The Ethics of Anthropological Research with Remote Tribal Populations

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Anthropologists have been conducting fieldwork with remote tribal populations around the world for a century and a half. Such work is critical for achieving the major goals of anthropology: the documentation of human variation and human universals and the investigation of those patterns. But the character of such research presents unique problems that are not encountered in any other kind of academic research. Specifically, we anthropologists are well educated and informed outsiders, who must procure collaboration from study subjects in order to obtain useful information. Such study subjects are virtually always under-informed about the basic goals of the anthropological research conducted upon them. They are also usually under-informed about the likely economic and career gains of visiting researchers, the ethical values of the researchers' societies, and the options for recourse available to them if they are unhappy with the character of the research relationship.

In short, study subjects are unaware of their own economic bargaining position based on potential career gain to researchers, and they are unaware of a commonly accepted code of human rights among Western societies that engage in anthropological research, and they don't know how to guarantee that they receive just treatment in either realm. These conditions mean that study subjects can be easily exploited by researchers who know the limitations of their knowledge and also understand the difficulties that they face in order to effectively report exploitation to an audience of the researcher's peers. In this essay I address these issues in the context of the Patrick Tierney's recently published book, "Darkness in El Dorado" which examines anthropological research with the Yanomamo by James Neel and Napolean Chagnon from the 1960s to the 1990s. Specific examples are drawn from that book in order to illustrate principles of modern anthropological ethics.

I. The well-being of the study population is our top priority

First and foremost, anthropologists should be aware that while we may have multiple intellectual goals we should all share a single priority: the health and welfare of the study population must always take precedence over any academic goal. And when native health and welfare are at risk, academic goals must be temporarily or permanently abandoned.

In the book "Darkness in El Dorado" Tierney charges that Neel and Chagnon allowed many Yanomamo to die from a measles epidemic because they were more focused on completing a research protocol than on treating sick people. Chagnon is additionally described as teaching his graduate students to callously collect observational data while refusing to intervene in health emergencies. Likewise, Tierney reports that during the making of the Nova film "Warriors of the Amazon", four Yanomamo in a village of 90 people died who could have easily been saved by intervention from the film production crew. Another woman was deathly ill, and was extensively filmed while suffering, but recovered without assistance from the filmmakers. Although the film crew expended exorbitant resources on their production they did nothing of significance to save the Yanomamo lives slowly vanishing before their eyes. They did however fly in an extra camera from London and stick around long enough to film a climax to their project, the funeral pyre of a dead women who could have been saved by their intervention. All these events, if true, seem to represent a callous prioritizing of career gain over the lives of the native population.

While I believe that all field anthropologists should unwaveringly offer critical emergency medical intervention when it can save the life of member of the study population, consideration the responsibilities to safeguard the study population beyond life and death emergencies raises some very complex issues. Should we expect people who visit indigenous populations to do a job (whether it be collect data or carry out a geological survey) to provide free medical services to all local people they encounter when such medical service should be the responsibility of national and local government agencies? Very infrequently have field anthropologists done EVERYTHING possible to ensure the health and welfare of their study population. Instead, we find people encompassing the entire range of assistance behavior from heroes to slackers. This is true in all different areas and theoretical camps of anthropology. Some of the fiercest Chagnon critics cited in the Tierney book provided no medical services themselves during times when I observed them in the field with the Yanomamo (they claimed they lacked proper training). And some anthropologists have even attacked others who provide medical services, suggesting that they are meddling in traditional societies that have their own health practices. Many anthropologists make no pretense about their lack of qualifications to engage in providing medical services to their study population. Some cultural anthropologists' discussions of this issue invokes a strange double standard. They believe that it is appropriate for them to go to the field for years and provide no medical services for their study population (because they are often unqualified and have no medical skills-- a conscious choice that they make before embarking for the field), but biomedical researchers should be obligated to donate their time and resources to provide help at whatever cost to them personally. Clearly all persons who intend to enter indigenous regions have a responsibility to get some medical training and provide whatever assistance they can.

