

Deep Culture Podcast – Transcript

The Deep Culture Podcast explores the psychological impact of intercultural experiences, informed by the sciences of brain, culture and mind. Join hosts **Joseph Shaules** and **Yvonne van der Pol** as we look at the personal growth that can come from travel, living and working abroad, learning a foreign language, growing up in a multicultural context—and the challenges of bridging different cultural worlds.

Episode 8 - Empathy Across Cultures

In this episode, we explore empathy – the ability to look at things from another person’s perspective. We discuss the importance of empathy for cultural bridge people, and why it can be difficult in intercultural situations! Yvonne talks about empathy in her hometown and Joseph tells a story of failed empathy on a freezing street corner in Tokyo. We also look at what science can teach us about empathy—it involves many cognitive systems and is linked with motivation! We are thankful for the work of Jamil Zaki, whose insights helped inspire this episode.

Time	Speaker	
00:00	Joseph	...But I don’t say to you, oh, well maybe you should get a dog because .. <i>(Laughter)</i>
00:06	Yvonne	Because it wouldn’t make a lot of sense.
		Intro
00:19	Joseph	Welcome to the deep culture podcast, where we explore Culture and the science of mind. I’m Joseph Shaules, as usual I am here with my good friend and colleague Yvonne van der Pol. You know, Yvonne, this podcast is such a great excuse to hang out with you.
00:36	Yvonne	Well same thing here. It’s always a pleasure to see my agenda. The recordings are being planned, and we are meeting today
00:45	Joseph	and this Podcast is so fun to do, you know, we’re on opposite sides of the world, but it feels like you’re right here in the same room with me. It’s just great. So, Yvonne, what are we talking about today? What’s our theme and why are we talking about it?
01:02	Yvonne	Well, today’s theme is empathy and that’s the ability to look at things from a different perspective.
01:09	Joseph	So, to see the world through someone else’s eyes, or kind of imagine how someone feels in a situation. And so empathy is important in everyday life, but it’s especially important interculturally. And so we want to dig into this a little bit and we want to see what brain mind sciences can teach us about empathy. And we’ve got a couple of questions that we’re interested in.

01:40	Yvonne	Yes. Well, first of all, what's empathy in everyday life? And then why is it important across cultures? And finally, what do we know about the science of empathy? And that brings us to Part One, "What is Empathy?" (<i>Piano</i>)
		Part 1
02:04	Yvonne	Well, empathy is a word that most people know, but it's not always easy to define, what do we mean by it?
02:12	Joseph	Well, as we were saying, empathy means looking at things from another's perspective, but it's not imagining yourself in their situation. That's, that's different. Uh, for example, you have two cats, right? Yeah. So let's imagine if, if you tell me that one of your cats is sick, um, but maybe I don't really like cats. And in fact, I have an allergy to cats, but I don't say to you, oh, well maybe you should get a dog because... (<i>Laughter</i>)
02:48	Yvonne	Because it wouldn't make a lot of sense
02:54	Joseph	Because even if I don't like cats, I can imagine how it feels for you to worry about your sick cat. So I'm not imagining myself in your situation. I'm kind of looking at things, uh, through your eyes.
03:11	Yvonne	So anytime we want to care for others, actually empathy is important..
03:16	Joseph	Yeah, and there's a strong connection between caring and empathy. I mean, imagine if you're at a therapist, for example, after you talk about your stresses and what you're going through, if they say, well, if it was me, I would, but we don't want them to tell us what they would do. We want them to look at the situation from our perspective to understand it from our point of view, we want empathy from the people that we care about.
03:47	Yvonne	Maybe this, this correlates to the story about the village I live in. It's located in what is called the "Care Valley". And traditionally there have been many healthcare centres here in this region, close to the forests, etc. And that demonstrates also the importance of empathy. So, well, for instance, in the main street, it's normal to see persons with physical or mental disabilities on the railway station. And these people form an integral part of the community. And when we came here, to live in the suburbs, it was really interesting because it was so much taken for granted, people take care for each other...
04:31	Joseph	So you didn't . . . you weren't from here . . . you moved here. So that was new for you when you arrived.
04:37	Yvonne	Yes, I came from the city of The Hague – the busiest inner city. And of course there was a huge diversity, but not the diversity that I

