

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 17 – Honor and Diversity)

What does it mean to “honor diversity”? Joseph Shaules and Ishita Ray explore this hot-button issue: What is an “honor culture” and how is it a double-edged sword? Is social media the new village square in which our moral values are under public scrutiny? What is the diversity that we are honoring? Ishita shares personal stories from India where the pressure to live up to moral ideals can be positive or destructive. We discuss research into the embodied nature of cultural values and how honoring diversity requires building bridges of understanding.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Ishita	(Hook) I had strict instructions to touch the feet of every elder person I would be introduced to. I was about four or five years old. So practically everyone was older to me. I would just enter each house and start touching feet.
00:00:24	Joseph	Hello, I'm Joseph Shaules. Welcome to the Deep Culture podcast, where we explore culture and the science of mind. And I'm here today with Ishita Ray for this first episode of 2022. Hello, Ishita!
00:00:39	Ishita	Hi, Joseph and happy new year, wishing you and all our listeners, many good things in the coming year.
00:00:46	Joseph	Well, thanks so much. It is such a pleasure to have you co-hosting this episode today.
00:00:53	Ishita	It's a pleasure to be here as well. Or maybe I should say, “It's an honor to be here!” because today we're talking about honor. And this phrase in particular that we sometimes hear “Honor Diversity”.
00:01:08	Joseph	Yes. And this episode was inspired by an online article that I saw and I sent to you, and that kind of sparked a discussion between us.
00:01:17	Ishita	Yes, I've got this here, uh, “10 tips to help managers honor diversity in challenging times”.
00:01:25	Joseph	It seems to be intended for business people working in human resources. But we were talking about how for many people, it has become really important to kind of publicly declare one's philosophy of honoring diversity.
00:01:41	Ishita	And I've heard people say that they sometimes feel like they're walking on eggshells, you know, afraid of giving offense or using a politically incorrect word.

00:01:53	Joseph	And you made a comment that really struck me. You compared that to a village square in a small town.
00:02:01	Ishita	It actually reminds me of the importance of honor in some communities in India where there's social pressure to conform publicly to certain moral standards.
00:02:14	Joseph	That's so interesting - honor as a public display of morality. So, let let's talk about that some more, but first, what was your reaction to this article? This, this idea of tips to “honor diversity”.
00:02:28	Ishita	It struck me as a bit, well, abstract, like honor diversity was being used as some kind of a slogan. Tricks to help you, and help you to do what? Navigate diversity?
00:02:44	Joseph	And these supposed tips are really general, like “be there and listen”, and “learn what to say and what not to say”.
00:02:52	Ishita	Wow! Learn to say and what not to say. I mean, how do we do that, and who is the judge? Is there no room for disagreement?
00:03:03	Joseph	Well, and that article doesn't really explain that.
00:03:07	Ishita	You know, as someone who grew up in India, a society with a great deal of diversity, I have some strong opinions about the challenges of diversity. And that takes a lot more than just tips or tricks.
00:03:23	Joseph	You know, and I hadn't really thought about it, but it's interesting that the word honor is paired with the word diversity.
00:03:31	Ishita	You know, for me honor is a loaded word as well. Honor is a very powerful social value in India. And we sometimes talk about having this honor culture. It can be very positive and give us high moral standards, but when we demand that people honor something, it could turn ugly. We have examples of honor related violence, even killings to defend one's honor. This is definitely not a word I would use casually when talking about issues of diversity, for example.
00:04:08	Joseph	Well, and this word diversity too, is rather fuzzy as well. And what does it mean to honor diversity?
00:04:16	Ishita	I am not sure what the author of this article means by it. But I think we agree that in the work we do as intercultural educators, we focus on diversity in terms of understanding differences, on building bridges.
00:04:31	Joseph	And this podcast focuses on the challenges of doing just that, because there is so much diversity in the world and because our minds are so deeply influenced by our cultural background.
00:04:43	Ishita	True! We are all ethnocentric.
00:04:46	Joseph	And we have natural biases. All humans have these natural biases.
00:04:52	Ishita	Honoring diversity is not simple at all.
00:04:56	Joseph	So today let's look a bit more deeply at honor and diversity and why this idea can be a double-edged sword.
00:05:07	Ishita	And that brings us to part one: what an honor!
Part 1 – What an honor!		