Tierney implies that Neel should have abandoned his research (and his ethical commitment to the US taxpayer that contracted him to do that research) and made vaccination of Yanomamo communities his top priority. Sometimes this will be required in the case of extreme medical emergencies. My colleagues and I completely abandoned our research for several weeks in Manu Park in 1986 when a respiratory epidemic hit the isolated Yaminahua and Matsiguenga populations with whom we were working. We also flew in medical supplies at our own expense and against the wishes of a Peruvian anthropologist who threatened to revoke our research permit if we did so (because the supplies came from SIL missionaries and because they “interfered with the natural population regulation mechanisms of the tribal peoples--- ie. high death rates). In the case of the Yanomamo measles epidemic, however, it is ironic that Tierney seems prepared to attack the one person in the world who did the most to save Yanomamo lives. James Neel’s actions during this epidemic saved more Yanomamo lives than those of any other person on the planet, yet he was severely criticized for not doing more than he did. Strangely Tierney does not lay much blame on the Catholic missionaries who had been present in the area for some time without vaccinating the Yanomamo, or the Venezuelan government that could have prevented epidemic.

James Neel was a researcher. His job in 1968 was to collect information on human genetic diversity, mutation rates, and genetic load. He had to weigh the benefits of his research to the world community against the benefits of abandoning his research to help the Yanomamo. They are some common standards for researchers caught in such dilemmas. For example, when physicians from the U.S. Center for Disease Control are called into a country to research an outbreak of disease they do their job as researchers not clinical practitioners. They do not and can not get involved in treating every sick person they encounter in the field, that is the job of local and national government agencies. Most scientific researchers studying a human population or any other phenomenon (weather, geology, ecology, air pollution, cosmic radiation, etc.) would never accept the proposition that it is their responsibility to provide medical care to a population that happens to become ill in proximity to their research. Likewise, very few people believe that they are morally obligated to donate their time and resources to help every needy human group just because they receive information about the suffering of those groups (many will however volunteer help, just as Neel did). Why should Neel have been obligated to donate his valuable time to provide medical care to the Yanomamo but anthropologists (and anthropology students) who know today that the Yanomamo are still suffering from serious health problems are not "obligated" to give up part of their yearly income to help the Yanomamo? The health problems of South American Indians have been widely publicized during the debate about the Tierney book. Each anthropology student who bought a music CD this year despite knowing about Yanomamo suffering has essentially made the same decision that Neel is accused of — namely prioritizing his/her own needs over that of the Yanomamo. I think that such prioritization is human, and to highlight such difficult human decisions uniquely in Dr. Neel's case, smacks of hypocrisy.

So, we cannot expect that all anthropologists will give up their entire income and all their time to work unendingly to improve the health situation of remote populations. If such practices were adopted by field anthropologists funding agencies would no longer provide research funds because no research would ever be carried out. On the other hand, basic human decency provides some guidelines for ethical behavior in times of need. It is not ethical to observe another person dying over a period of time when one has the means to save them. It is not ethical to justify a lack of intervention by claiming that 'traditional outcomes' (such as high death rates from disease and accident) are favorable to 'acculturation' or 'modernization'. And it is not ethical for a researcher to withhold assistance from an individual who has hosted and collaborated with the researcher just because that assistance might cost a little money and take up a bit of time. There are things in the world more valuable than a few dollars, and priorities more important that a lost day of work.

II. Research with native populations requires informed consent

In some cases anthropological research is designed specifically to provide information that could help the study subjects themselves. In other cases the results may be important for the entire study population or ethnic group. But in most cases anthropological research is not intended to provide direct help either to the individuals studied or to their ethnic populations. Some anthropologists assert that all research done on indigenous populations that is not designed to help those same populations is unethical. I disagree. Research done on native peoples that can be used to help the world community at large (eg. basic medical research) or other indigenous populations (eg. Neel's studies on virgin soil epidemics in Amerindians) is indeed ethical as long as: 1) there is informed consent by the study subjects as to the dangers of the data collection procedures; 2) the subjects clearly understand that the research is not being carried out just to help them; 3) there is fair renumeration for the subjects' cooperation; and 4) the procedures are not potentially dangerous.

