

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 #14 - Resistance

In this episode Joseph Shaules and Ishita Ray explore the “eternal tourist” phenomenon—people who resist cultural difference they experience abroad. Ishita talks about the resistance she encountered when moving to France from India. Joseph talks to Jack – who spent years in Tokyo but still doesn’t speak Japanese. Joseph shares his research into common patterns of resistance. Brain and mind science reminds us that resistance is natural—we all do it—and that we all have cognitive biases that can trigger resistance.

Time	Speaker	
		Intro
0:26	Joseph	Hello, I'm Joseph Shaules. Welcome to the deep culture podcast, where we explore the psychology of intercultural understanding. This is a podcast for people who move between different cultural worlds. We talk about intercultural experiences and we dig deep into the science and psychology of culture and mind. Today with me is my co-host Ishita Ray, how are you today Ishita?
0:51	Ishita	Hi, Joseph. I'm wonderful. And I'm so happy to be with you here today
1:00	Joseph	Now you and I first met at the Brain Mind and Culture Masterclass. And you've been on the podcast team for a while now. I'm sure some listeners will remember the story you told about ordering food in France in the last episode.
1:11	Ishita	Well, I hope so. And it's wonderful to be on the podcast team.
1:15	Joseph	Well, you and I have quite different backgrounds, you grew up in India and I grew up in California, but whenever I talk to you, I feel

		like we find these parallels. Like we both grew up loving foreign languages. We both were the kind of person that couldn't wait to leave and go out and see the world.
1:30	Ishita	That is great. Isn't it? And where I am from Durgapur, a small town in Eastern India. And, I grew up having two first languages, English and Bengali.
1:44	Joseph	So you've been managing diversity, your whole life.
1:49	Ishita	Navigating different cultural and language worlds has been a way of life. Even as a four year old, I had to communicate with playmates who did not speak Bengali, then from surviving in a small town in France to training employees in a multinational spread across 55 countries, it has been quite a language and culture roller coaster
2:14	Joseph	I'm looking forward to learning more about all these experiences. . I'm thrilled to have you here on the podcast, so Ishita, I have a question, you've spent time doing intercultural training. You've lived around the world. Have you met people who've spent a long time abroad, but don't seem to adapt very deeply, they kind of stay on the surface or don't really try to understand the local culture?
2:38	Ishita	Oh, yes, absolutely. The eternal tourist phenomenon, they might live for years in a foreign country and hardly adapt, or complain about the locals, or always compare everything to back home
2:55	Joseph	Well, and on the other hand, some other people may just spend a short time, but they have these profound life-changing experiences.
3:01	Ishita	That's true. It's so odd. Isn't it? Some people really seem to resist cultural difference
3:10	Joseph	I think it's really common, but in the intercultural field, people don't talk about it that much

3:16	Ishita	I think there's this idea that just by travelling or being in a foreign environment, we automatically become international or culturally sensitive or something like that
3:28	Joseph	And it's just not true. You know, some people go abroad and they hardly change at all, or they have stereotypes reinforced or they just decide, oh yeah, my country is the best after all.
3:39	Ishita	So in today's episode, we're going to look more deeply at cultural resistance. We'll ask what cultural resistance is. Why do people resist? And we look at what brain and mind sciences can teach us about resistance.
Part 1 - No Wine for Good Girls		
3:55	Joseph	And that brings us to Part One: No Wine for Good Girls.
4.:08	Joseph	Ishita, before we get to this idea of the eternal tourist, I wanted to mention that I was fascinated recently when you told me the advice that you got from relatives before leaving India when you moved to France for the first time.
4:22	Ishita	When I was about to leave and it was my first time that I was leaving India. I was strictly advised by some of my relatives to not drink wine, whatever you do not drink wine. They knew, of course, that drinking wine was common in France and they were worried that I would be somehow influenced, even corrupted by this morally questionable custom.
4:51	Joseph	So for them, the goal was that you not be changed by your stay in France, to not adapt because doing that would somehow compromise you.
4:59	Ishita	Exactly. And that's where cultural resistance comes from. Isn't it? This idea that we have to protect ourselves from cultural difference, that if we adapt and change, we lose something valuable.
5:18	Joseph	I think though that resistance is not simply disliking something, right? But for example, if I'm living in Thailand, I may choose not to