00:05:18	Joseph	So, honor is an everyday word, but I'm not sure I can define it precisely. And as a US American, it sounds a bit formal or, or old fashioned
00:05:28	Ishita	In last month's podcast episode, you said to Bob Whiting, "It's an honor to have you on the deep culture podcast". And at the end, he said, "it's an honor to be on this program". The question is, what does it mean to be honored?
00:05:45	Joseph	Well, I looked up honor in the Oxford English dictionary and it had two main definitions and the first is "high respect, esteem, or reverence accorded to exalted worth or rank".
00:06:00	Ishita	So, you thanked Bob for the privilege of his esteemed presence, and he returns the compliment.
00:06:09	Joseph	So, honor is public recognition of esteem of, of exaltation.
00:06:15	Ishita	Yes. And I think this public element is really important to the idea of honor.
00:06:22	Joseph	Well, and there's a second definition too, and that is "a fine sense of and strict allegiance to what is due or right".
00:06:34	Ishita	It kind of makes sense to me because in certain communities in India honor is very powerful. You bring honor by achieving great things and dishonor, when you fail to live up to these community standards.
00:06:51	Joseph	So, what does that mean in terms of everyday life?
00:06:55	Ishita	For example, when I worked in this big multinational company, my parents' neighbors, wouldn't stop asking questions about me and raving about how well I was doing in life. The high-status company defined my standing in society in their eyes. And then, last year I left the company and have been working on my own since then. Suddenly these same people have gone all quiet and awkward when the topic of my professional life comes up.
00:07:31	Joseph	Well so, what kind of things do people say?
00:07:33	Ishita	Things like, "why would you leave such a good job? Are you doing something better?" And people have actually tried to console my mother about it.
00:07:44	Joseph	But that's a lot of pressure!
00:07:46	Ishita	True. Whether you want it or not, you are being judged by these standards, which is why people feel a need to defend or uphold their honor.
00:07:58	Joseph	So this is a bit hard for me to grasp. I grew up in Southern California. The word honor is not something I heard a lot of talk about, but we can say then, that honor is about one's reputation.
00:08:10	Ishita	Yes, but not just a title or status. An attack on your honor implies a failure to live up to modern standards.
00:08:26	Joseph	So when we talk about an honor culture, we're talking about this sense that one's morality is public and it has to be maintained in a visible way.
00:08:36	Ishita	Yes. And it could have its advantages. Like last month I was in Udaipur, in Rajasthan. It is a state famous for the Rajputs who attach a lot of

		importance to honor. On the last day I wanted to eat at a restaurant that was highly recommended to me by the locals, but the driver was supposed to drop me back at the hotel. Instead, he went out of his way to take me to this restaurant. He said, "You are new to the city. If I do not honor your request, what impression of the Rajputs would it leave in your mind? Guests are like gods to us."
00:09:19	Joseph	So he was upholding the reputation of the community.
00:09:22	Ishita	Exactly. But there's a flip side. Rajasthan is also one of the states where honor killing is a stark reality. Marriages outside of one's community are perceived to bring dishonor and therefore need to be protected with one's life.
00:09:40	Joseph	So honor is a double-edged sword. Having high ideals to live up to is a good thing, but it's really striking that something good, these high moral standards can turn into something destructive.
00:09:52	Ishita	So it is a social contract, a way a community regulates behavior, and that contract can be abused.
00:10:01	Joseph	Well, I see that double-edged sword at work and the idea of honoring diversity as well, because taken in good faith, the idea of honoring diversity is an ideal that we should all strive for. But if this turns into a test of purity or a way to control people, then it's becoming destructive.
00:10:20	Ishita	I really like this phrase: "a test of purity", because that's just what the idea of honor is like in some communities in India.
00:10:29	Joseph	So at the risk of grossly simplifying this, this fear that people sometimes have of using the wrong word or being politically incorrect, that could be seen as a form of honor culture.
00:10:43	Ishita	It is a provocative idea!
00:10:46	Joseph	Well, if that's the case, then maybe social media is the equivalent of this small village square, where we have to uphold our moral reputation.
00:10:56	Ishita	And maybe that's why the politics of honoring diversity can become so partisan. It's not just about government policy, it's a competition to see who or what deserves to be honored publicly.
00:11:12	Joseph	So that's making sense to me. But I'm still wondering about this word diversity, you know, that's a word that's closely related to the work that we do, but I have the feeling that there are different ways that it is being used. And I feel like we should dig into that too.
00:11:28	Ishita	And that brings us to part 2 - Diversity is hunky-dory
Part 2 – Diversity is hunky-dory		
00:11:43	Ishita	We started this conversation by talking about honoring diversity and said, that honor is about public morality, but I'm still not sure what it means to honor diversity. Well, let's start with the dictionary then. According to Merriam Webster, diversity refers to "the condition of having or being composed of different elements, variety".
00:12:12	Joseph	So diversity relates to difference. Basically, people are not all the same.

