

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 24 – Are you WEIRD?)

In this first episode of Season 3, Joseph Shaules, Ishita Ray and Emre Seven discuss intercultural blind spots – including how intercultural theory is influenced by a W.E.I.R.D. (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic) perspective. Also, Joseph shares experiences from his recent trip to India and Ishita talks about the intercultural insights of Rabindranath Tagore!

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Joseph	(Hook) Simply walking down the street, you come into contact with people speaking different languages, practicing different faiths from different ethnic communities, different degrees of privilege.
00:00:12	Ishita	(Hook) And this is something that I take for granted. Navigating diversity is really a way of life in India.
00:00:30	Joseph	Hello, this is 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 cohost Ishita Ray beginning the first episode of season three, episode 24. It is great to be back with you.
00:00:50	Ishita	Hi Joseph. It's really great to be back for season three.
00:00:54	Joseph	So Ishita, the title of today's episode is "Are you WEIRD?" And by the standards of today's episode, I am weird, but you Ishita are not weird.
00:01:07	Ishita	But we aren't talking about being strange or bizarre. When we say WEIRD, we are using it as an acronym, W E I R D.
00:01:19	Joseph	W Western, E educated, I industrialized, R rich, and D democratic.
00:01:29	Ishita	So the so-called WEIRD countries are for example, the US Canada, the countries of Western Europe. And so as a US American you, Joseph come from a WEIRD country.
00:01:43	Joseph	Whereas you Ishita, having grown up in India were raised in a not WEIRD country.
00:01:50	Ishita	And this acronym goes back to an academic article, published in brain and behavioral sciences in 2010. And the title was ' <i>The Weirdest People in the World</i> '.
00:02:04	Joseph	And the main point of the article was that the field of psychology had a problem. Researchers were trying to understand the human mind, the psychology of human beings in general, but research studies were overwhelmingly from Western or so-called WEIRD countries. And the research subjects, often college students simply weren't typical of people around the world.

00:02:31	Ishita	That's right. And we've talked about how our minds are shaped by culture before on this podcast. Things like how we process information, how we experience emotion, our identities...
00:02:46	Joseph	And this article was pointing out this blind spot, reminding us not to assume that what's normal for us is the same for the rest of the world.
00:02:57	Ishita	And in season three of this podcast, that's what we will focus on our cultural blind spots.
00:03:05	Joseph	And those blind spots often relate to things that we take so for granted that we never notice them.
00:03:12	Ishita	And this is really at the core of being a cultural bridge person, discovering that what is normal for you is not normal for other people.
00:03:22	Joseph	So to get this going in today's episode, we're going to take a closer look at one of those blind spots - the WEIRD phenomenon, attitudes, or ideas that may be taken for granted in Western societies, which may not make so much sense in other cultural communities.
00:03:40	Ishita	And in particular, whether the field of intercultural education is influenced by a WEIRD perspective.
00:03:48	Joseph	And that brings us to Part One: A WEIRD person in India.
Part 1: A WEIRD person in India		
00:04:10	Joseph	Ishita, I have to start by sending out a big thank you to your father, Uday Ray.
00:04:15	Ishita	I'm sure he'll appreciate that you met him and my mother in August in India, it was fun to hang out with you there. And my father is a huge fan of this podcast.
00:04:26	Joseph	Well, I am honored as you know, it was my first time in India. I was in Mumbai as well as in Bengal, in Eastern India, where you live with your family. I loved it. And your father gave me books, including "In a Land Far from Home, a Bengali in Afghanistan" by Syed Mujtaba Ali. It's about the travel experiences of a Bengali educator in Afghanistan at the beginning of the 20th century.
00:04:57	Ishita	A book about cultural exploration.
00:05:01	Joseph	Yes. And I was inspired by the inscription that your father wrote on the inside cover. He wrote "like minds break the barriers of geography, language or culture effortlessly".
00:05:16	Ishita	Well, my father and mother are both educators. My father is really a humanist. He has this broad perspective in the tradition of Rabindranath Tagore.
00:05:29	Joseph	So just remind our listeners who Rabindranath Tagore was...
00:05:35	Ishita	Well, he was a Bengali writer and poet, the first non-westerner to win a Nobel prize in literature, but he was much more - an educator, social reformer, a philosopher, an artist. He has had enormous influence on Bengali and Indian culture and society. And he was a world renowned intellectual.
00:06:02	Joseph	While I was in Bengal, I visited the village of Santiniketan, where I went

