

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 18: Culture Shock

In this episode, Joseph Shaules and Ishita Ray discuss culture shock, the psychological disorientation caused by foreign experiences. They tell the story of Kalervo Oberg – the anthropologist who first wrote about culture shock, and explain the difference between culture surprise, culture stress and culture shock. They explore research into resilience, which reminds us that foreign experiences are often deeply meaningful even if they're not always 'fun'.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Joseph	Hello, I'm Joseph Shaules and welcome to the deep culture podcast where we explore culture and the science of mind. And I'm here with today's co-host Ishita Ray. How are you doing?
00:00:11	Ishita	Hi, Joseph. I'm great. It's great to be with you again. So Joseph, you're not in Tokyo right now. Are you?
00:00:19	Joseph	No, I'm not, I am now in San Diego, California, my hometown I've travelled here to spend some time with my family.
00:00:26	Ishita	You've been living outside of the United States for many years now. Does it feel like coming home?
00:00:33	Joseph	It's an odd feeling because it, it feels very familiar, but it also feels a little foreign. And I notice these little things that I never paid attention to when I was actually living here, like huge eight lane freeways, huge amounts of food that they serve you in the restaurants, and how strangers will talk to you in the supermarket checkout line. I sometimes feel like a spy.

00:00:57	Ishita	A spy!
00:00:58	Joseph	Well, you know, everything is familiar, but it's like I have this secret life apart from everyone else. And like I'm observing everything that, that goes on.
00:01:06	Ishita	When I came back to India, after staying in Europe, I noticed these little things too - like how people communicate indirectly in India. Like when my mother says, "Are you hungry?", she usually means "I am hungry. I want to have dinner right now."
00:01:29	Joseph	That's funny, that's something you would not have been thinking about before you left India, right?
00:01:35	Ishita	Exactly. And it's sometimes called <i>reentry shock</i> or <i>reverse culture shock</i> .
00:01:42	Joseph	You know, it's a reminder of how really powerful psychologically a foreign experience is because spending time away even changes our perceptions of back home.
00:01:53	Ishita	Yes. And It's not just when we come back home but often even more so when we leave home and spend time in foreign places, we experienced culture shock. And that is the theme of today's episode, culture shock, this psychological disorientation caused by foreign experiences.
00:02:16	Joseph	So we're going to look a bit at the psychology of culture shock. What is it? Why does it happen? What can we do about it...
00:02:25	Ishita	And that brings us to Part One: Surprise, Stress and Shock. Let's start with the definition of culture shock from the Oxford Languages Dictionary: "It's the feeling of disorientation experienced by someone who is suddenly subjected to an

		unfamiliar culture, way of life or set of attitudes.”
00:02:55	Joseph	The first time that I remember experiencing that was when I went on a three-month homestay in Mexico when I was 19. And I was definitely off balance sometimes. It was a great experience, but I do remember feeling lonely and sometimes like, I don't want to go out of my room. I remember eating lots of cookies.
00:03:15	Ishita	I vividly remember this grey saturday afternoon in March, when I was in France, coming from a tropical country, I had expected that the weather will start brightening up by March and then the white snowflakes started to appear...again!
00:03:33	Joseph	Oh no...
00:03:33	Ishita	Except they weren't magical anymore. You know, all of a sudden the novelty, the excitement of experiencing snow, all that had vanished into thin air. And I just burst out crying. It was as if the snow symbolized everything foreign and unfamiliar to me at that moment. And I just couldn't bear the burden of the foreign winter anymore.
00:04:03	Joseph	What a wonderful phrase – “foreign winter”. That really captures this feeling of culture shock.
00:04:12	Ishita	But you know this is still pretty vague to me because that was just my personal story, but people have a lot of different reactions.
00:04:23	Joseph	And people use the word culture shock to mean many different things. So let's dig a bit deeper into this, and I think we should tell the story of the creation of the word culture shock.
00:04:36	Ishita	Great idea. It goes back to an article by Kalervo Oberg...
00:04:42	Joseph	Kalervo Oberg was a Canadian anthropologist. And in 1954, he gave a speech at the women's club of Rio de Janeiro. So the story goes that that was the first time that the word culture shock was used. Now he described it as an occupational disease of someone who has been transplanted abroad. And later that speech was reprinted in an anthropology journal.
00:05:07	Ishita	I am imagining the scene that there are these American expatriate women living in Brazil, probably pretty privileged.
00:05:18	Joseph	I bet that's true. In his speech for example, he talks about the problem of not knowing how to talk to servants.
00:05:25	Ishita	It's very interesting to read the article today because some parts sound so dated, and yet his basic analysis of what causes culture shock still seems really insightful.
00:05:39	Joseph	And the opening of the article is timeless and now I'm

