

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 25 – My Comfort Zone)

Joseph Shaules and Emre Seven talk about how foreign experiences take us out of our comfort zone. This can lead us to the groan zone, the learning zone, the growth zone and the panic zone! We talk about our work with study-abroad students and how the auto-pilot of everyday life – the intuitive mind – is key to managing our comfort zone. We explore how the work of Jack Mezirow can help us understand what makes foreign experiences so transformational.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Joseph	(Hook) I was like, What's wrong with these people? I had an image in my mind of like a, like a zombie movie.
00:00:14	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 Emre Seven. Hello Emre. How are you?
00:00:26	Emre	Hello Joseph. I'm really fine. What about you?
00:00:30	Joseph	I'm good as usual. I'm recording this in Tokyo, but today because it's pouring down rain, I'm actually recording this in my closet. How are you doing?
00:00:40	Emre	I'm in Sivas, Turkey as usual, but it's unusually sunny here and it's great to be with you.
00:00:46	Joseph	And great to be with you. So Emre, the title of this episode is Comfort Zone and it was inspired by a book that you recently published called "My Dear Comfort Zone". So, first of all, congratulations on the book.
00:01:01	Emre	Thank you very much.
00:01:03	Joseph	And so, what's your interest in comfort zone?
00:01:07	Emre	I find comfort zone as a fascinating topic because often being out of our comfort zone can be so stressful, but it is what makes us grow. And I'm interested in how foreign experiences push us out of our comfort zone.
00:01:26	Joseph	Well, we both work with students who are studying abroad. And you're in Turkey and I'm in Japan and my students are coming to study in Japan.
00:01:35	Emre	And I work with students participating in international exchange programs.
00:01:39	Joseph	So, your book is about helping students get the most out of their foreign experiences. Um, do they struggle?
00:01:47	Emre	Overall? They do it well. They have great experiences and they tell me they like it here. But there are stresses too. In fact, I think it's unavoidable. For example, students who come to Turkey sometimes tell