Thus, for example I see nothing unethical about recruiting the Yanomamo as study subjects for research into childhood asthma, which is a major killer in the US but is not present among the Yanomamo. Indeed the lack of this medical condition among the Yanomamo is the very reason why they represent a good study population for research. Likewise, contrary to Tierney's assertions, Marcel Roche's research on goiter with Yanomamo study subjects using small amounts of radioactive iodine was not unethical *per se*. It did however lack adequate informed consent and should not be repeated again under the same conditions. Roche's logic at the time was that much could be learned about goiter, which would benefit numerous Venezuelan's with the disease, as well as indigenous populations and probably the Yanomamo themselves in the future. His research protocol was not dangerous, but was too complicated to be understood by the Yanomamo participants, and was thus not explained to study subjects (the Yanomamo couldn't possibly understand radioactive tracers at that time). Such research should always be voluntary, informed, and appropriately rewarded. Roche's lack of informed consent was an error by today's standards but did not represent a callous disregard for Yanomamo welfare that would constitute blatantly unethical research behavior.

Indigenous peoples should not be indoctrinated to believe that all research done with them should only benefit them. They are members of a larger world community and they should cooperate with that community for the common good, just as they expect to receive the benefits from research done on other communities (all the modern medicine they receive is based on prior research with other groups). Most natives with whom I have discussed this issue are proud to be able to contribute to the world community in this way.

Informed consent, in theory, should include not only information about the potential dangers of the research methodology but also some information concerning the larger goals of the research. While biomedical researchers sometimes fail to carry out this step adequately because of gaps in the educational background of the study population, this oversight is just as common in cultural anthropology. Explanations of cultural anthropology research goals are often totally lacking. Do cultural anthropologists fully inform subjects for example, that their research into oppression is primarily intended to provide ammunition for ideological battles at a national or international level which may lead to political systems that the native population finds distasteful? Do they explain that research into male and female activities, or political power may be used to advocate the imposition of sex roles in society that native peoples find incongruent with their own cultural values? Did Claude Levi Strauss fully explain to the Brazilian Indians that he studied how he intended to use data on them to advocate a theory of duality about their social organization and did his study subjects give informed consent for him to forward such a view? Yes, standards of informed consent need to be developed in anthropology, but they should be consistent across subfields and theoretical camps and regardless of whether the research is scientific or non scientific in goals and methodology. There was no justification for Tierney singling out Neel and Chagnon as violators of modern standards of informed consent. The vast majority of anthropologists working with tribal peoples in the 20th century did so.

But, it is also important to consider the levels of information required in order to label consent as truly 'informed'. I suggest that a PERFECTLY informed opinion about the implications and significance of any particular research project requires one to be a specialist in that research area-- something unrealistic for Yanomamo or even American populations. Instead, 'informed consent' should include a complete understanding of the potential risks of a research protocol and a more general understanding of the purpose of the research. I don’t believe that the Yanomamo have a full understanding of the implications any of the anthropological or medical research conducted among them, but I do think that the general research goals can be adequately explained to them, and that perhaps knowing that is sufficient for 'informed' consent.

When we consider biomedical research ethics we must acknowledge that there is a long tradition of protective regulation in biomedical research with native subjects. Interested readers might consult such documents as the “Belmont report[1]” of the 1970s which has been the basis for subsequent biomedical and behavioral research protections developed in the US (and heavily influential on IRB regulations), or the Australian National Guidelines for research on Aboriginal populations[2], and the Canadian Tri-Council working group on ethics[3] which both concern specifically protections that should be implemented when carrying out biomedical research with native groups. These documents and the numerous discussions generated from them during recent years are far more comprehensive than the Nuremberg guidelines cited by Tierney in his criticism of scientists who did research on the Yanomamo. Those guidelines were highly restricted to deal with human experimentation. The Nuremberg code does not attempt to regulate observational research and is not relevant to epidemiological surveillance required in public health emergencies.

Basic moral principals should guide all protective measures that form a part of informed consent. First, politically vulnerable groups should not be subjected to dangerous research against their will or through the exploitation of their lack of understanding about the potential dangers of any research. Second, individual and community consent is required for most research among native populations unless that consent is withheld as a tactic to perpetuate oppression (for example, male leaders refusing to allow research on spousal abuse). And third, when public health is at stake, the need for informed consent and the rights of individuals to refuse to cooperate with research are balanced against the interests of a larger world community.