		to the campus of Visva Bharati University, which Tagore founded. I went with you and our good friend and colleague Dolon Gupta who went to school there. It was, it was just magical.
00:06:24	Ishita	One thing that inspires me about Tagore is that he embodies a kind of non-contradiction. Tagore was a humanist and very much an internationalist, a sophisticate. He traveled the world, met with world leaders, and yet he was very much a Bengali. He fully embraced his cultural roots.
00:06:49	Joseph	So for Tagore, being a global citizen, did not conflict with having a strong cultural identity.
00:06:55	Ishita	That's right. And as an Indian and as a Bengali myself, I find his embrace of his Bengali and Indian self, even as he traveled the world to be inspiring.
00:07:08	Joseph	Well, it does strike me that these days, if you say global citizen, it somehow sounds like you are supposed to go beyond culture. Like you belong to the world and not to where you grew up. It's a, it's a very internationalist idea.
00:07:26	Ishita	And from my perspective, and I think Tagore would've agreed with me, we can never really go beyond the effects of culture. It's a very deep part of who we are.
00:07:39	Joseph	Well, it seems to me that the idea of going beyond culture is a very Western perhaps even particularly American idea. It seems to treat culture as a form of identity, almost something that we choose.
00:07:55	Ishita	And that makes sense. If you grow up in a society that emphasizes individualism, you might think that I, as an individual can choose to be a global citizen. Growing up in India, it's really clear that we are shaped by our cultural background. We navigate deep diversity every day.
00:08:16	Joseph	Well, the United States has a lot of cultural diversity as well, but I feel like as an American, I grew up with this idea that, you know, people everywhere in the world are basically the same. We're basically just a human.
00:08:33	Ishita	And what fascinates me is that when people say that they present it as a simple fact.
00:08:40	Joseph	But it is largely a cultural assumption that people are the same and people accept it without much thought.
00:08:48	Ishita	Yes. And I think that applies to intercultural theory as well. For example, we hear a term like intercultural competence.
00:08:58	Joseph	Yes, yes. That's a real buzzword these days...
00:09:02	Ishita	But it's very individualistic. Like one more skill to add to my resume. Something to help me get outcomes.
00:09:19	Joseph	Yes. And, and this brings up an important point. Something that we discussed during my visit to India, because just before coming to India, I spent a week in Switzerland at a conference of intercultural researchers. And I must say the majority of them were from these so-called WEIRD countries.

00:09:40	Ishita	And so it wouldn't be a surprise to find terms like 'intercultural competence' being used in an individualistic way.
00:09:48	Joseph	Well, one thing is for sure, intercultural theory is largely generated in a small number of countries predominantly these so-called Western countries. And the same is true of intercultural communication textbooks.
00:10:04	Ishita	And yet a country like India, with enormous cultural diversity, and the legacy of people like Tagore, is not producing nearly as much theory, research and education.
00:10:18	Joseph	While I was really happy to learn more about the intercultural field in India, but that does raise a larger question about whether the field of intercultural education is being dominated by this so-called WEIRD perspective. And if so, what are we missing?
00:10:41	Ishita	And that is something we'd like to focus on during season three of this podcast. We are going to be hearing from cultural bridge people working in non-WEIRD contexts.
00:10:52	Joseph	Like you Ishita working in India. And we also have a new member of the podcast team, Emre Seven, who is an intercultural educator working in Turkey and will hear from podcast team member, Zeina Matar, who was raised in Lebanon.
00:11:09	Ishita	And of course, Yvonne van Der Pol is still with us as well as Daniel Glinz.
00:11:15	Joseph	And will try to dig deeper into topics that may sound simple but aren't. We'll look for our blind spots and we'll dig deeper into things like culture and emotion, and culture and values. And we'll take a new look at this idea of the global citizen. Is there really such a thing?
00:11:40	Ishita	I'm also looking forward to digging deeper into the complexity of culture. We have an episode planned called The Butterfly Effect.
00:11:49	Joseph	And that's all to come in Season 3. So Ishita, let's dig a bit deeper into this idea of so-called WEIRD people...
00:12:14	Ishita	As we were saying, WEIRD is an acronym and it stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic. It first got known through an article by Joseph Henrich, Steven Heine and Ara Norenzayan titled "The WEIRDest people in the World"
00:12:36	Joseph	And basically this article was a critique. It was questioning a hidden assumption, sometimes found in psychological research that we could understand how the human mind works simply by testing subjects from a narrow slice of the world population.
00:12:55	Ishita	And here's a quote from the article: "WEIRD societies, including young children are among the least representative populations one could find for generalizing about humans. Many of these findings involve domains that are associated with fundamental aspects of psychology, motivation, and behavior."
00:13:20	Joseph	So as a US American, that makes me a member of one of the least representative populations in the world. Yet many psychologists, uh, many of them American had been assuming that we could understand