00:12:18	Ishita	I hear it used that way in corporate settings. The idea, for example, that each individual on a team has different abilities or backgrounds and that diverse teams can lead to synergy.
00:12:32	Joseph	But I feel like in conversations about social justice, the word diversity means something more than simply people being different. It refers to people or communities that have traditionally been marginalized.
00:12:45	Ishita	So metaphorically, honoring diversity would refer to raising up those who have been oppressed. It emphasizes power differentials.
00:12:55	Joseph	So in that context, the word honor holding in public esteem, it makes sense. It would be a raising up of people who have been put down, which is certainly a noble goal. But the idea that you can be shamed or punished, if you use the wrong word, that can be abused.
00:13:15	Ishita	And let's be clear. Of course, we should avoid insulting or insensitive language. And of course, social inequality needs to be addressed. That is certainly an ongoing issue in India.
00:13:29	Joseph	And of course, in my country, the US as well,
00:13:31	Ishita	What I find a bit disturbing, however, is the possibility that putting on a display of honoring diversity becomes a substitute for doing all the hard work of finding solutions to real world problems.
00:13:45	Joseph	Particularly because people often don't agree on solutions or, or even what the problems are. And that's precisely because there is so much diversity in the world.
00:13:59	Ishita	The difficulty of agreeing on solutions is certainly something that we both see in the work that we do.
00:14:08	Joseph	Well, then maybe we should explain that we both work in intercultural education and training in international contexts. So helping people work together internationally, for example, or preparing students to study abroad or helping team members from different countries collaborate.
00:14:27	Ishita	And in those contexts, a primary challenge is simply understanding the differences that you are dealing with. Because there is so much diversity in the world, different cultural perspectives, customs values, beliefs, different assumptions about what's important in life about what's fair. It goes on and on.
00:14:50	Joseph	And difference is deep, and that is, that's humbling. It means that we have to question our own values and we can't just assume that our standards should apply.
00:14:56	Ishita	And because of that, I think there's an important difference between working in intercultural education and training, what we do, and what is sometimes called education for diversity and inclusion.
00:15:16	Joseph	I agree. I see the term diversity and inclusion as often referring to a more activist approach to education, trying to create positive social change, for example, by raising awareness of discrimination or injustice.
00:15:34	Ishita	So this brings us back to the question of living up to ideals. The ideal of social justice and inclusion is a worthy goal, it's a valuable ideal, but if it becomes performative or coercive...