There is a fundamental difference between experimentation, observational research, and epidemiological surveillance in health research. Experiments require interventions on study populations and can carry some risk to the individual participant. Such research should be thoroughly regulated, with fully informed consent as the cornerstone of any protection policy. Observational research by its very nature does not put study subjects in danger because it includes no intervention (however some methods like blood sampling may include a slight potential for harm). Observational biomedical research includes activities such as taking blood pressure, body temperature, recording skin lesions, collecting blood and fecal samples, etc.. It is important to realize that all advanced health treatment centers immediately begin observational research on any patient admitted to their facility and the request for treatment at such a facility automatically implies informed consent. The same may be implied when native populations in the field approach researchers for health care.

Observational research that is not intended to provide information for clinical treatment is indeed regulated in most cases but can be conceptualized as a business agreement between those who sell information (the study subjects) and those who buy it (the researchers). As such, study populations should be allowed to decide if they want to sell their product (allow the research) and at what price. They must clearly be informed about the dangers of collaboration but it is not clear that we should expect them to fully understand how their product (data about them) will be used. A Yanomamo artisan does not need to know what will be done with a basket she sells in order to decide whether or not to sell it. Likewise Yanomamo study subjects do not need to understand the long term goals of a study on salt intake and blood pressure in order to decide whether they want to 'sell' data on their diet and blood pressure values. There are of course some common sense limits here-- buying a basket in order to use it in a museum display that mocks the Yanomamo people would likely change the seller's mind about whether or not to offer the product. Likewise, using Yanomamo blood pressure data to argue that they are mentally inferior would probably influence whether or not Yanomamo study subjects are willing to allow such data collection. Thus, something about ***how*** scientific data are used can be expected to influence Native decisions about whether or not to participate in research, and this is the logic for providing basic information about the purpose of the study.

Finally, however, when data collection constitutes epidemiological surveillance critical to the public health of a wider community there is no requirement of informed consent in most countries. For example, in the US no informed consent is required in order to collect data on HIV prevalence among patients who are treated in US hospitals. There is a critical public interest at stake in knowing what percentage of our population is infected with HIV, and informed consent would invalidate the accuracy of that estimate (if infected groups were more likely to refuse permission). In such cases where research represents a vital public interest public health officials often supersede the authority of local police and military. I bring this up because some anthropologists seem unaware, for example, that under special circumstances the Yanomamo could be required to provide blood samples whether they give consent or not (e.g. in a hypothetical scenario where they are the seed population of an extremely infectious type of drug resistant tuberculosis).

In between experimentation (which clearly requires informed consent) and critical public health surveillance (which does not require informed consent) there is a wide range of public health research that is more or less critical to the well being of the world community. Indigenous populations should have a strong voice in research protocols brought to their communities and make final decisions about whether they wish to participate in any particular study. But they should also be better informed about the potential benefits of such research by people who understand them. Frankly, many anthropological activists who have attempted to sway indigenous opinion on these matters are not qualified to assess potential benefits of such research. Tierney for example sees little value in Roche's study of goiter and insists that such research could not foreseeably benefit the Yanomamo. I disagree. While the Yanomamo did not have a high prevalence of goiter at the time Roche conducted his iodine tracer studies, there were indications that this problem could become more serious for them in the future. Some populations in Venezuela have very high prevalence of goiter and one of Roche's goals was to determine why the Yanomamo were generally unaffected by goiter in the 1960s despite a diet that had no marine source of iodine. This research carries the obvious implication that such research could later help to explain why the Yanomamo might begin to develop this health problem. The same analogy could be drawn for the study of any "disease of modern society" (asthma, cardiovascular disease, anxiety and depression, etc.) that was carried out among the Yanomamo who may not yet be afflicted by such a condition.

Likewise, some anthropologists see little practical value to the Yanomamo of research into human genetic variation and suggests that the Yanomamo should consider having their blood samples destroyed rather than allow them to become integrated into the human genome project. I can't imagine more counter-productive advice. First the samples already exist and thus the beneficiaries do not have to undergo any new procedure in order to reap future benefits. Although some anthropologists report that the Yanomamo have a special cultural aversion toward allowing their blood to be possessed by strangers, I suspect that most well informed Yanomamo would quickly make an exception, for example, if they arrived at a hospital with a massive infection and were told that medical personnel must draw blood in order to measure their white blood cell count. Cultural aversions can quickly adapt when important benefits are at stake (another example might be gynecological exams which are probably culturally inappropriate in every traditional society in the world but often later accepted because of their potential value).