		the human mind simply by studying these so-called WEIRD populations.
00:13:44	Ishita	And probably lots of people assume that human mind works fundamentally the same around the world.
00:13:51	Joseph	Which is not so strange. I mean, the way our mind works is simply normal to us. So as an American, going to India, I might notice that people there eat different foods or behave differently, but how can I tell if people's minds are working differently?
00:14:11	Ishita	Because how people act cultural differences in behavior are a lot easier to notice than the workings of one's mind. But before we go too far over here, I think we should point out that we aren't trying to divide the world into WEIRD versus non-WEIRD.
00:14:31	Joseph	We are not saying that people from the same country are all psychologically identical. Mental processes are much, much too complex to make blanket statements like that.
00:14:43	Ishita	But at the level of large populations, there are important differences that can be measured. There is an enormous amount of research into mental processes among people living in different societies.
00:14:56	Joseph	People from so-called weird societies are psychologically unusual in a number of ways. So what are these differences that we're talking about? According to the article, they relate to fundamental aspects of psychology, motivation, and behavior.
00:15:18	Ishita	The domains reviewed include " <i>visual perception, fairness, cooperation, spatial reasoning, categorization, inferential induction, moral reasoning, reasoning styles, self-concepts, and related motivations and heritability of IQ.</i> "
00:16:09	Joseph	Wow, that is quite a list. Some of these things seem to be related to information processing like visual perception while some other things on this list relate to the way we make sense of the world, like inferential induction. In other words, how we come to conclusions and reasoning styles. And then there are other things which relate to some very personal elements of the self, like moral reasoning, the ways in which we judge right and wrong and self-concepts - In other words, how we experience identity.
00:16:38	Ishita	Okay. So this is really a wide range of profound differences and they're easy to lose sight of. It's hard to understand how our mind works and even harder to know how your mind might work differently than mine.
00:16:57	Joseph	And this was on my mind in India, where I felt like I was getting a tiny sense of just how deep and complex cultural difference can be. Simply walking down the street, you come into contact with people speaking different languages, practicing different faiths, from different ethnic communities, different degrees of privilege...
00:17:36	Ishita	And this is something that I take for granted. Navigating diversity is really a way of life in India.
00:17:39	Joseph	Well, I know I loved watching you switch back and forth between languages, between Hindi, Bengali, and English. And sometimes you did

