



# Working Lives: Reflections of a (Commercial) Unbound Anthropologist

Stockholm, 24 November 2004



Ideas Bazaar Limited  
Company Number: 4401107

67-69 Whitfield Street  
London W1T 4HF

t: +44 (0)20 7462 7785  
f: +44 (0)20 7462 7801

e: [ideas@ideasbazaar.com](mailto:ideas@ideasbazaar.com)  
w: [www.ideasbazaar.com](http://www.ideasbazaar.com)

# What am I doing here?

- Explain
  - What I did when I did when I completed my PhD
  - How I came to do it
  - And what has made this possible
  
- Explore
  - What this might mean for you...
  - (Does this sound like something you would like to do?)
  - What skills you have as anthropologists...
  - And how these might be applied in new settings...

## Some background

- From the Athens of the North
  - Completed an MA and PhD in Anthropology at the University of Edinburgh, with some South Asian Studies, Sociology and politics on the side
  - Damascene conversion: from politics to anthropology
  - Car engines, black magic and the Vietnam war peace talks
- To North India
  - Focused on India (Hindi speaking region)
  - MA dissertation on popular Hindi film and cinema goers
  - PhD: the satellite TV revolution in north India

# Varanasi, northern India

- An anthropology of mass media
- The social and local organisation of mass media (cable *wallas* and multinationals)
- Tea shops and the public sphere
- Media in the home
- Televisions, dowry and conjugality
- The growth of consumerism and the rise of the middle classes



**आंध्रके मसलेपर लोकसभामें हंगामा, विपक्षका बहिर्गमन**

**विपक्षकें मसलेपर लोकसभामें हंगामा, विपक्षका बहिर्गमन**

**अकोला इलेक्ट्रानिक्स भवनों, बाराणसी का विकास**

**अरुण अग्रवाल एवं सन्तोष रन्डेव**

**Canon**

Welcomes Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi on her arrival at Varanasi on the Occasion of Inauguration of T. V. Centre.

**a tale of two epics**

**Canon Super Star**

India's first built in coloured screen-cum-shutter TV set.

**Canon Super Star**

CANON ELECTRONICS PVT. LTD. 2/20, BANGALORE ROAD, DELHI-110002

What then?

# Dominant, Recessive and Emergent Anthropology

- Dominant
  - Applied
    - Social development consultancy
    - NGOs and civil society
  - Academic
    - Researching, teaching, publishing and avoiding paperwork
    - In Britain at least this = indentured labour
  - Being an anthropologist involved doing specific things
- Recessive
  - Anthropologists in a variety of settings
  - Scattered and hidden, not vocal
- Emergent
  - Another way of doing anthropology and being an anthropologist...?

# ideas bazaar

- What?
  - A research consultancy
- Where?
  - Offices in central London
- When?
  - April 2002
- Who?
  - Two anthropologists, a repentant management consultant and administrator
  - A network of trained anthropologists or others whose disciplines (e.g., HCI) promote the use of anthropological thinking and research

So what do you do then?

## Being more specific

- What do we do?
  - We use research to help businesses and organisations operate more effectively
  - Our research identifies what ‘stuff’ means and what our clients should do about it
  - Rich socio-cultural analysis
  - A focus on what that means for our clients
  - Identifying opportunities and problem solving
- What’s this got to do with anthropology?
  - We **challenge** the **etic** and **champion** and **emic**
  - We use research in a **creative** and mainly **inductive** way
  - We tell stories which make an impact because they are informed by the **anthropological imaginary**

## Being more specific still

- Our work falls into three main areas
  - Print and Broadcast Media
  - Organisations
  - Technology and Communications

# Print and Broadcast Media: BBC

- The Question?
  - What is travel? What is a holiday?
  - What do they mean to people?
  - How has the way we think, dream, plan and talk about travel changed?
  - What does this mean for TV?
  - Brief: Understand, provoke and stimulate creative ideas
- What we did?
  - ‘Ethnographic encounters’, interviews and audience workshops
  - Weeks of analysis, discussion and further research
  - A travel magazine based five key themes, a video, a prose and a strategic recommendations documents