The study of human genetic variation has enormous implications for understanding human disease and pathology, and this is likely to be much more critical for small inbred populations than for members of large western state societies. This is why groups like the Ashkenazi Jews and the inhabitants of Iceland have been very proactive in encouraging genetic research on their populations. Indeed, as we move into the era of a completely mapped human genome, one of the clearest patterns to emerge is that human genetic diversity is more related to disease adaptation than any other environmental factor. The world community stands to benefit from the analyses of Yanomamo genes but the Yanomamo themselves are likely to benefit even more. Unfortunately Tierney and many of his most vocal allies are completely unqualified to assess the benefits to native populations of genetic research. What possible benefit could the Yanomamo gain from the destruction of this material that is already archived? Instead of insisting that previously collected blood samples should be destroyed, I believe that the Yanomamo should write to the guardians of those samples, requesting that research be initiated with them that could benefit the Yanomamo community. Scientists should be co-opted as allies rather than alienated and attacked. But, I must add one strong qualification to this postition: Any commercial use of Yanomamo genetic material must be approved by the Yanomamo beforehand and must include fair compensation and share of profits. Unauthorized commercial use of Yanomamo genes should immediately lead to a lawsuit.

Because of oversights in obtaining clear 'informed consent' for earlier research, some anthropologists suggest that the Yanomamo should consider filing lawsuits against a variety of institutions that were behind previous biomedical research. I believe that such action is not in the best interests of the Yanomamo. In these modern times of escalating tendencies to litigation over every imaginable issue there should be common sense moral guidelines that provide the criteria for justifiable lawsuits. They should be filed in order to compensate for real damages or to punish reckless lack of concern for potential damage caused by research procedures. I don’t believe previous Yanomamo research meets either criteria. If not, such lawsuits are frivolous and send the wrong moral message to the Yanomamo (that they should be willing to extract resources from anybody they can if they can get away with it regardless of the ethics of doing so). Filing frivolous lawsuits against researchers or research agencies will only lead scientists to be unwilling to return to the Yanomamo communities, something that would be disastrously counterproductive given their growing health problems.

III. The ethics of field methods

In his book, Tierney makes numerous additional allegations against Napoleon Chagnon that address important ethical issues. Most notable among these are claims that Chagnon’s portrayals of the Yanomamo have harmed them, that Chagnon’s gifts caused conflict, that Chagnon used unethical methods to obtain data from the Yanomamo, that Chagnon allied himself with people who intended to harm the Yanomamo, and that Chagnon did little to help the Yanomamo during his many years working with them. These charges should cause all anthropologists to reflect on their own fieldwork, (even if the charges against Chagnon are false). First, it is true that anthropologists should demonstrate concern about the ways that the information they publish could harm a study population or embarrass them. This is true even if the ethnographic portrayals are based on scientific data and are accurate. Such concern for our study subjects does not imply that we should falsify results to make study populations look flawless, but simply that we must be sensitive to potential damage that can come from some types of information. For example, when M. Hurtado and I published a book about Ache demography we were careful not to over-emphasize high infanticide rates and promiscuity in Ache society even though such patterns were evident in the data we collected. We did not call the Ache “the baby killers” or "the love makers" on the jacket of our book, nor did we emphasize exotic behavioral patterns in the media that might draw attention to ourselves or our book. Instead we put the data in scientific papers and books where they belong and where they can be discussed by appropriately qualified scholars. Indeed, we were so concerned about the potential damage of our results that we met with several community leaders before publishing our book. Those meetings led to an agreement that we would not publish our findings in Spanish. This meant that our work was unlikely to be cited by local news media and made available to the close neighbors of the Ache who might use it against them. Instead, the information would be read primarily by a well-educated segment of the world population that was more likely to be sympathetic to the contingencies associated with these behaviors in the first place. This is an example of the type of compromise between scientific findings and image concern that should be a part of modern anthropology.