		paraphrasing just a little bit, but let's read some. <i>“Culture shock is caused by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. The thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life. When to shake hands and what to say when we meet people, these cues may be words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, or norms.”</i>
00:06:20	Ishita	And he's not talking here about strange food or exotic customs. Rather it's differences in everyday behavior, which tires us out. He goes on to say, <i>“All of us depend for our peace of mind and our efficiency on hundreds of these cues. Most of which we do not carry on the level of conscious awareness.”</i>
00:06:48	Joseph	And he's really talking about deep culture. In fact, Edward Hall, who published <i>The Silent Language</i> five years later in 1959 is given credit as one of the first people to talk about how culture influences us unconsciously. But Oberg had understood that culture shock happens because our unconscious mind must adapt to new ways of seeing the world, of interacting with the world.
00:07:17	Ishita	He uses a metaphor that we often hear. He or she is like a ‘fish out of water’, no matter how broadminded or full of good will, you may be a series of props have been knocked from under you.
00:07:32	Joseph	I like this idea, it's not a question of goodwill or being open-minded or being curious. It's simply that your mind loses its bearings and you cannot navigate like normal.
00:07:47	Ishita	And I think anyone who has travelled to a foreign country has experienced this to one degree or another, a feeling of being overwhelmed by new surroundings, mentally tired when exploring a new city or feeling homesick and missing familiar food and friends. But I feel like it's still not clear if all of these things are the same thing or not.
00:08:15	Joseph	I know that in my work with students who will be going abroad, I divide the experience into three categories: <i>Culture Surprise, Culture Stress, and Culture Shock</i> .
00:08:27	Ishita	So Culture Surprise is when you start noticing cultural differences - it can be interesting, it can be surprising or stressful. It's like, “Wow, look at that!”
00:08:40	Joseph	And then Culture Stress - that's the mental stress caused by the unfamiliar things in everyday life. So like, “How do I use this stupid ATM machine? Because this ATM is different than the one back

		home, or maybe it doesn't have the language that I speak." And then Culture Shock is a kind of depression or mental tiredness, but there's no specific reason for it. It's just that our psychological batteries are low, this feeling of – "Could you just leave me alone?"
00:09:11	Ishita	Did you come up with those?
00:09:13	Joseph	To be honest, I can't remember. I've been using them for a long time and I would like to say that they come from Janet Bennett, but I was not able to find the reference.
00:09:23	Ishita	So when we talk about culture shock, we are really talking about a lot of different experiences.
00:09:32	Joseph	I agree. And I don't think culture shock is one single thing. People's situations and personalities are so different. It's really hard to make generalizations or to predict how someone will react to being in a foreign environment. But there are some models that people have created, to help understand this process. And that brings us to Part Two: The W-curve.
00:10:28	Joseph	You know, when we were planning this episode, I asked the members of the podcast team, if they could share experiences of culture shock, and everyone had lots of things to share. The problem is everyone's reactions are very particular, very individual, and I think that's one reason that it's hard to fit the culture shock experience into a kind of broad theoretical framework.
00:10:31	Ishita	True, but I think it's still important to know about some of the theories that are out there. For example, I think the most common model of culture shock is the W-curve.
00:10:43	Joseph	And when I was researching this episode, I looked around to see if people were still using the W- curve model or theory. Because it's been around a long time. And I found that it is being used by universities to talk about the adjustment gone through by incoming freshmen students.
00:11:04	Ishita	It makes sense, because if you are leaving home for the first time and coming to live on a college campus, it can be a huge adjustment. Culture shock is not simply when we go to a foreign country, it can happen any time when have to adjust to a new environment.
00:11:23	Joseph	And so the W- curve model, it describes these stages of