		it in the same sentence. So as I was experiencing all of this diversity, I found myself wondering how common is intercultural education in India?
00:17:53	Ishita	Well, not very, it's not widely known. There are very few classes in intercultural communication, few graduate degrees, not much intercultural training in Indian companies.
00:18:28	Joseph	Right? So India is one of the most diverse countries on earth. And I assume it has plenty of intercultural challenges, right?
00:18:29	Ishita	Absolutely!
00:18:30	Joseph	Yet the study of intercultural communication is not common. Why not?
00:18:34	Ishita	I sometimes feel that intercultural theory can be hard to relate to in the Indian context.
00:18:41	Joseph	Hard to relate to?
00:18:43	Ishita	Well, you see navigating cultural complexity is part of everyday life in India. It's very personal. And yet intercultural theory is often highly abstract. If you open an intercultural communication textbook written in the US or Europe, it often starts with a long discussion of the definition of culture. It says things like culture is a complex phenomenon and there are many competing definitions.
00:19:18	Joseph	Yes, I, I see that all the time.
00:19:20	Ishita	To put it bluntly, that definition of culture does nothing to help me navigate the deep diversity I experience every day in India.
00:19:32	Joseph	I can see that.
00:19:33	Ishita	And intercultural education can also be ideological. A friend of mine, for example, an Indian employee of a multinational corporation was saying that intercultural training in her company didn't help her make sense of her experiences. For example, there were complaints that Indians don't speak up enough and yet indirect communication is part of everyday life in India. It reflects deep parts of Indian culture, and this wasn't recognized at all in the trainings.
00:20:10	Joseph	So for whatever reason, the ways that intercultural trainings were done in this person's company were not helpful for someone who navigates cultural diversity every day.
00:20:22	Ishita	Precisely.
00:20:24	Joseph	And you feel that this is not an uncommon perception, that intercultural theory can be hard to relate to in the Indian context.
00:20:35	Ishita	Honestly, that's what it feels like to me.
00:20:38	Joseph	Well, if so, that's a problem. And that brings us to part three. Are you a global citizen
Part 3: Are you a global citizen?		
	Joseph	Ishita, you've said that intercultural theory can be hard to relate in the Indian context. So let's get another perspective from someone working outside of this so-called WEIRD context.
00:21:19	Ishita	Yes. A new member of the podcast team, Emre Seven.

00:21:24	Emre	Hello, Joseph. Hello, Ishita. Glad to be with you today.
00:21:30	Joseph	Great to have you here with us. Emre. And you were born and raised in Turkey and you are working at Sivas Cumhuriyet University.
00:21:42	Emre	Yes. In the international relations office. In a nutshell, I host people from all around the world and I teach intercultural communication. And I even translated one of your books in Turkish, Joseph.
00:21:55	Joseph	Well, I am incredibly honored.
00:22:00	Ishita	Emre, I understand that you have a very intercultural family?
00:22:	Emre	I do indeed. My wife holds passports from four countries and speaks five languages. So I cook in a very intercultural kitchen.
00:22:14	Joseph	Well, and of course, Turkey is also traditionally considered the meeting place of east and west. Constantinople, now Istanbul, was the capital of the Byzantine and Ottoman empires. Uh, it was known for its cultural diversity.
00:22:34	Emre	And today Turkey is currently holding the highest number of refugees in the world, according to the, uh, UN refugee agency.
00:22:43	Joseph	So Emre, you've been part of the discussion that the podcast team has been having about this so-called WEIRD phenomenon. And I'm wondering about the question that Ishita and I have been discussing in this episode, how well does intercultural theory meet the needs of your context in Turkey?
00:23:04	Emre	Well, the first thing that comes to my mind is that concepts and definitions often originate in English and they can be rather obscure or vague in other languages. And Turkish is one of them, for sure. Uh, the word competence, for example, has more than a 15 different translations. That was quite a challenge for me when I was translating your book.
00:23:31	Ishita	It's fascinating for me to hear about Emre's experiences because my context in India is so different and yet there are parallels. I agree with Emre, about not having equivalence for terms like competence. And then where do we go with those terms and definitions? How do they help my audience navigate real life diversity? But let's get back to the WEIRD question. The Japan intercultural Institute has been carrying out a research project about the attitudes of intercultural trainers. It's called 'What's Wrong with Intercultural Theory?'
00:24:15	Joseph	Yes. We have a sample of about 100 intercultural specialists, a large majority come from the so-called weird countries and most of them have more than 10 years experience.
00:24:28	Ishita	So these are people who might be interested in the theory and research that you found in the conference in Switzerland.
00:24:38	Joseph	Exactly. And in this research, we asked questions about intercultural concepts. For example, as we mentioned, many textbooks start out by spending a lot of time talking about the definition of culture.
00:24:55	Emre	The odd thing is that those books will often say, nobody agrees on the definition. It's too complex.