The same common sense rule applies to embarrassing portrayals in film, photos, or in text. Nobody wants photos published of them picking their nose, or engaging in many other aspects of personal hygiene, even if such activities are common behaviors that can be readily caught on camera. Drug induced dazes and filthy faces are not "cute" to the people being portrayed even if they are "good copy" in some circles and are encouraged by book editors. Anthropologists have a responsibility to be sensitive to the feelings of their study population as well as being true to their research results. Candid photos should not be published if the subjects in such photos are offended by their publication.

Another important issue raised by the Tierney book is the extent to which gifts from anthropologists cause conflicts in the study population. Despite Tierney's assertions to the contrary, Chagnon's gifts were typical of field anthropologists at the time and not particularly excessive given the rewards that he gained from his research (it would be unethical not to share such economic success). While it is possible to exercise bad judgment in this realm, and induce social conflict, (for example giving massive support to one faction in a village and nothing to others), Tierney provides no compelling evidence that Chagnon made such errors. Indeed there is no evidence that Chagnon's gift giving was any more or less destructive than Tierney's own gift giving. The solution that Tierney implies (but then later ignores when he travels in the field) is that anthropologists should provide no material goods to study populations so as not to introduce potential conflict. This solution is paternalistic and would surely be opposed by all native groups.

Tierney also asserts that Chagnon was culturally insensitive in obtaining names and genealogies and frequently tricked informants into providing information, or exploited existing conflicts in order to get sensitive information from enemies about each other. These charges, if true, seem to imply unethical behavior. But, many anthropologists use a variety of tricks to obtain desired sensitive information, and journalists (who seem to have almost no ethical guidelines to investigation) are much worse. Cultural anthropologists routinely ask for information from children or neighbors, and show no reluctance to delve into local gossip networks, opportunistically exploiting social divisions as a way of getting information that would not be obtained from certain individuals voluntarily. The ethics of such techniques should indeed be carefully considered by professional anthropologists. Is obtaining the dirt on an individual from his/her neighbor unethical? Is obtaining information on sexual activities through secret inquiry a legitimate activity? Does it matter whether the anthropologist has lived with the study population for one week or 20 years? Many anthropologists explicitly practice a moral double standard here. Any techniques are acceptable when exposing the activities of certain politically incorrect groups (oppressors, etc.) but the same methods become unethical when used to gather information on politically correct groups (e.g. the oppressed). This may seem like a reasonable moral position until we consider who decides which groups can acceptably be deceived by the investigator. Should we conclude, for example, that feminist anthropologists can lie and deceive male informants (who they view as oppressors) to collect data, but the same tactics of collecting data on women would be unethical?

One guideline to such issues might be that if an anthropologist angers his/her study population through the employed data collection methods then those methods are unacceptable. Tierney asserts that Chagnon infuriated the Yanomamo by the mere act of obtaining the names of adults and dead people. But, John Peters and Bruce Alberts also obtained names and genealogies of hundreds of living and dead Yanomamo, and all available evidence suggests that their study populations were quite accepting of these activities. Thus, there is little doubt that there are appropriate ways to obtain this information and that Yanomamo names are not unconditionally taboo as Tierney asserts. The only question here is whether Chagnon employed methods unacceptable to a large fraction of the study population. Certainly any data collection can potentially anger a small faction of any study group (usually those who want to hide certain truths). But anthropologists routinely collect information that has the potential of upsetting some individuals (often those in power who don’t want some of their behaviors revealed). In light of this we need to develop specific guidelines about what kinds of data collection are acceptable and how this changes depending on who is being studied and what the relationship is between the anthropologist and the study population.