		me they find it too difficult and tiring to handle their daily life trying to speak Turkish, even supposedly simple things like asking for directions.
00:02:15	Joseph	Or ordering at Starbucks?
00:02:17	Emre	Yes. Even ordering at Starbucks.
00:02:20	Joseph	Well, my students tell me similar things. They talk about missing friends or being homesick for family. But there are also little things that catch them by surprise. I had a student who spent an hour going to different bread stores looking for whole wheat bread. She, she couldn't find anything similar to something back home and she got really frustrated and in the end, her friends called and asked her if she wanted to go out. Uh, she was too ashamed to tell them that she was too tired to go out because she had been looking for whole wheat bread.
00:02:57	Emre	My students find it too difficult to use the toilet type that's called "à la Turka". And they don't anticipate these things and how challenging it can be going abroad. They expect speaking English or having studied Turkish will make communication easy, but it doesn't work that way, especially at the beginning.
00:03:19	Joseph	You know, this raises a very basic question. Why is it so hard to be prepared for these things? I mean, we look forward to it. Maybe we plan for months, but still we get pushed out of our comfort zone.
00:03:34	Emre	On the other hand, that same stress, we like it. We like being out of our comfort zone. I really think you can't have one without the other. And it means that managing our comfort zone is an important skill for all cultural bridge people.
00:03:51	Joseph	So, in this episode we'll dig into the idea of the comfort zone. We'll talk about how the stresses of adapting to a foreign environment are rooted in the unconscious mind, the intuitive mind, which is the mental autopilot that helps us navigate everyday life. And that brings us to Part One: The Comfort Zone
Part 1: The Comfort Zone		
00:04:26	Emre	People often use the word culture shock when talking about being stressed in a foreign country.
00:04:33	Joseph	Yes. And Ishita Ray and I did a whole episode about culture shock. Uh, that was episode 18.
00:04:40	Emre	I remember she spoke about her study abroad in France.
00:04:44	Joseph	Yes. Well, let's listen back to what she said.
00:04:50	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...
00:05:06	Joseph	Oh no!
00:05:08	Ishita	...again! Except they weren't magical anymore. You know, all of a sudden the novelty, the excitement of experiencing snow, all that 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.
00:05:45	Emre	I think many people can relate to these feelings.
00:05:49	Joseph	But it's curious, isn't it? You know, how do such small experiences like you know, a snowy morning or an ATM machine or ordering in Starbucks, how do these little things provoke such powerful reactions?
00:06:04	Emre	We tend to think that going abroad that so called exotic things will give us the most powerful experiences.
00:06:12	Joseph	And that's not how it works, is it? In fact, in my experience, the obvious cultural differences like different clothing or the buildings being different or the food, it doesn't really impact us on a very deep level. In fact, we often get used to those kinds of things pretty quickly.
00:06:31	Emre	I agree. Like if you visit a new city after, let's say a week, you feel like an expert. But that's strange too, because we can get used to being someplace pretty quickly. I mean, at least on the surface. But still, little things like no wheat bread or a cold snowy day can cause you stress and make you feel miserable.
00:06:57	Joseph	Well, this is one thing I liked about your book, because it points out that if you understand how the mind works, then these reactions are not so surprising.
00:07:09	Emre	Yes. The comfort zone is not just a metaphor, it relates to fact that normally our mind is on autopilot. But being in a foreign environment, overloads our autopilot. And that's why we feel outside of our comfort zone.
00:07:28	Joseph	And of course, if you listen to this podcast, you've heard us talk about two minds, the attentive mind, which is our conscious problem-solving mind and the intuitive mind.
00:07:42	Emre	Yes, the intuitive mind is our autopilot. It is sometimes called the cognitive unconscious or the adaptive unconscious. And Daniel Kahneman calls it fast thinking.
00:07:56	Joseph	And the intuitive mind operates in the background and it takes care of routine tasks. A lot of what we do every day we do on autopilot - brushing your teeth or interacting with people, going shopping, ordering food in a restaurant.
00:08:13	Emre	But in a foreign environment, things are different. We can't do them on autopilot. And that is why even supposedly simple things like ordering coffee in Starbucks can be stressful in a foreign country.
00:08:29	Joseph	And one of my students actually did get stressed and confused in a Starbucks in New York because the person behind the counter asked him for his name.
00:08:40	Emre	Oh, because they were gonna call out his name when his order was ready, right?
00:08:45	Joseph	But that's not common in Starbucks in Japan. So, my student just blanked out, he couldn't understand what was happening. And then the clerk seemed to get irritated and my student just kind of panicked.

00:08:58	Emre	Oh no! But that kind of thing isn't strange at all. My students also can get stuck in small interactions.
00:09:07	Joseph	Well, and getting stuck feels stressful, which brings us back to this idea of the comfort zone. When we can handle things in a routine way, we remain comfortable. In psychology, that's sometimes called cognitive ease. But when we're pushed out of our routine, we are also getting pushed out of our comfort zone as well.
00:09:30	Emre	It's like when we cannot fly on autopilot, our conscious mind, the attentive mind, has to work hard to navigate through whatever storm we are facing.
00:09:58	Joseph	Well, it's funny to think of ordering at a Starbucks as flying through a storm, but it can feel that way. You know, our mind is racing when we're in the panic zone.
00:10:10	Emre	And of course, stress like that can build up over time. We can get more and more psychologically tired. And then sometimes it only takes a little thing to trigger a really powerful response.
00:10:25	Joseph	And I think that's what happened to Ishita, you know. A few snowflakes aren't upsetting, but she must have been mentally tired from spending time in France, you know, using French and interacting in new ways and eating different food.
00:10:40	Emre	So, Ishita could have been having a wonderful time, but still in a given moment, she gets pushed out of her comfort zone.
00:10:50	Joseph	I think there's another way that our autopilot relates to our comfort zone. Our intuitive mind is constantly making judgments, anticipating what will happen next, reacting positively or reacting critically, jumping to conclusions. My European and American students sometimes get frustrated by Japanese communication because it's more reserved. And they say, "Well, why don't students speak up in class?"
00:11:18	Emre	People in Turkey in general have a polychronic time orientation. And that can be really frustrating for those who come from a monochronic culture. Sometimes the firm hierarchy may make them feel stressed and offended, or the indirect communication style can make them feel as if people do not behave honestly here.
00:11:39	Joseph	So, when things seem unreasonable or inefficient or unfair, we get pushed out of our comfort zone as well.
00:11:48	Emre	And that brings us to part two: "The Panic Zone"
Part 2: The Panic Zone		
00:12:03	Joseph	Emre, how can you tell when your students are out of their comfort zone?
00:12:09	Emre	Well, mostly they start to appear in my office more often than usual. And they have a big question mark in their eyes and a problem they are stuck with. And then they start asking about the possibility of leaving the program and returning home. In the worst cases, they burst into tears. But I also think that sometimes students are out of their comfort zone in

