

Evolutionary Psychology

www.epjournal.net – 2013. 11(1): 126-131

Book Review

The Right Person, In the Right Place, At the Right Time

A review of Napoleon A. Chagnon, *Noble Savages: My Life Among Two Dangerous Tribes—The Yanomamö and the Anthropologists*. Simon & Schuster: NY. 2013, 531pp., US\$32.50, ISBN #978-0-684-85510-3 (hardcover).

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Introduction

Noble Savages: My Life Among Two Dangerous Tribes—The Yanomamö and the Anthropologists, by Napoleon Chagnon, has been long anticipated by everyone familiar with the outlandish accusations of Nazi-like atrocities made against Chagnon by Patrick Tierney in his 2000 book *Darkness in El Dorado*, and the even more absurd credence initially given to those accusations by many anthropologists. Chagnon explains the delay in the appearance of the book by writing:

. . . I spent years trying to write this book, scrapping much of the effort many times because of the anger that kept creeping into my writing, giving it a very depressing tone. Everything I wrote during this time was contaminated by the lingering stench associated with *Darkness in El Dorado*. (p. 452)

As horrible as that period must have been for Chagnon, the delay has had a very important and beneficial side effect. If the book would have been written in the midst of the El Dorado controversy, it probably would have had to have been devoted nearly entirely to an item by item rebuttal of the ridiculous charges leveled against Chagnon. Such a rebuttal is no longer needed because it has been convincingly provided by others (see Dreger, 2011 for an introduction to the vast evidence demonstrating Chagnon's innocence and the absurdity of the charges against him). Chagnon's vindication is demonstrated by his election to the National Academy of Sciences. This allows *Noble Savages* to place the El Dorado controversy in its proper perspective as an important, but far from defining, event in Chagnon's career. The inclusion of material beyond the controversy allows *Noble Savages* to serve as a uniquely valuable mirror for retrospective reflection because Chagnon's work has had so much to do with many of the events forming the careers of a

generation of anthropologists and evolutionary theorists. In this sense, *Noble Savages* not only has a positive tone, it has a surprisingly positive message for anyone attempting to explain human behavior with evolutionary theory.

New Contributions

Chagnon describes *Noble Savages* as his “. . . first publication on the Yanomamö for a wider, more general reading audience” (p. 13), and says it is less technical and more accessible than other publications, including his main ethnography on the Yanomamö (Chagnon, 2012). Although most of the material in *Noble Savages* is very accessible to the general reading audience, I’m not sure how important this distinction is given that so many members of the general reading audience have already read his ethnography on the Yanomamö in college classes over the past few decades. Further, although *Noble Savages* is less technical than his ethnography on a few subjects, it actually provides a more in depth discussion of some important theoretical issues and various forms of new ethnographic information on the Yanomamö (see below). Thus, it would be very unfortunate if academics, including those familiar with Chagnon’s other publications, failed to read *Noble Savages* because it is purportedly written for a more general audience. Much of the new material in the book can also be usefully incorporated into college classes using Chagnon’s ethnography.

The material in *Noble Savages* can be conceptually organized into four stories. First, it tells the story of the El Dorado controversy and directs readers to other publications on this subject—but this story is mainly confined to the last few chapters. Chagnon puts that controversy in perspective by first intertwining the story of his own experience among the Yanomamö, the story of the changes in the lives of the Yanomamö over the period Chagnon has known them, and the story of how Chagnon’s own evolutionary explanations of human behavior have developed over the course of his career. *Noble Savages* makes a new contribution to all of these stories.

Given the preposterous accusations of unethical fieldwork (e.g., genocide) made against Chagnon, it is ironic that one of the strengths of his ethnography has always been his openness in describing difficult decisions he had to make during his fieldwork. These descriptions have always been one of the aspects of his ethnography that has most attracted students to his work, and they serve as a valuable teaching tool and as a means of provoking discussions of the inevitable kinds of ethical dilemmas faced, in one form or another, by most anthropologists. Chagnon expands upon this information in *Noble Savages* by providing a number of examples that are not included in his ethnography. The discussion of Chagnon’s attempt to bring his family to the field will be particularly interesting to readers trying to connect anthropological fieldwork with familiar aspects of their own lives.