		adjustment to a new environment.
00:11:31	Ishita	It's called the W-curve because it's shaped like a W. So it starts up on the left, goes down up again in the middle down again, and then finally up on the right.
00:11:46	Joseph	And so the high point on the left is the honeymoon phase. When everything in the new environment is interesting and exciting after a time that it dips down and you have a culture shock crisis where your mood or your energy is low. So that's like your snow story, Right?
00:12:05	Ishita	Right. I remember looking at myself in the mirror one morning and thinking, "If I die in this cold snowy dark morning, my family and friends won't even know!"
00:12:18	Joseph	Oh, that is really extreme!
00:12:21	Ishita	I know, right?
00:12:23	Joseph	But, but I have to say, I went to France in my thirties. I had already lived in other countries. I had travelled quite a bit. I was taking French classes. I was making friends there, but still after two months, I also had this down period where I, I lost interest in seeing Paris. I'd lost interest in studying. I was staying at home and reading whatever books were on the shelf. And I remember feeling guilty. I had been anticipating this for so long and I felt I should be out exploring the city. But I just felt kind of, you know, blah!
00:13:03	Ishita	That definitely sounds like culture shock.
00:13:07	Joseph	But in fact, I didn't even realize it at the time. In spite of my intercultural theory that I had learned, I just felt like I was being lazy.
00:13:20	Ishita	So true, we often don't notice culture shock, and can be so hard on ourselves. So the W-curve goes back up in the middle as we adjust to the new environment, did that happen to you?
00:13:33	Joseph	Yes. After another month or two, I did feel like my usual self again, and I did really enjoy my life in Paris.
00:13:41	Ishita	The W -curve also predicts that you feel another honeymoon when you return to your home. I guess you return to Tokyo.
00:13:52	Joseph	That's right. But I did not feel a honeymoon phase back in Tokyo. I immediately went into a kind of negative re-entry shock. I noticed all of the things that I didn't like about Tokyo and all of the things

		that I missed about Paris.
00:14:07	Ishita	So neither of our experiences was just like the W- curve, but it's more of a guideline than a prediction.
00:14:15	Joseph	And of course everyone's experience is different, which is why I thought we should ask our podcast team member, Daniel, what he thinks about all of this, because he has lived all over the world and is probably the most travelled of any of us and has worked with a lot of international people.
00:14:36	Ishita	So we asked him to first share a bit about his international experience.
00:14:46	Daniel	<p>In a nutshell, my experience was as a student, as a newspaper correspondent, as a tourist guide and as a delegate for the international committee of the Red Cross.</p> <p>The times I lived abroad was first in Holland and then China, Japan, India, Sri Lanka. I spent some time in Jordan, in Nairobi and Africa, and then in central America, Mexico, Colombia, I think most of these places I stayed a year, or maybe sometimes two years, maximum was four years.</p> <p>At some point I always experienced their culture shock. There was always one moment where I was totally fed up. I was really fed up. in Japan I was fed up because, the doors were too small. I was banging my head. In China, I was fed up by the system. I thought, I had lost all my individuality. In Mexico city, I was fed up with the pollution and traffic jams. In Arabic countries, I was fed up by the people always changing their minds at the last minute, and so on and so on.</p> <p>So yeah, it never really disappears. I mean, culture shock can come back any moment, anytime you're abroad, there's no permanent cure for it. But maybe with time passing you just start to realize, hey, that's just normal. It's part of it. It's part of the cycle of getting adapted to a new place. And there's nothing big to worry about.</p>
00:16:28	Ishita	Daniel also spoke about what he had noticed when working with expatriates and migrants.
00:16:41	Daniel	The experience of culture shock is very different. Whether you are voluntarily going abroad, or whether you are forced to leave home because of economic difficulties or political issues and so on. So usually people who are voluntary they tend to have a culture shock after the initial period, which we also call the honeymoon. Now, this is completely different for people who are forced migrants, people who are obliged to leave their home country. I've met Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Europe and in Jordan and these

		<p>people from one day to another, they lose their job, they lose their status, they lose their friends and all this because they were forced to leave.</p> <p>They find themselves in small places, temporary shelters with their family all together. Sometimes they work as taxi drivers way below their usual level of education. So yeah, the difference is vast.</p>
00:17:52	Ishita	And we asked him what advice he would give.
00:17:56	Daniel	<p>It is difficult to give a general advice how to cope with culture shock, a psychologist once told me if you go abroad and you prepare to have a culture shock , pack a five senses first aid kit. First aid kit contains five objects, one for each sense.</p> <p>So a photograph of someone who you feel very close connection, sounds from home or the voice of someone from home, a typical candy or chewing gum or something with a taste you can only find in your home place and maybe something for the smell and then just smell it when you feel a little bit tired or down, and this will give you a few seconds vacation at home. And then the last one is the sense of touch. So maybe, a piece of cloth, a stone, a piece of wood, which comes from a place connected to your home. And if you feel really bad after a big culture shock, open the box, open the first aid box and use these objects, and yes, get home just mentally for 10, 15 minutes, have a good sleep. And you're fit for the next day.</p>
00:19:18	Ishita	Wow. I love the idea of the first aid kit. A whiff of familiarity through the five senses.
00:19:26	Joseph	Because we experience the world with our whole body. And that's another reason why these experiences touch us so deeply. And it's also white culture shock can also have serious mental health consequence.
00:19:40	Ishita	<p>And that brings us to Part Three: There's more to life than happiness.</p> <p>So we said that culture shock is not a single thing. But at the level of cognition, what is happening?</p>
00:20:01	Joseph	Our mind and bodies are complex. And so there's a lot going on. But one thing that certainly happens is something called ego depletion.
00:20:12	Ishita	As I understand it, ego depletion is when our conscious problem-solving part of our mind gets overloaded. We lose willpower and