Tierney also alleges that Chagnon allied himself with disreputable characters (e.g. Ceclia Matos and Charles Brewer) who intended harm to the Yanomamo through mining activities or expropriation of native lands. It is important to remember, however, that both these individuals were 'legitimate' Venezuelan government officials at the time. And, there was no evidence available to Chagnon at the time that either of these two intended to dispossess the Yanomamo of their land or carry out illegal mining on their lands. Instead it appears that Chagnon simply associated with these people because they were powerful Venezuelans who could help him gain access to the Yanomamo at a time when it was being denied. Associating with unsavory characters seems like unwise behavior by a scientist who very badly wanted to continue his research, but no obvious ethical violations are apparent. Are anthropologists to be held responsible for all interaction with individuals in a foreign country who later on turn out to be corrupt government officials? If so, very few anthropologists who have done long term field work would ever be innocent of such misjudgment. We work with government officials because we have to, and we have no input as to who those officials are. We often know little about their official activities and less about their personal lives. The alternative to 'association' with such people would be a failure to obtain required permits and the subsequent inability to do anything at all to assist native populations in large areas of the world. Anthropologists should be held responsible for such 'associations' only when they constitute true collaboration with individuals who knowingly carry out actions harmful to the study population.

Anthropological fieldwork ethics should also include a strong concern for the truth even when advocating native causes. Deception rarely works to help secure native rights in the long run. It is disturbing to see some anthropologists get carried away in the spirit of well-meaning action and exaggerate or distort the truth about indigenous rights issues in an attempt to stimulate more public support for their cause. I believe that such tactics are always doomed to backfire. One of the most frequent anthropological deceptions in the past has been an exaggeration of population size in census estimates. In virtually every country in South America it is easy to find examples where the size of specific populations have been intentionally distorted by anthropologists hoping to gain more support (land, resources, etc.) for groups who are deemed worthier when they are larger. Likewise exaggerations of indigenous suffering are not uncommon and cheapen the information that we have on true indigenous suffering.

In the 1980s I was extremely distressed to be forced to contradict reports about 'genocide' in Paraguay because they contained blatant distortions and flat out fabrications about the Ache situation. Photos of Ache children swimming in a river supplied by a German anthropologist, were published in a German magazine with a caption claiming that they were 'floating corpses from a massacre'. A photo of an Ache man with traditional charcoal and feather decorations was published in an edited volume on human rights with a caption claiming that it showed the torture of an Ache chief. Both these cases involved intentional deception by well-meaning anthropologists. My demographic research at that time revealed that earlier reports of Ache 'genocide' were based on gross errors of fact. When I published accurate accounts of the Ache situation I was visited by the director of a European indigenous rights organization who implored me to retract my data analyses, and then later threatened that I might be sued if I did not. He stated that the issue was not indigenous rights so much as the important campaign to destabilize the Stroessner military dictatorship that ruled Paraguay at the time. The Indians were just props in a larger political battle. He told me that my insistence on publishing the truth was the stance of an innocent fool and that there was in fact no such thing as truth, only the question of “whose side are you on”.

This was my first exposure to a shockingly amoral brand of post-modernism, and I was indeed naïve. I adhered to the principle that any cause that is truly 'just' can prevail through the use of truth as a weapon. If the cause requires lying to support it may not be 'just' after all. His position was clearly that the battle itself was so moral that the importance of truth was superseded by the importance of winning the battle. I am not so naïve as to believe that truth is the supreme morality in the universe and I might also willingly distort factual information in order to save lives if it were required. But my gut feeling is that deception is a tactic that usually produces only short term gains in any human rights battle. When the deception is discovered the strength of a morally correct position is heavily undermined. Anthropologists must incorporate this reality in order to engage in truly ethical advocacy.

IV. Sharing economic success.

Another ethical issue in the Tierney book concerns our responsibilities to provide long term assistance to study populations and what constitutes a fair redistribution of the economic gains that come from our collaboration with anthropological study populations. When I visited the Yanomamo I heard complaints that Chagnon had made a great deal of money off the Yanomamo and had done next to nothing to help them or share his economic success with them. These charges may be true, but anthropologists should not be too quick to accept all complaints they hear against their colleagues. I have heard similar complaints expressed about me and my wife Magdlena Hurtado at our own long term field site, despite having provided nearly a quarter million dollars in economic aid for that population during the past 20 years and a time cost to both of us that has been enormous. This included providing long term medical care, paying for emergency evacuation and hospital bills, building schools, clinics, housing, water and electrical facilities, working to obtain land titles, providing long term employment, and designing training programs for the study group. Some members of anthropological study populations have a short memory and sometimes they simply get irked at something and make irresponsible statements.