		eat spicy Thai food because it burns my mouth, but that's not resistance.
5:30	Ishita	It's not because you're not making value judgments about it.
5:36	Joseph	So when we're talking about cultural resistance, we mean both avoidance, like don't do that, plus a negative value judgment. There's something wrong with those people that do that thing.
5:50	Ishita	Yes. And I think that the relatives that gave me that advice really did feel that French people must somehow be morally compromised given the fact that they commonly drink wine.
6:05	Joseph	But let's just point out that from their perspective, I mean, they were trying to watch out for you trying to protect you perhaps.
6:11	Ishita	Of course, and I really appreciate that. And that also raises an important point. If drinking alcohol is against my religious or moral beliefs, then adapting really would compromise me. But, there is still this question remaining: Can I choose to not drink wine when in France, but still accept the fact that for French people, drinking wine is normal and not a sign of moral failure
6:40	Joseph	And that's the challenge, isn't it? Accepting cultural difference at that deep level requires that ability to recognize that things which feel strange or wrong or uncomfortable, or perhaps even immoral, may simply be a reflection of cultural difference.
6:59	Ishita	Yeah, it sounds so simple, but it can be fairly difficult in practice.
7:07	Joseph	Ishita in Episode 13, you told a story about the first time you went out to eat with French colleagues, and your shock at how they ordered.
7:16	Ishita	That is correct. Everyone focused on what they wanted, and no one took into account what others were eating. It seemed selfish to me.

7:29	Joseph	Well, I love that you're so honest about your feelings in that moment, because it's so easy to say, oh, I want to learn about the culture or I appreciate cultural difference. But in fact, in real life, when you're confronted with uncomfortable difference, we really do often make these negative judgements. I remember first living in Tokyo being on a packed subway train, wall to wall people, no one was talking, everyone seemed to be in this private little bubble. I could just hear the clickety clack of the train wheels. And I remember thinking, wow, look at these blank faces. That's so weird. What's wrong with these people?
8:10	Ishita	So we do have these judgemental thoughts or negative feelings, but I think it's unavoidable. Human beings are naturally judgemental.
8:21	Joseph	Well, and in my case too, I had that reaction, even though I recognized that this was cultural.
8:29	Ishita	Me too. So you can't really stop these negative judgements, but it's also true that as we get used to something, as we start to understand it better, our attitude starts to change. We start to accept and adapt. So for me, this is where things get interesting. Why is it that some people never seem to accept or adapt to cultural differences at a deeper level.
8:59	Joseph	Well, and this brings us back to this idea of the eternal tourist, which is where this conversation started, that there seemed to be some people who can spend a long time in a foreign country, but they really don't seem to adapt very much.
9:14	Ishita	Oh, yes. I have friends who have lived abroad for years. They get along in everyday life, but hold themselves apart . . . don't really make many local friends, you know, outside of work would visit homes of other Indian families, sit on the floor and sing Bollywood songs.
9:32	Joseph	So they're in a foreign country sitting on the floor, singing Bollywood songs.