		easily feel irritated. It doesn't happen only when we are in a foreign environment. It's why we feel so exhausted after a test. And why, when we are tired, after a long day's work, it's harder to resist grabbing a cookie when we get home.
00:20:40	Joseph	Exactly. You just want that cookie! And then in addition to that, as Kalervo Oberg pointed out, Being in a foreign environment is tiring also because our intuitive mind, our automatic mental autopilot must adjust to new mental habits.
00:21:02	Ishita	That's what he was referring to when he talked about losing the signs and symbols of social intercourse. In a foreign country, especially if we don't speak the language well, we are often ignorant and helpless.
00:21:18	Joseph	Totally! Just going to the supermarket can be stressful. You know, what do you do when the cashier speaks to you, and you don't understand.
00:21:26	Ishita	So our problem solving mind goes into overdrive, trying to figure things out. And our unconscious autopilot eventually gets overloaded too, with new patterns. So culture shock is not just feeling down a little bit. It can create serious stress.
00:21:48	Joseph	And that's recognized in the psychology literature as well, which categorizes a culture shock as an adjustment disorder, which is caused by changes or stress in our life. So for example, the Mayo clinic on, their website describes adjustment disorder as a "stress-related condition caused by a stressful or unexpected event".
00:22:12	Ishita	So when I life situation changes, it can create stress, which makes sense such as when we lose our job or move to a different city or have a loved one die. These can bring about really big changes, which can be hard to cope with and can have serious psychological symptoms.
00:22:35	Joseph	Yes on the website, they have this list of symptoms such as feeling sad, hopeless, or not enjoying things you used to enjoy, frequent crying, worrying, or feeling anxious, nervous, jittery, or stressed out. Trouble sleeping, lack of appetite, difficulty concentrating, feeling overwhelmed, difficulty functioning in daily activities, withdrawing from social supports, avoiding important things such as going to work or paying bills or even suicidal thoughts or behavior.
00:23:16	Ishita	That is quite a list. Have you known people who've had these kinds of things?
00:23:23	Joseph	Well, I have, I work a lot with students who are studying abroad and I've seen students who need to return to the home country

		<p>because they've been suffering from feelings of depression and anxiety. I knew one person who arrived in Paris for a study abroad, except that she hadn't made a hotel reservation before arriving. She got in a taxi, found out that it was a holiday weekend. Couldn't find any rooms available. She got so anxious and so stressed. She told the taxi driver to take her back to the airport and she caught a flight home. There is a happy ending to that story. She spent a few days back home. She then went back to France and she had a wonderful experience.</p> <p>So that is a slight reminder, you know, even when it feels terrible, we do adjust and human beings can really handle new experiences once they get used to them.</p>
00:24:14	Ishita	<p>Right. And to think of migrants and refugees, the stresses that can be extremely traumatic. If it's hard for a study abroad student to get used to Paris, imagine what it's like to escape from a war zone, perhaps losing one's home and loved ones, and then finding yourself in a new country, having to adapt to life there.</p>
00:24:39	Joseph	<p>It's important for anyone working in this area to recognize that simply providing food and shelter to someone is just a minimum first step, migrants often need a great deal of support. One meta study found that 15% of migrants experienced depression. And of course this may be in addition to trauma that they have experienced in their home country or while migrating.</p>
00:25:04	Ishita	<p>So let's get back to the question of advice. What should we keep in mind when dealing with this adjustment stress?</p>
00:25:14	Joseph	<p>Well, I find that question tricky, you know, for my students who are studying abroad, I have two contradictory pieces of advice. One is that by going out of our comfort zone, we're likely to have a more enriching and deeper experience, but at the same time, you need to manage your stress and don't overdo it.</p>
00:25:34	Ishita	<p>And just knowing that there's nothing wrong with you can be very helpful. Most people will probably start to feel better before long.</p>
00:25:44	Joseph	<p>And my feeling is if you feel overwhelmed, often it's a good idea to retreat, to a more familiar environment, to recover your sense of normal and reach out to people that you know, when you are ready to venture out again, you'll feel much better.</p> <p>And of course, get help if you need it.</p> <p>So with that in mind, in preparation for this episode, I wanted to learn a bit more about the psychology of adjustment. And so I had a conversation with Cheryl Forster.</p>