		a more general way. Like they sometimes may feel down or they may just stay in their rooms.
00:12:44	Joseph	Yeah. And that's what people often call culture shock.
00:12:48	Emre	I think of culture shock as being psychologically tired. Our mental batteries have run down, and when this happens, we can become really negative.
00:13:00	Joseph	When I'm out of my comfort zone, I do have a tendency to make negative judgements. When I was first living in Tokyo, I used to ride a super packed train every morning to work. But not only was it stressful to be jammed together with strangers, but I found everyone's behavior a bit odd. No one was speaking just silence. Uh, I could just hear the sound of the train wheels and it felt surreal. I couldn't imagine Americans being so packed together without interacting, at least in some way, at least, you know, a nod to each other or a complaint. But there was none of that. I was like: "What's wrong with these people?" I had an image in my mind of like a, like a zombie movie.
00:13:51	Emre	It's a funny image, but I must say that's pretty harsh, you know, seeing your fellow passengers as zombies.
00:13:59	Joseph	Well, but that's the thing. You know, when you're out of your comfort zone, we have these thoughts. We make these negative judgements, and that's normal. That's a sign of psychological resistance.
00:14:11	Emre	And we talked about resistance in episode 14. Human beings are very sensitive to change and resistance to change is just natural.
00:14:21	Joseph	And there is a whole body of research about this. For example, our minds tend to be biased towards the familiar.
00:14:30	Emre	The mere exposure effect.
00:14:32	Joseph	And we use different areas of the brain when reasoning about familiar and unfamiliar situations, and novel tasks use up more mental resources.
00:14:46	Emre	Psychologists talk about cognitive strain or ego depletion.
00:14:51	Joseph	And we know that our mind has a tendency to be biased towards familiar in-groups. And there's a tendency to respond to cultural difference in terms of threat. And there's even research that shows we tend to find non-native speakers of our language less believable. So Emre, how do you help students deal with resistance?
00:15:17	Emre	Well, I tell my students that being out of your comfort zone is like going to the gym. At first, our body resists and hurts when we push it out of its routine, but without it, without pushing it, improvement is just not possible. Now I tell my students they have to be patient with themselves. I tell them to try getting familiar with the unknown, which means intentionally trying to get out of routine and make this a routine.
00:15:51	Joseph	So, this is like, uh, intercultural warmups.
00:15:54	Emre	Exactly. We can actually get into the habit of doing new things. It can be listening to a new type of music, eating something that you have never

		tried before, or even going home using a new route. But doing this is a new routine.
00:16:20	Emre	And when we were planning the podcast, we asked our other team members how they handle comfort zone.
00:16:30	Joseph	And Yvonne had a great diagram. It was a series of concentric circles, but the inside circle being the comfort zone. And the next zone outside of that is the "Groan zone".
00:16:44	Emre	We experience something and say, "Oh no" and we groan. But the zone beyond that is the learning zone. We groan because we have to adjust to something new and maybe we resist it, but we recognize that this can also lead to learning.
00:17:02	Joseph	And beyond the learning zone is the growth zone. The new things we've learned make us grow, they stretch us.
00:17:10	Emre	But if we get stretched beyond our ability to grown and grow, it's the panic zone. And how about you Joseph? You seem like such an adventurous person. Have you ever visited the panic zone?
00:17:23	Joseph	Oh man, of course I have. I mean, I remember one of my panic zone moments was when I was 19, I was going to Mexico to study Spanish and go on a home stay. And my mother dropped me off at the border of Tijuana, just south of my hometown in San Diego, in California. And so my plan was to walk across the border, to find the bus station and then take a bus to my destination, San Miguel de Allende.
00:17:56	Emre	Sounds straightforward.
00:17:58	Joseph	Oh, but no. Then I walked into Mexico with the intention of finding the bus station, but I had no idea where to go. There was a roundabout with an enormous number of local buses and swarms of people. And here I was totally ignorant about what to do next. I had this heavy green canvas bag and my Spanish was barely enough to exchange basic information.
00:18:27	Emre	And so what did you do?
00:18:28	Joseph	Well, I stood there and I had this moment of panic. I froze. I had this sick feeling in the pit of my stomach and I realized I had no idea what I was doing, where I was going. And no one was gonna help me. Everyone was just rushing past minding their own business. Well, finally I got up my courage. I approached, someone asked in my broken Spanish, where is the bus station? And he said, Which one? And I had no idea that there was more than one bus station. Well, eventually I did make it to the correct bus station. But again, I froze. I was surrounded by people all around. There were ticket counters for different bus companies. I couldn't figure out where to go. Eventually I did make it to my home stay, although there were more adventures.
00:19:35	Emre	So you were in the panic zone and that worked out. But I don't recommend to my students that they dive off into the deep end.
00:19:46	Joseph	I agree. It's not good to push ourselves too hard. And some of my students definitely do that. They, they may feel that they have to get the