9:36	Ishita	Exactly. And there's this thing I often hear... Uh there's you know, there's no place like India
9:45	Joseph	and that is such a common reaction. I hear that as well in Japanese, there's <i>yappari nihon ga ii</i> , which is roughly translated as well, just as you might expect, or just as I thought <i>Japan is great</i> or an American, I've heard Americans say, well, one thing I learned from traveling abroad was, <i>I'm glad I was born in America</i> . So the question that I have then is how can we make sense of all these different reactions
Part 2 - The Trains Run On Time		
10:09	Ishita	And that brings us to Part Two: The Trains Run On Time.
10:24	Ishita	So Joseph on the very first page of your first book, <i>Deep culture, The Hidden Challenges of Global Living</i> , which came out in 2007, there's a quote by someone you call Jack. It says Japan is predictable. Lots of times that's a good thing. I know my train's going to come on time. What's that quote about?
10:52	Joseph	So I started the book with that because it was an example of how Jack was mostly concerned with surface culture when talking about Japan, even though he had been living in the country for 14 years
11:06	Ishita	So he was one of those eternal tourists, by the way, this book was based on your PhD research.
11:15	Joseph	Yes. And, and the basic idea was that despite globalization, deep intercultural understanding is harder than we think because of deep culture difference...
11:26	Ishita	Which again is related to resistance.
11:32	Joseph	Right. And that research in fact was inspired by Jack or his real name is Jonathan Bollick, who I called Jack in the book. And he's a friend of mine. He's a great guy, but he spent years living in Tokyo without adapting that deeply to Japanese culture. So I interviewed him, I quoted him and he was a key person in that book.

11:54	Ishita	And he knew you were writing about him, right?
11:58	Joseph	Well, yes, he did. Um, and I think he even enjoyed it. And I used to talk about him when I would give a presentation or in my teaching. And to be clear, what I wrote was not a criticism, on the contrary, he was an example of a really nice person, who for different reasons, never really adapted deeply, but, he was very open about that.
12:17	Ishita	Well, your book was published in 2007 and you interviewed him before that. So it's, it's, it's been quite a long time. I wonder how's Jack doing these days
12:30	Joseph	Well, he is still based in Japan. Uh, and since we're doing an episode on resistance, I thought, wouldn't it be fun to see how Jack, or actually Jonathan, is doing these days. And he was kind enough to agree to talk to me again this time using his real name
12:48	Ishita	Great. That will be fantastic.
13:00	Joseph	Well, welcome to the deep culture podcast.
13:06	Jonathan	Well, thank you.
13:08	Joseph	of the reasons that I give you credit for my PhD, as you know, because you got me interested in this idea of surface and deep adaptation.
13:21	Jonathan	I just gave you a perfect case study.
13:23	Joseph	You gave me a perfect case study. Absolutely. Because, you're happy in Japan, and it's not like you're some kind of prejudiced jerk or anything, you're a very positive person. Uh, yet you spent many years in Japan and did not adapt in a deep way, in the way that I did. And so this raised the question for me at that time, like what is the difference between adapting deeply and, staying more on the surface? One of the ideas that came out of that research was this idea of resistance, of resisting adaptation, and that you can sometimes adapt on a more surface level, but resist at a deeper

		level, even at the same time. And the theme of the podcast, this podcast, is resistance. Um, and so I wanted to check in with you and see how you're doing. And
14:28	Jonathan	Oh, how much I'm still resisting.
14:34	Joseph	Well, what I did was I, I found some quotes from when I interviewed you, I don't know, 15 years ago. And I wanted to read them back to you and see what you thought. So I asked you about what friendships you have with Japanese. And this was what you said. You said, <i>actually, I don't have that many Japanese friends. Actually my male friends are all foreigners.</i> So has that changed? Is that basically the same?
15:03	Jonathan	As far as Japanese male friends, I, I would say I have two, and they came out of, uh, being long time students of mine.
15:16	Joseph	That's nice. And, and I'm assuming you speak to them in English, right?
15:22	Jonathan	So yeah. My 30 years existence in Japan is basically been at all in the English language
15:29	Joseph	well, I actually asked you about your Japanese ability when I interviewed you. And, uh, you said, is this embarrassing for me to read back what you said 20 years ago?
15:41	Jonathan	Oh, no, it's in a book somewhere. So
15:50	Joseph	So when I interviewed you all those years ago, I asked you about learning Japanese and there will be some people who will think, Oh, how could you possibly live in a foreign country for 20 or 30 years and not become fluent in the local language? And so I asked you why haven't you learned more? And this is what you said: <i>I really don't have the opportunities. I would have to create opportunities. For example, I could go to this store, even though I don't need tuna fish, I could ask for the tuna fish, I could call a</i>