		noticed here. And also, the level of taking care for each other and people with disabilities, whether they are blind, have physical or mental disabilities, they are not seen as, as some strange stranger, but are just one of us.
05:02	Joseph	So your empathizing is, you know, they're one of you and you can look at the situation from their perspective and maybe give them a hand if that's necessary. And so this is of course important for all of our relationships, but it's not always easy. You know, it can be hard to practice empathy. I mean, even with a family member or our partner, we don't always automatically understand their perspective. We don't always automatically look at it from their perspective. So, empathy is important, but it's something that we have to work at.
05:44	Yvonne	Oh, and then that's true, and that raises an important point. Actually, it can be hard with people we know well, so imagine it's even harder for people who are at more distance and in cross-cultural situations.
05:57	Joseph	So that's one reason that empathy is so important for interculturalists. Well, the basic idea is that if you're in a foreign situation, it can be hard to empathize because you need to look at things from a different cultural perspective. You know, you need to put on different cultural glasses.
06:21	Yvonne	And that brings us to Part Two, "Last week, we went to Tengu" (<i>Piano</i>)
Part 2		
06:37	Joseph	So this is an empathy story, or rather a failed empathy story. Shortly after I first started living in Japan, I was teaching at a language school, and every week I used to go out after class with the students. And I remember on one occasion standing on the corner in December with these students. And we were all trying to decide where to go. And there was this long silence. People were kind of looking around, and one person said, "Well, <i>Doko ikou ka</i> where should we go? It's kind of dragging on. And well, last week we went to Tengu. Tengu was the name of a, of a restaurant " <i>So da ne, Tengu da ne . . .</i> " Oh yeah. ... Someone else said, "Well, how about "Tsubohachi?"
07:47	Joseph	And so there's this slow decision-making process happening. And I'm starting to get in a bad mood. I'm freezing cold. I'm frustrated by what seems to be this incredibly slow pace of decision-making the turn-taking seems slow. The opinions are very tentative. Some people didn't speak at all. There was, nobody was debating, you

		<p>know as an American, I was accustomed to decision-making, that's like a, you know, like an, like a marketplace where I put in my 2 cents worth and you put in your 2 cents worth and we kind of lay it on the table. And then we say, well, what do you want? What do I want? You know we exchange our views. We weigh our opinions. But Japanese decision-making, it just follows a different cultural logic. But what was that logic? I could not read that logic. It felt slow. It felt awkward. It felt hard to interpret. And I knew that this was cultural, but it didn't help. So I wanted to empathize. I tried to, but I simply couldn't read their minds. It just didn't make sense to me.</p> <p><i>(PIANO)</i></p>
09:28	Yvonne	<p>You know, what's interesting to me about this story is that you wanted to empathize <i>(LAUGHTER)</i></p>
09:34	Joseph	<p>Oh, I was irritated, but, you know, I was aware that this was cultural. So I did want to empathize. I did want to know . . . I wanted to know what they were thinking.</p>
09:49	Yvonne	<p>You couldn't, it didn't work out, you know...</p>
09:53	Joseph	<p>I, so I couldn't look at it from their perspective. And so that's one way that cultural empathy is different from empathy in everyday familiar settings.</p>
10:07	Yvonne	<p>Did not understanding their perspective make you even more irritated? <i>(Joseph: Well, of course it did!)</i>. I mean culturally <i>(LAUGHTER)</i></p>
10:17	Joseph	<p>Yeah. The fact that I couldn't understand their perspective is, was irritating because it just didn't seem reasonable and things that are unexplainable just don't seem reasonable. So I was having to fight against my own irritation.</p>
10:37	Yvonne	<p>Yes, well. And that's why empathy is harder across cultures, and also why it's so important to try and develop it. Um, but that raises also some additional questions.</p>
10:48	Joseph	<p>Right. So, can we decide to empathize? Can we decide to do it, or does it just happen? Is it something we can learn or is it just part of human nature?</p>
11:01	Yvonne	<p>Tough questions, but fortunately brain and mind sciences have some insights that can help us answer them.</p>
Part 3		
11:09	Joseph	<p>So that brings us to Part Three "Motivated Empathy" <i>(PIANO)</i> So first some background, we've been talking about empathy as though it's one thing, but from the brain mind perspective, it's just not that simple. There are many cognitive systems at work, and empathy involves a variety of different experiences. So to understand it, we</p>

