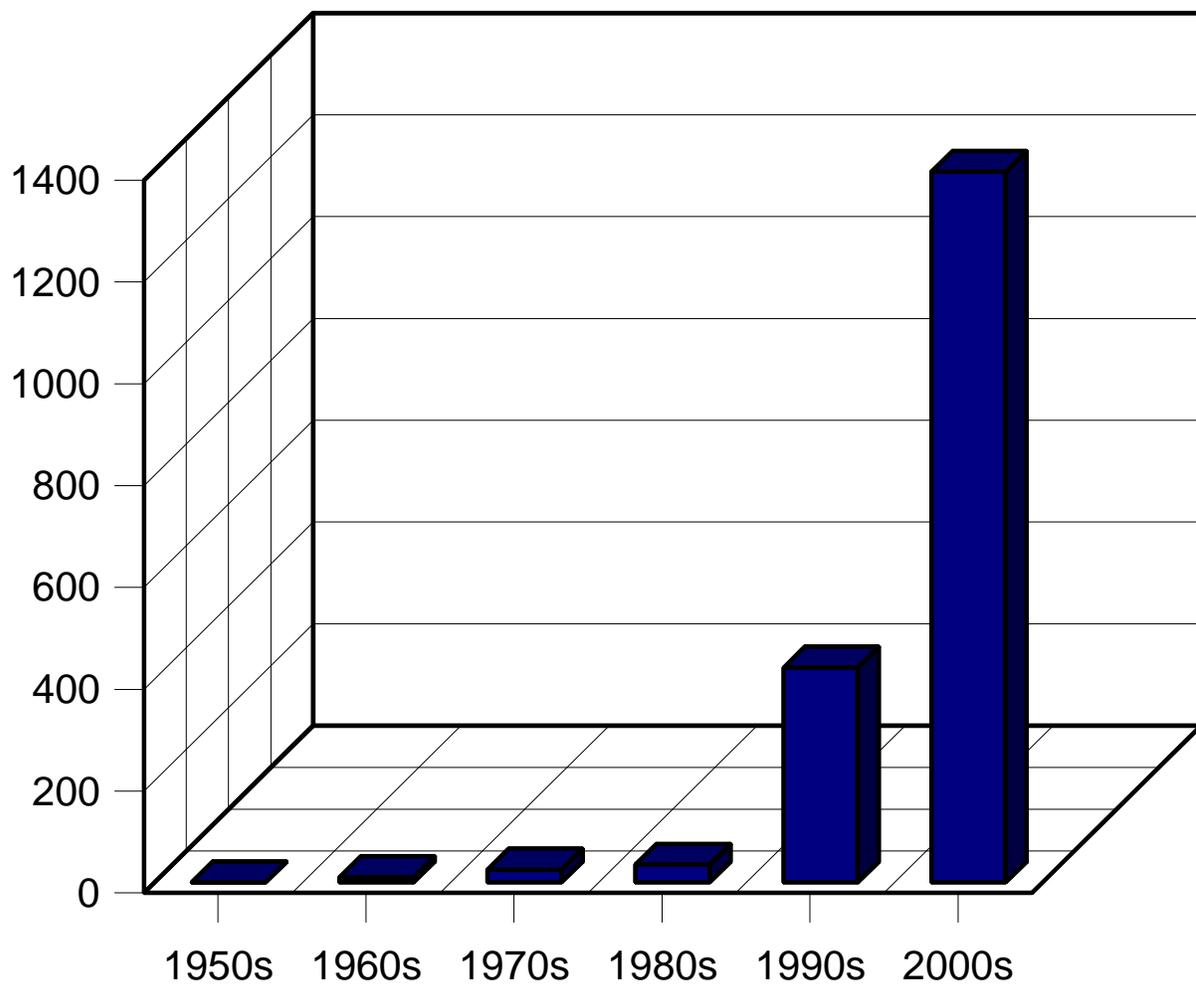


Figure 2. Number of Citations for "ethics" in Anthropology Index Online