		<i>department store on the phone and ask for something. So you basically said you don't have the opportunities, uh,</i>
16:42	Jonathan	And that was very specific to certain kinds of communication as well. Right. Just, uh, you know, daily tasks at the supermarket kind of thing, but nothing to do with building relationships or professional space either.
16:55	Joseph	When I was writing about that, I noted that the way you were talking about Japanese, learning Japanese, was a very kind of concrete way to get things done. Um, and you weren't so much thinking about it at, in terms of how learning a language allows you to have deeper relationships, uh, well, we did talk about the relationships that you have with people and the language that you use, and, and this is what you said: <i>All the other English teachers that don't speak English well, avoid me. Other colleagues outside of the English department use a mix of Japanese and English, but I have much less contact with them. Very little. I could go days without using Japanese. I'm sure I have.</i>
17:49	Jonathan	I guess I was probably teaching in high schools and I was like, oh, we used to say the hired guns where they would put the foreign teachers in the back, but we weren't even in the teachers' room. Well, yeah, we're going to that, that first quote. Yeah, that's pretty shocking. I've had plenty of opportunities.
18:09	Joseph	So what is it that's holding you back?
18:13	Jonathan	Living in Tokyo, I think my environment allows for that, so like the end of the day, probably after a hard day's work, the last thing I kind of wanted to do was to come home and study, you know, I just needed to unwind and yeah.
18:27	Joseph	Uh, one of the things that I really learned from talking to you is how much resistance is about staying comfortable, and human beings want to be comfortable, and learning a foreign language or changing the way that you communicate is uncomfortable. I mean, it takes effort, it's effortful

18:49	Jonathan	It's hard. Yeah. When I first came to Japan, my thought, I planned was only one or two years. So, and I was just working, working, working, and then, Uh, yeah, maybe I just didn't realize until years later that, okay, how, as a language teacher how, uh, integrated well language is culture, right? So had I known that maybe that would have motivated me a lot more, um, for sure. But, but as I get older and when I'm living in Japan and I'm being single, too, that need is becoming stronger now, because let's say I do retire in Japan and I'm living on my own, and now I do need to call the hospital, you know? Um, but then just have friends too and, you know, and, just having the language going forward would allow just a much more meaningful daily existence as well.
19:51	Joseph	When I was interviewing you before I asked you about cultural difference and let me just...
19:58	Jonathan	I think I remember some of these really? Yeah. I got
	Joseph	Its all in the book, man
20:06	Jonathan	So go buy that book, ladies and gentlemen
20:14	Joseph	Right. Deep culture, 2007 multi-lingual matters. Um, so this is what you said about, Japanese cultural. <i>The Japanese ability to be patient has rubbed off on me. They are attuned to other people's feelings, but a lot of times they limit themselves too, by being too concerned with what other people think. And so they don't express themselves or do what they really want because they're too worried about how other people view them.</i>
20:40	Jonathan	Yeah, it sounded a bit ignorant there, but, uh, yeah. Wow,
20:52	Joseph	Well, so let me tell you what I wrote about that in my book, and then see what you think. Because what I said at the time was that you understood and appreciated things that you found to be positive about Japanese cultural values, but at some level there was a deeper kind of resistance, you know, and when you saying, you know, they limit themselves or they worry too much about