00:15:49	Joseph	If people change their behavior out of fear of social rejection...
00:15:54	Ishita	Then that's the destructive side of honor culture. When Twitter becomes the public square!
00:16:01	Joseph	Yes. And the public square where people can yell at each other without having to face each other and where extreme people get the most attention.
00:16:16	Ishita	I think the role of social media in all this is a whole other topic. But I want to get back to this idea of honoring diversity as a slogan and why it's not enough.
00:16:29	Joseph	Well, and this is something I deal with in my work with students who are studying abroad. I work with a lot of university students from Europe and the US who are coming to Japan. And for them, the idea of respecting cultural difference is really common. But when they arrive, they often aren't sure how that should be applied. For example, on the one hand, they want to respect Japanese cultural values. But on the other hand, there may be things they disagree with or that they think are ethically or morally wrong.
00:17:00	Ishita	Yes. The idea of respecting diversity is all hunky dory, until you face the challenge of adapting yourself to values that make you really uncomfortable.
00:17:11	Joseph	Or that you simply don't understand. So sometimes they ask me "does respecting difference mean I have to do everything like the locals, that I have to accept things that I disagree with?"
00:17:23	Ishita	From my perspective, there is a clear answer to that question. Respecting difference does not mean giving up your own values, but it means you have to ask yourself the question. Do you understand the difference that you encounter? Can you understand where people are coming from?
00:17:43	Joseph	And that has really been a focus of this podcast, understanding these deeper challenges of intercultural understanding.
00:17:51	Ishita	So we've been exploring this idea of honor and diversity. And since this is the deep culture podcast, I'm wondering how brain and mind science can help us with all this.
00:18:05	Joseph	And that brings us to part 3 - Embodied honor.
Part 3: Embodied Honor		
00:18:21	Joseph	So there's a lot of research that I think can help us get a handle on some of these issues. But first, if you haven't listened to it already, definitely check out episode 9 of this podcast "Bias is not bias".
00:18:37	Ishita	It talks about cognitive biases, the natural mental shortcuts that make us jump to conclusions, misjudge, favor the familiar and so on. It makes the point that our judgements and biases are produced by unconscious cognitive processes.
00:18:57	Joseph	And we aren't aware of our biases because they're such a natural part of how we think. And that's one way in which diversity runs deep.

00:19:07	Ishita	And this is true for communities that emphasize honor. It becomes an integral part of how people think. This is something that I've experienced firsthand growing up, I internalized lessons about honor and social standing.
00:19:25	Joseph	So do you have some specific memories?
00:19:28	Ishita	For example, I remember visiting my father's native village for the first time. In India, bending down to touch the feet of your elders with your right hand is a way of showing respect. I had strict instructions to touch the feet of every elder person I would be introduced to. I was about four or five years old. So practically everyone was older to me. I would just enter each house and start touching feet. Everyone would beam smiles in reassurance to my parents.
00:20:02	Joseph	As if to tell them how well you had been brought up.
00:20:06	Ishita	Precisely.
00:20:07	Joseph	And so your behavior was reflecting on the standing of your family, like living up to the ideals in the public square.
00:20:14	Ishita	Exactly. But these things are complicated. The moral ideals are not always positive in practice. For example, I remember that in one home, as I went to touch the feet of a lady, she started to move back. The more I advanced, the more she recoiled. When suddenly someone from the house asked me not to touch her feet. There were awkward smiles. And the lady in question just disappeared into the house.
00:20:49	Joseph	So (they) asked you not to touch her feet. I don't understand.
00:20:55	Ishita	Honestly, I didn't either. It was later that I was told that she's from a different community and that we do not touch their feet. When I asked why, well, obviously not every why had an answer.
00:21:13	Joseph	Wait. So when you say different community, you are referring to one of a lower social standing?
00:21:18	Ishita	That's the perception, correct! In a way, not touching someone's feet would hurt that honor. Just as much as touching someone's who is not a deserved recipient.
00:21:32	Joseph	And the logic is that each person has their place?
00:21:35	Ishita	Yeah. Something like that. It's against my personal values to accept this, but I do understand the different value systems.
00:21:45	Joseph	Well, these sound like really powerful experiences.
00:21:48	Ishita	But that's true for people no matter where they grow up. Our moral compass is shaped by the values around us.
00:21:56	Joseph	I guess, from the perspective of cognition, we would say that these patterns are embodied. They become part of our physiological response to the world.
00:22:14	Ishita	In your book, you talk about research carried out by Richard Nisbett.
00:22:20	Joseph	Yeah, we've talked about Richard Nisbett's work before, particularly his book "The Geography of Thought", which talks about how culture shapes our cognitive processes.