# Organisations: PwC

- The Question
  - Why is the employee Portal not working as well as it could?
  - What aspects of our culture work in favour of or against this piece of technology
  - Focus: knowledge management, communication and styles of working
  - How can we make it work in such a vast and complex environment
- What we did?
  - Workplace ethnography: at the desk with staff partners to secretaries
  - Solicited opinions: lunch time forums
  - An IB associate conducted formal usability tests on the site
  - Synthesised the findings into one piece of analysis and recommendation
  - Now: ongoing work looking at knowledge management and content strategies

# Technology and Communication

- iSociety

- A three year technology and everyday life project
- Run within a not-for-profit think tank and consultancy
- Formerly The Industrial Society
- Co-authored:
  - Mobile UK: Mobiles phones and everyday life
  - Fat Pipes and Connected People: Rethinking Broadband Britain
  - Getting by, not Getting on: Technology in UK Workplaces
- Pioneering use of ethnography as research method within think tank environment

- Unbound work

- Public dissemination
- Public policy and influencers



Mobile Phones & everyday Life



Technology at Work



Broadband Britons

## To recap...

- Wide range of projects
  - Network allows us to offer services beyond core competencies
- A reputation for ethnography
  - But ‘methodological neutrality’
  - Other techniques that allow us to explore an issue
  - Workshops, group discussions, diaries, interviews, expert interviews,
  - Desk research (aka an addiction to the web), relevant literature sources
- Fun and variety
  - We love our work
  - Our clients like what our approach delivers
  - They enjoy research that they can really talk and care about

What makes this possible?  
or The Ethnographic  
Imagination

# There are two ways of applying anthropology...

- **Stealth**
  - Anthropology applied without a fuss
  - Practitioners not identifying themselves as anthropologists
  - Muting this aspect of their professional identity
  - Little obvious confidence in benefits of anthropology
  
- **Announced**
  - Practitioners are defined or define themselves as anthropologist
  - Hired for specific set of recognised skills
  - Tend(ed) to be in certain sectors

## But a third way presents itself...

- Unbound Anthropology
  - Anthropologist sit within host organisations
  - Flex their identities as required
  - Sits outside disciplinary anthropology but is not disengaged
  - Unbound describes the current state of anthropology, not a type of application
- Out of the closet, on the corridors
  - Treading the corridors of the civil service
  - Walking the wards of NHS hospitals
  - Researching in R&D functions of technology companies: Intel, Google etc
- Co-opting and Co-opted
  - Anthropologists and others are part of unbound anthropology
  - Cross-disciplinary teams
  - 'Globalising method' (Paul Stoller)

"Ethnography lays bare the cultural erotics that consumers employ to animate the world of goods, and renders those principles accessible to creatives whose job it is to translate them into artifacts and relationships"

From John Sherry's foreword to *Creating Breakthrough Ideas: The Collaboration of Anthropologists and Designers in the Product Development Industry*, Susan Squires & Brian Byrne, Eds (Bergin & Garvey, 2002)

# Ethnography is Dead, Long Live Ethnography!

- The new chic
  - Everyone is doing it
  - Ethnographic as adjectival prefix
  - Ethnography = doing an interview in their house rather than ‘laboratory’
  
- But why?
  - ‘User-centred’ approach
  - Globalisation
  - Context is king
  - Cultural constructions
  - The insatiable appetite of capitalism...



“It is hardly possible to overrate the value... of placing human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar.”

Isaiah  
Berlin

From someone in the city (of London)

-----Original Message-----

From: XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.com [mailto:XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.com]

Sent: 27 October 2004 17:02

To: Simon Roberts

Subject: Now I understand....