		what other people think and that, that's largely unconscious, but what do you think,
21:23	Jonathan	Yeah. Making judgments on. Yeah. Not knowing the culture very well. Right.
21:32	Joseph	<i>There was actually another quote, which was related to that. You said <i>Japanese society as a whole will never fully accept me. There's a sense that there's a barrier there. I didn't feel it was even worth trying to break that barrier down. I'm happy on this side.</i></i>
21:50	Jonathan	Wow. What was I basing that on?
21:55	Joseph	Actually you did mention that you mentioned that other foreigners had told you that even if you speak fluent Japanese, that Japanese people will never accept you. And to be fair, Japanese society is not easy to become. It's not easy to get on the inside.
22:08	Jonathan	Yeah. Making blanket statements like that based on and not, not having adapted very deeply at that point. Yeah. Well, I'm, I'm more aware now I'd like you to know. So,
22:23	Joseph	Well, it's, it's really fun. To talk to you about this stuff.
22:28	Jonathan	Some of these are cringe-worthy, but . . .
22:32	Joseph	but, this idea which you picked up on that resistance is about making judgements. Because that kind of keeps us comfortable but it's nice also that, you know, your thinking continues to evolve, over time.
22:50	Jonathan	Yeah, I think maybe because I didn't really adapt and get deeper, but I think maybe I'd benefit from the length I spent there, and plus meeting you and you know, learning more about that cultural awareness. Um, but yeah, maybe the I'm sure that, well, I'm sure there are foreigners that have been in Japan 40 years and still haven't adapted at all.

23:13	Joseph	<p>Yeah. Well, I think the other thing about resistance is that, you know, you kind of have the luxury of choosing how much you want to adapt, you live in Tokyo, you work in an English speaking environment. Things are all, you know, efficient and.., but for people who don't have that freedom to not adapt, like let's say that you're a refugee and you've come to a country and you have to learn a language simply to survive and you didn't choose to come, and then you're under this enormous pressure to adapt to these local conditions. And maybe people have prejudice against you. And so in a situation like that, the pressures are enormous. And also in that sense, resistance is a kind of very natural self-protection mechanism, what we're calling resistance, discovers this enormous range of different experience, but I suppose in the end human beings, are, both need to protect themselves and feel comfortable, but we also, we're curious and we want to be connected to the people around us. It struck me that you talked about these friendships that you made, and maybe it was your desire for connection with people, which is allowing you to feel more and more like Japan really is home and that you have deeper connections there.</p>
24:41	Jonathan	<p>And, it's just probably a maturity process too, of having lived in a place that long. It just kinda hit me and maybe we talked about it years ago in the book, but my whole life, I moved every two or three years. So I was always having to go these new places and finding certain ways to feel comfortable and adapting. But at the same time, then I am uprooted. So maybe there was just, this part of me was natural resistance to that. Oh, well this is going to end in two years and now I'm going to be moved to Turkey or I'm going to move to the east coast, I'm going to move to a rural town in Idaho, or we're going to move down to the deep south again, or I don't know. I just, it just kinda hit me,</p>
25:28	Joseph	<p>I hadn't thought of it that way, but for someone who grew up moving around a lot, like you did, then maybe, resistance is a way to avoid the disappointment of having to uproot yourself again.</p>

25:44	Jonathan	Yeah, but I always found, but every place we went to it and I loved, and I always, I didn't want to leave there found certain a level of comfort, but yeah,
25:55	Joseph	Well, I, I want to thank you for agreeing to talk to me about this and to do so publicly on this podcast. It's been so great,
26:07	Jonathan	Oh, you're welcome.
Part 3 - Title		
26:17	Ishita	So we can learn about resistance from hearing stories like the Jonathan moving on from there. What can we learn from science about resistance, I guess, from the perspective of evolutionary psychology, resistance is a form of threat response.
26:39	Joseph	Yeah, I think I agree at the most basic level, it's a, it's a kind of threat response. We could also call it a natural bias.
26:48	Ishita	But how is resistance a bias?
26:52	Joseph	Our mind is full of biases. Often called cognitive biases. And a lot of those biases are related to resistance.
27:00	Ishita	Ethnocentrism for itself.
27:04	Joseph	Absolutely. I mean, ethnocentrism means we judge things from our own cultural perspective and of course that's going to tend to make us judge cultural difference negatively.
27:15	Ishita	Right. And then there's familiarity bias. We naturally feel comforted and have positive feelings about the familiar. I remember in episode nine, Yvonne talked about her American friend who wanted to eat at McDonald's when she was traveling in Europe, she was stressed out and needed something familiar to comfort her
27:43	Joseph	I have done the same thing. Look for something familiar when you're stressed in a foreign country. Because basically novelty is stressful. It's exciting, but it's stressful, and that can irritate us and