		need to be ready for some complexity. And so today we're sharing some information from an article, entitled "Empathy, a motivated account" by Jamil Zaki. And this article, I remember Yvonne, when we first read this article and talked about it. (Yvonne) That was amazing (Joseph continues) it kind of exploded the idea of empathy that I had in my mind. It was a word that I was familiar with, that I used as an intercultural educator, but then it got exploded. Now this article is not a simple read, it's quite technical, but it really gave me an appreciation for how this kind of everyday mental experience is just so much more complex than it might seem.
12:39	Yvonne	No, it's also, for me, when I first read it, it was amazing. It even has this diagram of empathy, boxes and pluses and minuses and arrows. And it's like, wow, when you look at it, and actually I have it here in front of me
12:59	Joseph	Yeah, copy in front of me too. So the diagram you're talking about, there's a caption underneath. Can I just, can I read this? (Yvonne: <i>Yeah of course</i>) So, so get ready, figure one, schematic detailing, empathic approach and avoidance motives and regulatory strategies through which they affect empathic episodes as they unfold. Positive and negative signs indicate the directional effects of empathic motives on the deployment of empathy at different processing stages, through situation selection, attention modulation and appraisal. (LAUGH)
13:41	Yvonne	Exactly. <i>Joseph continues:</i> But I'm sorry to all the listeners. I know that was impossible to follow. Let's, let's try in simpler language. So that caption was describing a diagram, showing a multi-stage cognitive process that produces empathy. So empathy isn't just a simple reaction. Our unconscious mind is actively anticipating and regulating empathy and responding to our positive or negative feelings towards that particular situation.
14:15	Yvonne	It makes a lot of sense, and it happens in split seconds. And it's amazing. You select whether you're going to show empathy or not. And where do you go to reach out or not? And we make judgments, and that's fascinating in itself. So it's a very well, huge and rich article, yet technical and detailed.
14:40	Joseph	And, so it, it does help us answer that first question that we talked about. Can we decide to empathize or does it just happen? So empathy is automatic in the sense that we naturally imagine ourselves in the place of others. So if you see a kitten that is kind of