00:26:15	Ishita	I remember Cheryl from the JII learning circle, and I think when she was in the Mind, Brain and Culture Masterclass, she woke up at 4:30 AM to participate.
00:26:27	Joseph	That's right. And she's on the west coast of the United States. She's the coordinator of the diversity and psychology program at Portland state university. And in our conversation, she said a couple of things that really stood out for me. One thing she's talked about was that finding meaning is more important than finding happiness.
00:26:49	Ishita	That sounds beautiful. You need to explain more though.
00:26:54	Joseph	Well, she talked about the fact that people like to feel good. And so, we associate happiness with positive emotion, but research into resilience, which is the ability to deal with adversity finds that, and these are Cheryl's words, "If you chase happiness, you tend to end up less happy. When we focus on meaning, we end up with more life satisfaction."
00:27:25	Ishita	Isn't that so true for intercultural experiences? If you go abroad thinking you're going to have a fun and exciting time all the time, you can be really disappointed. But if you start with the assumption that you're going on an exploration that might challenge you. And what you're looking for is a meaningful experience, you are much more able to turn challenges into growth.
00:27:53	Joseph	And along those lines, Cheryl also told me about the work of Dr. Arielle Schwartz, who I wasn't familiar with, but her practice focuses on the qualities that are important for coping with life's challenges. So she emphasizes resilience and she says "People who are resilient, tend to be flexible in the way they think about challenges, and flexible in the way they react emotionally to stress. Many are able to accept what they cannot change to learn from failure, to use emotions like grief and anger, to fuel compassion and courage, and to search for opportunity and meaning in diversity."
00:28:35	Ishita	And so true that the challenges of culture shock or adjustment stress or whatever we call it, can be a chance to develop resilience and have deeply meaningful experiences.
00:28:49	Joseph	Even if they don't always feel good.
00:28:53	Ishita	Right. And on that positive note, perhaps we should end the episode here.
00:28:59	Joseph	You're probably right. Although as usual, I feel we just have begun to scratch the surface.

00:29:06	Ishita	We haven't talked about the Oz moment, or the cognitive impact of foreign experiences or the psychological resistance to cultural differences.
00:29:17	Joseph	I guess we'll just have to keep making more podcasts.
00:29:20	Ishita	That is it. Well, it was great fun making this one with you.
00:29:25	Joseph	Yes, it was.
00:29:26	Ishita	We've drawn on a number of sources today
00:29:29	Joseph	Indeed. We have, we were referring to the work of Kalervo Oberg and his 1960 article culture shock adjustment to new cultural environments published in practical anthropology. Also we referred to the work of Janet Bennett, her chapter "Transition Shock: Putting culture shock in perspective" appears in "Basic Concepts of Intercultural Communication. And I would just like to mention that Janet recently passed away. She has been a shining light of insight, in our field, a key figure with the intercultural communication Institute and just a marvelous, wonderful human being And she will be sorely missed. We also referenced the article "Prevalence of Depression among Migrants", a systematic review and meta-analysis from the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health by Shia and Wilson et.al. And you can check out the article "There's More to Life than Being Happy" by Emily Esfahani Smith in the Atlantic Magazine, the Schwartz quote, which Cheryl passed onto me was a summary of Southwick and Charney. I'd like to give a special thanks to Daniel Glinz for sharing his culture shock experiences, and Cheryl Forster for her input on resilience. Keep up the great work Cheryl and see you at another JII event.
00:31:05	Ishita	And you should mention Joseph that JII's learning circle is country focused on bias. You can join in by becoming a member of JII.
00:31:15	Joseph	That's a great idea. Please become a member of JII to support the work we do. We have a great community there
00:31:22	Ishita	Indeed.
00:31:24	Joseph	Also, thanks to the rest of the podcast team, Yvonne van der Pol, Zeina Matar, the magic sound man, Robinson Fritz, and everyone who supports this podcast as a member of JII. The deep culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan intercultural Institute, an educational NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I am Joseph Shaules, the director of JII. And finally, thanks so much to you Ishita it is always a pleasure to spend time with you like this.

00:32:00	Ishita	Thank you so much, Joseph, always a lot of fun.
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