00:22:30	Ishita	And he also did research into what people call the culture of honor in the Southern United States.
00:22:37	Joseph	Yeah, it was really interesting. He did experiments that showed how a culture of honor is evidenced in cognition, emotion, behavior, and physiological reactions of white males from the Southern US. This is a bit heavy but let me just quote an abstract from one of his academic papers. "Participants were university of Michigan students who grew up in the North or South. In three experiments, they were insulted by a Confederate who bumped into the participant and called him an "asshole". Compared with Northerners, who were relatively unaffected by the insult, Southerners were a. more likely to think their masculine reputation was threatened; b. more upset as shown by a rise in cortisol levels; c. more physiologically primed for aggression as shown by a rise in testosterone levels; d. more cognitively primed for aggression; and e. more likely to engage in aggressive and dominant behavior. Findings highlight the "insult-aggression cycle" in cultures of honor, in which insults diminish a man's reputation, and he tries to restore his status by aggressive or violent behavior."
00:24:10	Ishita	I find this fascinating. Reacting to an insult provoked actual physiological responses that were different for men from the South. Culture is not just a set of customs, it's embodied. They were reacting in the way that probably felt totally natural and justified to them.
00:24:32	Joseph	I was really interested in the historical reasons for this culture of honor in the Southern US. Immigrants to the South came disproportionately from places, in particular Scotland, that were traditionally herding cultures.
00:24:48	Ishita	And anthropologists have found that herding cultures tend to emphasize honor and public reputation. The explanation they give is that livestock is both valuable and vulnerable to theft, in a way that agricultural products are not. And this means that having a fearsome reputation is important for safeguarding your wealth. This is something that holds true in herding cultures across the world.
00:25:18	Joseph	And that's amazing. Generations after Scottish settlers come to the United States, their descendants are still reacting to insults, to honor in a way that is different from Northerners.
00:25:32	Ishita	This idea, that honor relates to one's social standing, is found in research carried out in India as well. In a study by Carla Hoff and colleagues in 10 villages in Uttar Pradesh, it was found that those from high castes are more likely to indulge in honor related violence. Most probably because they perceive the violence as a means to maintain the social image they feel compelled to live up to.
00:26:02	Joseph	Well, and there may be a kind of parallel phenomenon in my country. There have been examples of extremism on the right, which can even turn into a mob mentality, but people may simply feel that they're defending their values or defending their way of life.

00:26:20	Ishita	And I do feel like social media has allowed people to find the village square with the people they agree with, and that can lead to increased extremism.
00:26:32	Joseph	Well, this is heavy stuff. And all of it starting with this simple statement of “honor diversity”. But I feel like it's given me a new understanding of some of this double-edged sword of honor, and also the challenges of understanding diversity. But that feels like we've just scratched the surface.
00:26:57	Ishita	But personally Joseph, that's what I like about this podcast. The issues are deep. They are complex, but we shouldn't expect it to be otherwise.
00:27:08	Joseph	No, that's really true. And of course that's why slogans are not enough. It's not enough to simply say “honor diversity” or “it's a small world”, or, “you know, deep down we are all the same”. That stuff can only take us so far. But I feel like it's time that we wrap up this episode.
00:27:25	Ishita	And I certainly look forward to continuing these discussions.
00:27:29	Joseph	I have learned a lot from you today, and I want to thank you for sharing your experiences.
00:27:34	Ishita	Thank you, Joseph. I had a great time, or should I say it has been an honor!
00:27:48	Joseph	The Deep Culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. If you want to learn more about culture and the mind, sign up for JII's brain, mind and culture masterclass. Ishita, this is where I first got to know you, in this masterclass.
00:28:10	Ishita	Indeed, it was. And I really recommend it. It's a blended learning course and it's an online community of cultural bridge people where we all learn from each other. It's great!
00:28:23	Joseph	So there are a few places left in the next session, but you need to sign up because it's starting soon. To find out more, do a web search for Brain, Mind, and Culture, or look for the Japan Intercultural Institute. The study that we quoted today about honor was “ <i>Insult aggression and the Southern culture of honor</i> ”, an experimental ethnography by Cohen Nisbett, Bowdle and Schwartz. You can also check out Richard Nisbett's book “ <i>Culture of honor, the Psychology of Violence in the South</i> ” that's together with Dov Cohen. And also we talked about “Learning to cooperate in a culture of honor”, by Brooks, Hoff, and Pandey. If you liked today's episode, we'd really like to hear from you, leave a comment on Apple podcasts or write us at dcpodcasts@japanandyourcultural.org Thanks as usual to our podcast team, Yvonne Van Der Pol, Zeina Matar, Daniel Glinz, and our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz. And of course, thanks to you. Ishita Ray for spending this time with me.
00:29:30	Ishita	Thank you, Joseph. It was fun.