Si

I see a lot of company managements in my line of work, but I have just now met the first one who have talked about taking an ethnographic approach to their market research. Very exciting stuff. It was egg, specifically the chief executive Paul Gratton. He explained it as getting punters to do some drawings with crayons!

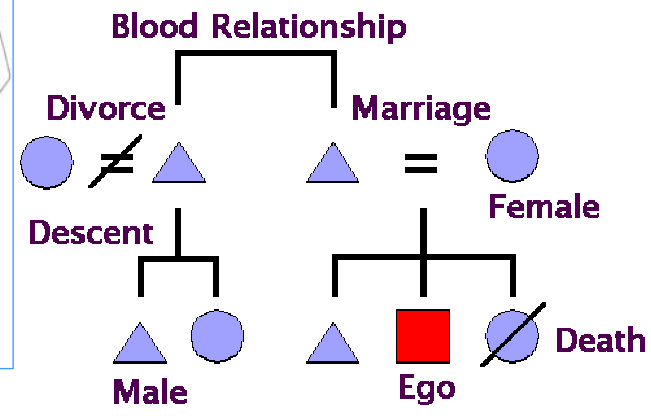
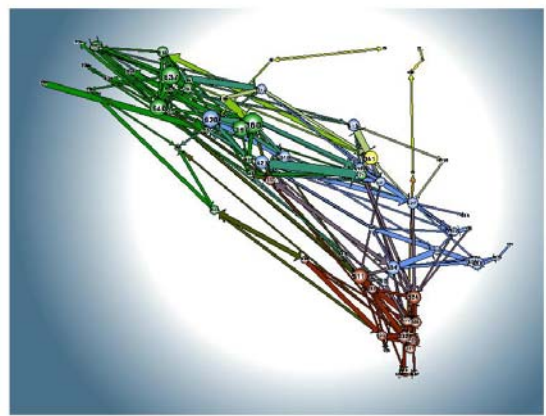
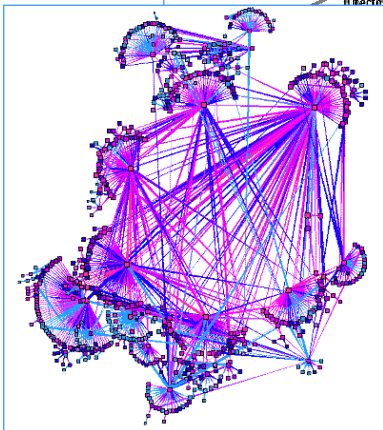
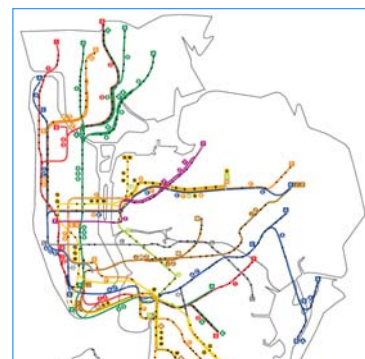
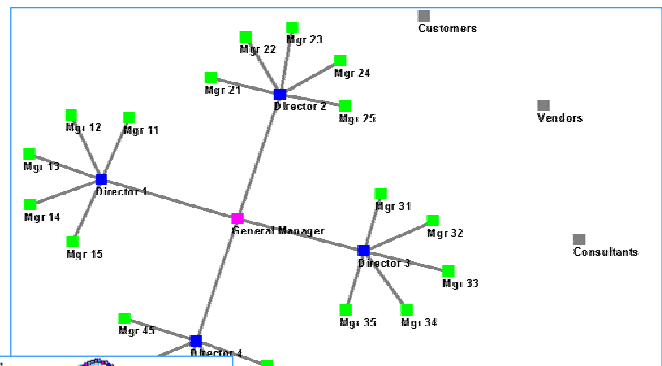
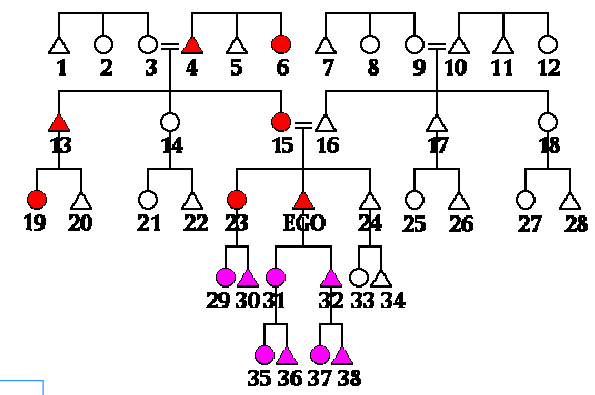
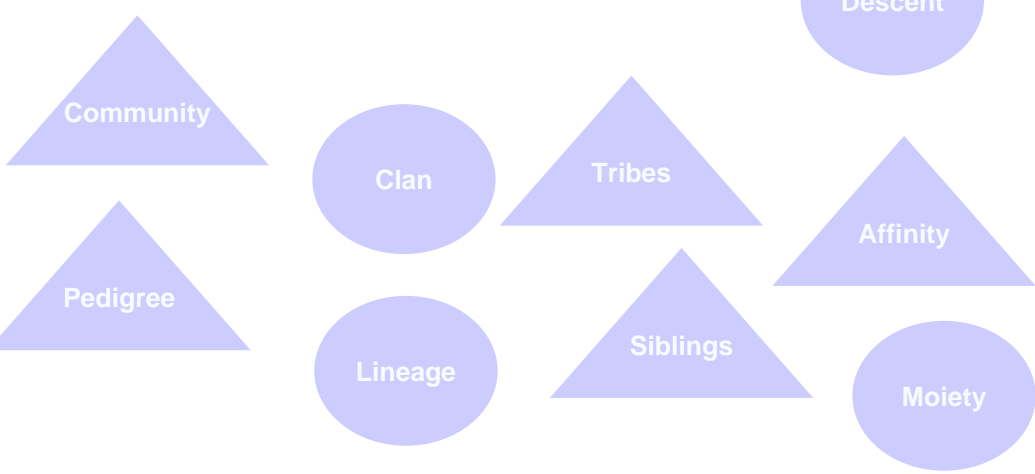
Can I sense your influence in this?

