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The Elephant in the Room: A Lesson from the Field

LIUBAVA SHATOKHINA

Gemic

We sometimes use ethnographic tools and methods with less reflexivity than they deserve. When you start to look at the constellation of objects in the spaces people inhabit, the traces of their values and practices can be seen everywhere. After all, the creation of an individual's life and culture is an effort to make a cosmos out of chaos. People do it all the time by rearranging objects, practices and concepts. Our job as anthropologists/consultants is to get to the unspoken rules and structure of people's everyday by being attentive to the cosmos people assemble materially and conceptually. However, we sometimes rely too much on spoken language. In most cases it applies to the use of interviews as our major data sources when we forget to use other opportunities to enrich our knowledge that ethnographic encounters can provide. Objects and their constellations leave powerful traces of culture, and they can often tell us more than people are able to articulate. Not because people are not reflexive, but because we usually deal with the mundane—things so natural that they are hard to notice in the flow of daily life. By keeping our eyes wide open to the various data points that ethnographic research can provide, we can actually see a more interesting, more detailed and indeed complex picture of cultural reality.

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Liubava Shatokhina is an ethnographer and cultural anthropologist at Gemic. Her research focuses on the culture of consumption. She is particularly interested in science and technology studies and ethnographic methods. liubava@gemic.com