

CRITICAL thinking

Yanomami: The “Fierce People”?

The Yanomami are a horticultural people who live in dispersed villages of between 40 and 250 people in the Amazonian rainforest (Ross 1993). Since the 1960s, biological anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon has studied several Yanomami villages. He has written a widely read and frequently republished ethnography about the Yanomami, with early editions carrying the subtitle *The Fierce People* (1992 [1968]). He also helped produce classic ethnographic films about the Yanomami, including *The Feast* and *The Ax Fight*.

Chagnon's writings and films have promoted a view of the Yanomami as exceptionally violent and prone to lethal warfare. According to Chagnon, about one-third of adult Yanomami males die violently, about two-thirds of all adults lose at least one close relative through violence, and over 50 percent lose two or more close relatives (1992:205). He has reported that one village was raided 25 times during his first 15 months of fieldwork. Although village alliances are sometimes formed, they are fragile and allies may turn against each other unpredictably.

The Yanomami world, as depicted by Chagnon, is one of danger, threats, and counterthreats. Enemies, human and supernatural, are everywhere. Support from one's allies is uncertain. All of this uncertainty leads to what Chagnon describes as the *waiteri* (a Yanomami word) complex, a set of behaviors and

attitudes that includes a fierce political and personal stance for men and forms of individual and group communication that stress aggression and independence. Fierceness is a dominant theme in socialization, as boys learn how to fight with clubs, participate in chest-pounding duels with other boys, and use a spear. Adult males are aggressive and hostile toward adult females, and boys learn to be aggressive toward girls from an early age.

Chagnon provides a biological, Darwinian explanation for the fierceness shown by the Yanomami. He reports that the Yanomami explain that village raids and warfare are carried out so that men may obtain wives. Although the Yanomami prefer to marry within their village, a shortage of potential brides exists because of the Yanomami practice of female infanticide. Although the Yanomami prefer to marry endogamously, taking a wife from another group is preferable to remaining a bachelor. Men in other groups, however, are unwilling to give up their women—hence the necessity for raids. Other reasons for raids are suspicion of sorcery or theft of food.

Chagnon argues that within this system warfare contributes to reproductive success because successful warriors are able to gain a wife or more than one wife (polygyny is allowed). Thus, successful warriors will have higher reproductive rates than unsuccessful

warriors. Successful warriors, Chagnon suggests, have a genetic advantage for fierceness, which they pass on to their sons, leading to a higher growth rate of groups with violent males through genetic selection for fierceness. Male fierceness, in this view, is biologically adaptive.

Marvin Harris, taking the cultural materialist perspective, says that protein scarcity and population dynamics in the area are the underlying causes of warfare (1984). The Yanomami lack plentiful sources of meat, which is highly valued. Harris suggests that when game in an area becomes depleted, pressure rises to expand into the territory of neighboring groups, thus precipitating conflict. Such conflicts in turn result in high rates of adult male mortality. Combined with the effects of female infanticide, this meat-warfare complex keeps population growth rates down to a level that the environment can support.

A third view relies on historical data. Brian Ferguson (1990) argues that the high levels of violence among the Yanomami were caused by the intensified Western presence during the preceding 100 years. Furthermore, diseases introduced from outside, especially measles and malaria, severely depopulated the Yanomami and greatly increased their fears of sorcery (their explanation for disease). The attraction to Western goods such as steel axes and guns would also increase intergroup

rivalry. Thus, Ferguson suggests that the “fierce people” are a creation of historical forces, especially contact with and pressure from outsiders.

Following Ferguson’s position, but with a new angle, journalist Patrick Tierney points the finger of blame at Chagnon himself (2000). Tierney maintains that it was the presence of Chagnon, with his team of core-researchers and many boxes of trade goods, that triggered a series of lethal raids due to increased competition for those very goods. In addition, Tierney argues that Chagnon intentionally prompted the Yanomami to act fiercely in his films and to stage raids that created aggravated intergroup hostility beyond what had originally existed.

In 2001, the American Anthropological Association established a task force to examine five topics related to Tierney’s allegations that Chagnon’s and others’ interactions with and representations of the Yanomami may have had a detrimental impact on them, contributing to “disorganization” among the Yanomami. The report of the El Dorado Task Force appears on the website <http://www.aaanet.org> of the American Anthropological Association. The task force rejected all charges against Chagnon and instead emphasized the harmfulness of false accusations that might jeopardize future scientific research.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS ▾

- Which perspective presented here on Yanomami men’s behavior appears most persuasive to you and why?
- What relevance does this case have to the theory that violence is a universal human trait?
- Do you think anthropological research could lead to increased violence among the study population?



Napoleon Chagnon in the field with two Yanomami men, 1995. Chagnon distributed goods such as steel axes and tobacco to the Yanomami to gain their cooperation in his research.