		hanging on to a rope kind of hanging there all desperately, you say, oh that's
15:09	Yvonne	Cute little kitten, no, be careful.
15:15	Joseph	So it does come naturally, but empathy is context dependant
15:24	Yvonne	It depends also on the situation. And that means that empathy can be turned off by negative emotion, feeling or threat and those kinds of things. Right? So
15:35	Joseph	So if it's not a cute kitten you're looking at, but you know, some deep sea fish with big fangs and bulbous eyes, you, you may not have this same empathic response that you had with the kitten. And so empathy can be turned off. Um, and also we may not have sufficient understanding to imagine other people's intentions (PIANO)
16:15	Yvonne	So what should bridge people know? Well, first of all, empathy is motivated, and we can either seek it or avoid it. It's not always automatic and valuing empathy is an important first step, but unfortunately, it's not enough.
16:31	Joseph	And that was the diagram that we were talking about. This diagram kind of is a schematic of how approach motivation, and avoidance motivation. Our mind has two motivational systems. We have a system that once I want that, and then we have another system which has, I don't want that. And those are two separate cognitive systems. So our empathy, our empathic response depends on this motivation system. Do we want to approach, do we want to avoid, that's why we say empathy is motivated. We can either seek it or avoid it.
17:10	Yvonne	And at the same time, empathy is complex. Uh, it evolves, uh, experience sharing. And what do we mean with experience sharing? Well, that's feeling what others feel, and mentalizing and that's understanding others' perspectives.
17:26	Joseph	So in fact, empathy is not just one thing. As you said, experience sharing, that's feeling what someone else feels. So if you're travelling to a foreign country and you see children smiling and playing, and you feel their joy and you don't need to speak their language in order to feel that, but as you said, mentalizing, understanding another's perspective is a different thing. And when I was on that corner in Tokyo, that's what I was having trouble with. I was having trouble mentalizing, uh, understanding the other person's perspective.

18:07	Yvonne	Feelings are easier to read than intentions. And that's the overall thing. And gaining cultural empathy is developmental. It happens over time as we learn new cultural patterns
18:19	Joseph	To gain cultural empathy is not something that we can just decide to do. Now the other question we asked was, is it something we can learn? Well, we can learn it cross-culturally, but it takes time. So for example, I couldn't empathize well when I was on that corner. But over time, I started to understand, uh, the cultural logic in Japan. I was used to the idea that each person gives an opinion for themselves and then we compare, but the cultural logic in Japan is that the opinion you give is for everyone. So it should take everyone into account, so of course, everybody was looking around to see what the other people wanted, but it took me a long time to get a feeling for that. Uh, but now it's much easier for me to empathize if I'm in that same situation. So gaining cultural empathy is developmental. It happens over time as we learn new patterns. <i>(PIANO)</i>
19:30	Joseph	Well, Yvonne, unfortunately I think we need to wrap up soon, but let's give the last word to Jamil Zaki
19:43	Yvonne	Empathy is a vital emotional force that scuffles everything from close relationships to large scale cooperation
19:52	Joseph	From close relationships to large scale cooperation from everyday interactions to civilization, to cultural community, to this global village. It is a vital emotional force.
20:07	Yvonne	Very powerful statement. And I like this, this sentence, and it's so crucial also in these times of the pandemic, um, but also in small scale, living with your neighbors, uh, in these situations that we face.
20:23	Joseph	And we need to understand this complexity because as, uh, as this article says, new directions for understanding when empathy fails, and how to maximize empathy, when it does not come naturally, but is most needed.
20:44	Yvonne	And that's what the world is today. And it doesn't always come naturally, but it's so much needed and maybe more so than ever.
20:53	Joseph	I think that as cultural bridge people, we have a special role to play for, for empathy and creating these bridges between people.
21:03	Yvonne	Yeah. And that makes us also very well happy about having you all here and all of you cultural bridge people sharing this time with us. Thank you so much for listening to this episode again today. <i>(PIANO)</i>
		Ending
21:26	Joseph	The deep culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research.

		I am the director of JII. If you're interested in culture and mind, why don't you check out JII's Brain, Mind and Culture Masterclass. It is a blended learning course and online community of cultural bridge people. It would be great to see you there together with Yvonne and me, to find out more, just do a web search for the Japan Intercultural Institute. If you liked today's episode, we'd really like to hear from you, leave a comment and rank us on apple podcasts, or write to us at DC podcasts at japanintercultural.org , a personal note of appreciation for the insights of Jamil Zaki whose work we referenced today. We hope we did it justice. Thanks as usual to our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz and Chris Koyama our production assistant. And of course, thanks to you Yvonne for sharing this time with me.
22:39	Yvonne	Yeah, well thanks to you as well, Joseph, and to all our listeners of course, (Joseph: see you next time)
	Yvonne	See you
		(PIANO)