Noble Savages also includes new ethnographic information on the Yanomamö, including new “data on female sexuality, infanticide, and statistical aspects of the abductions of females” (p. 13). It also includes much more detail on the relationship between the Yanomamö, governments, and missionaries, and how such relationships can determine the fate of indigenous people. It is once again ironic that many of the

anthropologists who non-skeptically accepted the charges made against Chagnon are the ones who could benefit most from Chagnon's discussion of these issues because of their own concerns about the future of indigenous peoples.

Although Chagnon's discussion of evolutionary explanations of human behavior in *Noble Savages* needs to be supplemented in order to serve as an introduction to the field, his discussion of evolutionary theory should be of interest to both academics and members of the general public already interested in the subject. The description of Chagnon's evolutionary understanding and how it has changed over his career will probably provide insights unique to each individual reader's own experience and interests. Although the source of such insights is Chagnon's summary of his career, the insights can lead to new directions for future research. While the specific ideas about future directions of research triggered by the book may be unique to every reader, *Noble Savages* also provides an important general lesson for anyone who has put forth evolutionary explanations of human behavior.

A Specific Point

In the dedication at the start of the book, Chagnon describes why he was initially drawn to evolutionary theory from conventional cultural anthropology: "Anthropology had no meaningful answer to the fundamental question about the very subjects of their profession: Why are humans social?" This was an important point to Chagnon because he writes that when it came to his fieldwork, "What I really had to find out was how the Yanomamö organized themselves socially . . ." (p. 47). Chagnon then describes the answer his application of evolutionary theory to the Yanomamö has provided to the crucial question of how a social system starts: "The short answer to this question is that it results from the long-term consequences of short-term decisions that tend to be made with immediate reproductive interests in mind" (p. 318). This answer is typical of current evolutionary thinking. In every generation, the Yanomamö, "organize themselves" by each individual being altruistic to very close kin and manipulating everyone else into actions which end up being beneficial to the individual in the sense of increasing the individual's life-long inclusive fitness. To support his argument that such manipulation of others creates the Yanomamö social system, Chagnon focuses on *rule breaking*: "The Yanomamö are just like us—not only rule makers, but rule *breakers*" (p. 232; emphasis in original). Although this statement is true, it points to a gap that exists not only in Chagnon's explanation of human social behavior, but in current evolutionary explanations of human behavior in general. Although evolutionary explanations have had considerable success explaining *rule breaking* with such concepts as Machiavellian intelligence, which is mentioned several times in *Noble Savages*, they have had far less success in explaining where *rules* of social behavior come from and why such rules exist in the first place. Chagnon's explanation of the existence of social rules is little more than the colloquial proverb "rules are made to be broken":

Many social scientists emphasize the difference between humans and other animals by drawing attention to the fact that only humans make "rules" (and

laws) about the appropriateness of their behavior. For them a culture hero is someone like Moses—the lawgiver. But humans not only make rules; we develop complex schemes to break these rules (Alexander, 1979; Chagnon, 1982). The *truly distinctive thing about humans* is not that we make rules, but *that we make rules in order to break them*, a kind of educational message for others to heed when the rule breaker is punished. (p. 474-475; my emphasis)

The frustrating part of this explanation of social rules is that Chagnon’s description of Yanomamö behavior repeatedly implies that the social rules creating the social “system” of the Yanomamö do not start in the manipulations taking place in each currently living generation. Social rules have instead been transmitted from ancestor to descendant for many generations. Further, Chagnon’s descriptions of Yanomamö behavior indicate that these social rules, concerning everything from shamanism to food sharing, name taboos to kinship terms, and mythology to alliance formation, have been largely *followed instead of broken*, and then transmitted to offspring for many generations. If the social rules existed only to be broken in each generation, they would cease to exist after a few generations because there would be nothing left of the rule to break. An example of Chagnon attributing the behavior of the Yanomamö to the obeying, not the breaking, of traditional social rules is his statement “The Yanomamö prefer living in relatively small villages where the diffuse sanctions behind kinship *rules are sufficient to maintain social order*” (p. 336; emphasis added). Chagnon also explains the behavior of his friend Dedeheiwä by saying it “. . . was constrained by kinship prohibitions . . .” (p. 356).