00:24:05	Ishita	You know what I find funny about that - people use the word culture every day. They understand what it means, but then you take a class in intercultural communication and then you don't understand the word anymore.
00:25:18	Joseph	Well, I feel like US education often emphasizes words and concepts. As though if you understand the concept, then you understand the phenomenon. And so textbooks often start with definitions.
00:25:36	Ishita	Related to this. We asked whether specialists were “familiar with theoretical issues and scholarly literature related to the concept of culture”.
00:25:50	Joseph	And more than 90% described themselves as knowledgeable about theory and scholarship related to the concept of culture.
00:26:00	Emre	That's impressive.
00:26:02	Joseph	It, it is, but there was something quite interesting. 40% also said that the concept of culture was difficult or very difficult for learners to understand. One typical comment was “I believe if explained it can be very useful, however many struggle with the concept of culture and how to understand it.”
00:26:26	Ishita	I find this to be very interesting. For me working in the Indian context to spend a lot of time explaining the concept of culture seems rather abstract.
00:26:40	Emre	I feel the same way about the Turkish context. Uh, when I talk about culture, I mean, what I mean by culture seems to be very different from what pops up in my listeners' mind.
00:26:52	Ishita	So is this focus on concepts and abstractions part of the WEIRD perspective?
00:26:59	Joseph	Well, I guess you two will have to tell me
00:27:14	Ishita	There's another survey question, which caught my eye. We asked about the idea of being a global citizen.
00:27:25	Joseph	Yes. The item asked whether you agree with this statement - “I identify more deeply as a global citizen than with a particular country or cultural community.”
00:27:36	Emre	Now I was impressed to see that more than half 54% agreed. They identify more with being a global citizen than with any cultural community.
00:27:49	Joseph	Well, I think many intercultural specialists kind of take for granted this idea that being a global citizen is a noble goal, but I'm not so sure that this is the case for many people in the world who have a strong sense of cultural identity.
00:28:08	Emre	And I can say that I'm not a typical or conventional Turk, both by how I look and way of life, or maybe manners. My wife, being a foreigner herself has been asked by Turkish people many times where I am from not where she's from.
00:28:27	Ishita	So you're not typically Turkish. And even your wife with four passports fits in better.

00:28:35	Emre	That's true. But especially after my stay in the US, I felt that I have a Turkish soul, which is my reality. And this is who I am and being a cultural bridge person cannot hinder it. Rather, it helps me to know my cultural self.
00:28:56	Ishita	And I think that echoes Tagore as well. Being a bridge person brings us back to our cultural home.
00:28:06	Joseph	So let's get back to this idea of the so-called WEIRD perspective in the world of intercultural education. We've talked about all this stuff and where does this leave us?
00:29:21	Ishita	Well, some things are just facts. It's simply true that the greatest part of the theory and research in the intercultural field comes from WEIRD countries.
00:29:36	Emre	And of course there is nothing wrong with that. It is a product of those societies and there is no reason to blame or condemn anyone.
00:29:47	Joseph	But if there are blind spots that come from this so-called WEIRD perspective, we should be aware of it. And we do need to take advantage of the diversity of experiences outside this so-called WEIRD world.
00:30:04	Ishita	Well, that gives us lots to explore in Season Three. But I think it's about time to wrap up this episode.
00:30:20	Joseph	Well, just before we do, we should mention some of the sources from today. If you want to learn more about the so-called WEIRD perspective, you can check out the original 2010 article, "The Weirdest People in the World" by Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan published in Brain and Behavioral Sciences. Joseph Henrich also has a 2020 book out with the same title, "The Weirdest People in the World". And again, the book that Ishita's father Uday Ray gave me was "In a Land Far from Home: A Bengali in Afghanistan" by Syed Mujtaba Ali. I highly recommend it.
00:31:05	Joseph	The Deep Culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I'm the director of JII. If you're interested in culture and the mind, check out JII's Brain, Mind, and Culture Masterclass - it is a blended learning course and online community of cultural bridge people. To find out more, just do a web search for the Japan Intercultural Institute. And you can also find more information about the research we mentioned, just look for learning circle and you'll see "What's wrong with intercultural theory?". And also in other Deep Culture podcast news, Emre has designed a new logo for the podcast. Thanks so much, Emre, it is totally cool. Check that out. And if you like today's episode, please spread the word on social media. Also, you can write us at DCpodcast@Japanintercultural.org . Once again, thanks to Ishita's father Uday Ray for his inspirational example of intercultural understanding and thanks to the whole podcast team, Yvonne Van der Pol, Zeina Matar, Daniel Glinz, Ikumi Fritz, as always sound engineer Robinson Fritz, and thanks to you today as always Ishita,

		and welcome to you, Emre, I'm so happy to have you with us.
--	--	---