		most out of their stay and they end up exhausting themselves or maybe getting depressed or really homesick. And how about you Emre? Have you ever been in the panic zone?
00:20:09	Emre	Oh yes. But it was not abroad, it was in Turkey. When I came from my hometown Samsung to Ankara to study, it was the first time that I left home to live alone. I was given a place in a state dormitory, thanks to my father's job. And that was the only place my family could afford at that time. And I was hoping that, you know, it would be fun to live a real university life. But when I came to the dormitory, I saw that I had to stay with eight people in the dorm room. It was really shocking for me because I'm an only child and I had never shared my room with anybody.
00:20:48	Joseph	Oh no!
00:20:49	Emre	And to make everything worse, there was no bathroom in the room. Instead, the bathrooms were at the end of each corridor. And in the bathroom there was no private shower, but a public bath where you need to take bath in a very large room on the first floor together with all the other students. That was worse than I could ever imagine. I seriously thought about leaving university and going back to Samsung.
00:21:20	Joseph	But of course, you did get used to it, right?
00:21:23	Emre	I did. And I ended up loving university life, but I had a lot to learn and suffer and I had a lot to get used to.
00:21:35	Joseph	And that brings us to part three: "The Growth Zone"
Part 3: The Growth Zone		
00:21:54	Emre	Joseph, we've been saying that getting out of our comfort zone helps us grow. But some people might think, why can't we just learn things and stay comfortable?
00:22:05	Joseph	Yes. Wouldn't that be great? Like if we could learn a language by listening to some lessons in our sleep?
00:22:12	Emre	Ooh, I would love that.
00:22:15	Joseph	But of course, the things that have a big impact on us are often not easy. And the person whose work helped me understand why this is the case is Jack Mezirow.
00:22:29	Emre	He's known for his work in transformative learning. And as I recall, he was working in adult education and he studied women who were going back to school as adults. And he found that for some individuals it was a transformative experience - going back to school changed their lives. And he wanted to understand what makes learning transformative.
00:22:57	Joseph	He made a distinction between different types of learning. And what he called informative learning is something where you're simply inputting additional knowledge that is similar to what you already have.
00:23:10	Emre	You learn a new recipe, but it doesn't really change how you cook.
00:23:14	Joseph	Exactly. And what he found was that women who went back to school as adults weren't just gaining new knowledge. They were reporting that their way of looking at things had changed.