Eric

# Ethnography is Dead, Long Live Anthropology!

- Long shelf life
  - It doesn't sit on a shelf
  - Communicable: people like stories
  - It disseminates itself
- It makes 'lay anthropologists' (John Weeks, *Unpopular Culture*)
  - Refreshed understanding of the everyday
  - They get to appreciate the emic
- Closeness and Revolution
  - Intimacy and detail
  - Makes common understandings and assumptions problematic
  - Provokes and inverts
  - Marginal perspectives
  - Critical toolkit

# Linkship



# Anthropology as a kind of tool kit

- Working Contexts
  - Flexible approach is important
  - Fieldwork or Frameworks?
- Translations
  - Literally ‘bearing across’
  - Mixing ideas and concepts across domains
- Opportunities
  - The opportunity lies in the acts of translation that you can imagine
- Vocabulary
  - The working concepts and approach of anthropology are common currency
  - If not always understood by all...
  - In my opinion this is an exciting phase for anthropology

## Download and stay in contact

### Contact

e: [simon@ideasbazaar.com](mailto:simon@ideasbazaar.com)

T: +44 (0)207 462 7785

Read our blog at

[www.ideasbazaar.com/blog](http://www.ideasbazaar.com/blog)

Also, the ASA Network of Applied Anthropologists is at

[www.theasa.org/applications/index.htm](http://www.theasa.org/applications/index.htm)

This presentation can be downloaded from

[www.ideasbazaar.com/stockholm.pdf](http://www.ideasbazaar.com/stockholm.pdf)

OPEN