Although Chagnon recognizes that traditional social rules exist, and that they are often transmitted from one generation to the next in the form of traditional stories, he portrays these traditional stories as relatively unimportant influences on human behavior: “While it is also true that tribesmen spend many happy hours . . . telling wonderful stories and myths around the campfire, one of the most salient features of their social environment is the threat of attack by neighbors” (p.231). One reason Chagnon attributes so little importance to the telling of traditional stories may be that he associates the study of this part of human behavior with a form of cultural anthropology that ignores biology and rejects science: “Both Irons and I left Penn State because sociobiological work apparently threatened faculty in our department who seemed to believe that cultural anthropologists should confine their interests to collecting anecdotes and myths and leave science (for example, biology) to “scientists” (p. 391). Although Chagnon’s statement accurately describes the attitude of many cultural anthropologists, the fact that many of the cultural anthropologists studying traditional stories containing social rules have rejected science and evolutionary theory is no excuse for evolutionary theorists to downplay or ignore these aspects of human behavior. To use Chagnon’s own example, the rules of social behavior found in traditional stories about Moses have influenced the behavior of humans for well over a hundred generations, and the influence of these stories is just as biological and amenable to scientific and evolutionary inquiry as any other form of human behavior.

Conclusion: A General Lesson

Given that Chagnon is typical of evolutionary theorists in downplaying the influence of traditional stories about proper and improper social behavior, it is doubtful that many readers will draw the particular point from *Noble Savages* that I have just described. However, the chances are very good that many readers will draw something important from the book that will contribute to the development of their own research questions and explanations. Further, anyone who has used evolutionary theory to explain human behavior can draw an important general lesson from *Noble Savages*. This lesson comes from viewing the publication of this book within the context of the controversy over sociobiology that has dominated explanations of human behavior for half of a century.

I first heard about Napoleon Chagnon when the professor in my first undergraduate course in cultural anthropology in the mid-1970s, the late Dr. Gerald Broce, described Chagnon as the right person, in the right place, at the right time. The professor was referring to the rare combination of training, courage, and resourcefulness required to perform meticulous long-term fieldwork among the relatively uncontacted Yanomamö during the 1960s. However, what I remember most about that initial class discussion of Chagnon's fieldwork was the professor's comment that Chagnon had recently adopted a new theory, something called "sociobiology," that was so politically controversial that it jeopardized his career despite his impressive accomplishments. This comment bewildered me because Dr. Broce had already effectively taught the class that the job of an anthropologist was to first accurately describe human behavior, and then apply critical thinking to determine the most verifiable and logical explanations of that behavior. We had discussed the ethics of fieldwork at length, and the debates over political ideology characterizing the 1970s often found their way into class discussions, but we had learned that moral and political value judgments were not what determined if a description or explanation of human behavior was true or false; only the evidence of our senses could determine that. If we had learned to distinguish explanations from moral judgments, and the importance of avoiding the naturalistic fallacy in the first few weeks of a freshman level undergraduate class, how could professional anthropologists fail to do so? Over the decades that have passed since that time, glaring logical errors leading to ridiculous accusations about the evil intent of those putting forth evolutionary explanations of human behavior have become so familiar that they often appear to be inevitable *and insurmountable* obstacles to efforts to increase knowledge of human behavior. However, the publication of *Noble Savages* demolishes that dismal conclusion because it demonstrates that even the most vicious and ignorant versions of the naturalistic fallacy and muddled post-modern thinking can be overcome if one has sufficient courage and conviction. Perhaps it is through his demonstration of this point that Napoleon Chagnon has indeed been the right person, in the right place, at the right time.

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