It is rumored that Chagnon made a good deal of money from books and films about the Yanomamo and in fact his entire lifetime academic earnings can be directly tied to the Yanomamo since his scientific reputation was based solely on his Yanomamo work. Chagnon paid the Yanomamo for data when it was collected but apparently did not provide any other assistance to the tribe. Is this a fair distribution of the gains that came from the Chagnon-Yanomamo collaboration, or is it exploitation? Although Chagnon has been singled out here for criticism, this is an issue that applies to a great number of anthropologists. I have seen numerous of field anthropologists over the years work in precisely the same way as Chagnon is alleged to have done. They provide a few gifts to informants and then never again return to share out any of the economic success that comes from a career that was built on that fieldwork. Few anthropologists could withstand the scrutiny of careful investigation into their own activities on this front, including most of the anthropologists in the 20th century who were as famous as Chagnon.

Some anthropologists have adopted a policy of donating all proceeds from books they write to the study populations described in those books. The logic here is that we all earn enough money from our academic salaries to maintain a decent lifestyle and therefore additional income that is produced directly through collaborative assistance of a study population should be redistributed back to that population. Likewise many anthropologists also donate the proceeds from photo publishing rights and film sales back to their study populations. But some anthropologists go much further in providing economic assistance to their collaborators. John Peters recently suggested[4] that ethnographers should be willing to share a continual percentage of their regular academic salaries back to study populations. For those of us raising families on ever shrinking academic incomes this might seem like a great sacrifice indeed. But, we can all use our skills to provide valuable services to study populations. Anthropologists are good writers and understand the world political and economic system. Native peoples need allies with such skills. Anthropologists can form NGOs to provide assistance and we can write proposals to larger organizations that fund small scale development projects. In this way we can indeed build schools, clinics, sanitation facilities and infrastructure by obtaining funds that are not easily accessible to illiterate native populations with no understanding of bureaucratic procedures required by funding agencies. This type of work, often carried out in our spare time, can provide much greater resources than we are likely to be able to donate on an individual level. Such activities should become standard procedure for all future anthropologists whose own careers are enhanced by the hospitality offered by any small study population.

V. Conclusions

Anthropological fieldwork has evolved considerably in the past century and a half. It began as an extension of colonial conquest, where native populations were coerced into providing information (sometimes at gunpoint) that could be used to successfully dominate them and entertain the conquerors. The earliest ethnographic documents such as the reports by the Lewis and Clark expedition, or Burton and Speke's description's of interior Africa were useful tools in that colonial expansion. Later ethnographic reports include volumes on topics such as 'the uncivilized races of man', and 'the sexual life of savages' etc. that served as entertainment for conquering populations. Many 19th century ethnographies, and early 20th century anthropological works became best sellers, and those who provided exotic descriptions of far off 'savage peoples' became celebrities themselves (e.g. Margaret Mead). Slowly anthropology has morphed into a field that is concerned for describing and understanding human variation, however, an exploitative character has remained. Most studies, whether cultural or biomedical, are mainly designed to serve the interests of the Western societies that produce anthropologists. Native study populations have often been exploited because they were uniformed about our goals, and the rights that they can demand in the research relationship. We need to be aware of this historical background and make every attempt to move anthropology into a new era of collaboration and respect between researchers and study populations. I have suggested in this essay some important areas where anthropological procedures can be improved in order to constitute a truly ethical enterprise with which we can be proud to be associated. Above all however, anthropological ethics must include a healthy dose of common sense and human decency. No procedures should ever be carried out on native study populations that we wouldn't want our own friends and family exposed to as well. The best guide to appropriate action is the simple question: "would I want somebody to conduct research on me in this fashion". Lets hope our students will help move us in the direction of a new era where the answer to this question is always a resounding "yes".

Notes

1. National commission for the protection of human subjects of biomedical and behavioral research, "Belmont Report". (Dept. of Health, Education and Welfare 1979).

2. Australia National Health and Medical Research Council "Guidelines on ethihcal matters in aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research" (NHMRC 1991).

3. Canada Tri-Council working group on ethics "code of conduct for research involving humans" (Minister of Supply and Services, Ottawa 1996).

4. See Peters second essay in the discussion posted on the following website: http://www.publicanthropology.org/