		it can make us more judgmental. On top of that, we have in-group bias. We naturally have more positive feelings about people who are similar to us. And we rely on heuristics, which are these kinds of mental shortcuts that we use. We jump to conclusions when we don't understand. That also leads us to making negative judgements.
28:22	Ishita	And then there's confirmation bias.
28:28	Joseph	Oh, is that some thunder there in the background. Is this an Indian monsoon
28:37	Ishita	That is Joseph, yes. Some monsoon sounds for free.
28:39	Joseph	Yes.
28:42	Ishita	And yes, so there's confirmation biases. And that contributes to resistance. That's when we look for things, which confirm what we already believe. So if we start out with a negative image of a new place, we're likely to find more and more things that confirm those negative judgments.
29:01	Joseph	And there are so many of these cognitive biases we could go on and on, but I think the larger point is that resistance is natural, which doesn't mean it's good, of course, but it's a natural part of the way our mind works and the way that human beings are. And it reminds me of this quote from Milton Bennett, from his 1986 article, it was the very first sentence, which really stuck in my mind. <i>Intercultural sensitivity is not natural. It is not part of our primate past, nor has it characterized most of human history.</i>
29:38	Ishita	It's hard for me to really digest this idea, that intercultural sensitivity is not natural at some level it's discouraging. Human beings naturally resist difference. It contributes to violence and oppression and prejudice and discrimination.
30:00	Joseph	That is so true. It is hard to digest that. And I try to remember though that although humans are resistant by nature. We are also curious by nature. We are also empathetic by nature. We also form

		community by nature. We are social. We want to be with other human beings. So there is this very fine balance between these two things.
30:25	Ishita	That is so true. And as cultural bridge people, we can't really change human nature, but maybe we can tip the balance a bit towards this openness to change.
30:39	Joseph	I hope so. And I don't think we can use logical arguments against resistance, but I think we can set the conditions to lower resistance, this requires security. We need to feel safe, even if we don't feel completely comfortable. And we need to understand the differences that are provoking resistance.
31:02	Ishita	I think good intercultural training does that, it provides that safe space for people to explore difference to come to new understandings?
31:13	Joseph	Well, and wouldn't it be great if this podcast and our conversation and talking to Jonathan and the community of listeners that we have here, wouldn't it be great if that's helping to accomplish that a little.
31:26	Ishita	Well, I really hope so. And I believe so. Well with that, it's time to wrap this episode up. And by the way, if you want to learn more about bias, do take out Episode 9 of the Deep Culture Podcast <i>Bias is not Bias</i> .
		Ending
31:48	Joseph	<p>The deep culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute and NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. If you're interested in going deeper into these topics, you can do that at JII Brain, Mind and Culture Masterclass. To find out more, search for the Japan Intercultural Institute.</p> <p>We would really like to hear from you, write us at DC podcast at japanintercultural.org. We're also on YouTube. Please subscribe. You can put your comments there. A special thanks to everyone on the podcast team Zeina Matar, Daniel Glintz. You, Ishita Ray,</p>

		<p>Yvonne van der Pol and thanks to our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz, and everyone at JII.</p> <p>And thanks to you Ishita for spending this time with me</p>
32;39	Ishita	<p>Thank you so much, Joseph. It was wonderful. And if you heard some rain and thunder in the background during the episode that some Indian monsoon delivered right to you.</p>