00:23:26	Emre	So transformative learning is about gaining a new perspective. Mezirow talked about it as changing one's frame of reference. These women were "reinterpreting their sense of self in relation to the world".
00:23:45	Joseph	Or a different way of saying that is that our view of the world of how we fit into the world, it shifts somehow. And I guess we have all had an experience like this, something that expands our world in some way. The way that I see it is that experiences that are transformative tend to be those that involve a kind of leap into the unknown. You decide to do something even though you don't know what it will be like.
00:24:13	Emre	Like deciding to have a child.
00:24:15	Joseph	Yes, that's a perfect example. It's impossible to know what it will really be like to have your first child. It's a totally new experience.
00:24:24	Emre	And it's impossible to go back.
00:24:26	Joseph	Right. And you Emre, not so long ago, had your first child.
00:24:30	Emre	Yes. I have a daughter, Elmira, who is now one and a half years old. And you are right. My whole world shifted. Now it's not just there's a new person in my life. My whole way of relating to the world has changed. It really is a transformation to become a parent.
00:24:50	Joseph	Well, I love seeing the photos of Elmira that you post on Facebook, but it's taking on the unknown that creates this potential for great change.
00:25:02	Emre	And foreign experiences can really be transformational. For example, when I returned from the US, which was my first sojourn, I felt as if it was not only four months, but as if I had been there for four years. It filled my head with thoughts about so many things about my life, about the world. But I wanted to tell everyone, not about the places that I saw, like the Statue of Liberty or Niagara Falls, but that it's a normal thing to call your boss by their first name or how it is normal for the manager to do the same work as the workers or even to clean the toilet when it is their turn.
00:25:47	Joseph	And I remember after my first home stay in Mexico, I arrived back to San Diego and things somehow looked different. And I remember wanting to tell my friends how cool it was to walk on cobblestone streets and to be speaking Spanish. I had found this exciting world. Uh, but for them it was just a story. It wasn't real. But there is one thing we have to bring up because we have to admit that not everyone who spends time in a foreign country has a profound experience.
00:26:28	Emre	That's so true. Some students treat being abroad as a chance to party with students from their own country, you know, like a vacation.
00:26:37	Joseph	And there are people who live abroad for years without ever learning the local language. And sometimes they spend a lot of their time complaining about the so-called locals. So in our work Emre, we want our students to get the most out of their experiences. So, what can we do to help them? What advice do we give?

00:26:58	Emre	Well, I can say a lot depends on the timing. For example, if you talk to the students before they go abroad, the whole thing still isn't real to them. And whatever you say may not have an impact.
00:27:14	Joseph	I think one of the best preparations for a trip abroad is foreign language classes. Just walking into the classroom and having to make efforts to remember new words and make funny sounds come out of your mouth and you get nervous trying to speak and dealing with all of that foreignness, even in the classroom is great practice. When you find yourself in a foreign country.
00:27:39	Emre	In my context, I deal with students who have come to Turkey and those who are leaving to go abroad. And I try to help them accept the fact that your normal does not have to be somebody else's normal too, especially in a foreign cultural context. And having negative feelings toward differences is not a deficiency. It is indeed the normal working principle of our brain. And thanks to the great flexibility it has, it is something manageable.
00:28:12	Joseph	And let's just say that taking a leap into the unknown can help us grow. But it's not necessary to go into the panic zone. You don't have to push yourself too hard. And if you're feeling overwhelmed or you notice that you've lost your motivation to explore, it's okay to retreat. Give yourself some time to digest.
00:28:35	Emre	Yes, your autopilot will start to get used to its new environment and you will be in the growth zone again.
00:28:44	Joseph	And that's probably a good place to wrap up this episode. But first, let's mention some sources. If you're interested in transformative learning, you can take a look at the work of Jack Mezirow. He has numerous publications. And check out the other Deep Culture podcasts about resistance, culture shock, the Intuitive Mind. You can find them on the website of the Japan Intercultural Institute or your favorite podcast platform. The Deep Culture Podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. And I am the director of JII. You know, this podcast lasts only about 30 minutes and there are limits to how deep we can go. If you want a deeper understanding of Culture and the Mind, I recommend JII's Brain Mind and Culture Masterclass. It is a blended learning course and an online community of cultural bridge people. We've got one starting soon. To find out more, just do a web search for the Japan Intercultural Institute. JII is a registered non-profit, and we offer discounts for participants from low GDP countries. And if you liked today's episode, spread the word on social media. You can also write us at dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org . Thanks to the whole JII team, our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz, and everyone else on the team, Yvonne Van der Pol, Zeina Matar, Ishita Ray, Daniel Glinz, Ikumi Fritz and all the members of JII. And of course, thanks to you Emre, for sharing this time with me. It's been great.

00:30:36	Emre	Thank you, Joseph it was great to be here.
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