

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 26 – The Trouble with Cultural Difference)
Joseph Shaules and Yvonne van der Pol explore why it can be so hard to talk about culture and measure cultural difference. They discuss three ways of looking at culture . . . as being, doing, and seeing. They discuss “classic” research into cultural difference (e.g. Hofstede) and argue that brain-mind sciences are shedding new light on cultural difference and can help us make better sense of our intercultural experiences.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Joseph	(Hook) Well, here's a question for our listeners. If culture is about things that are shared within a community, then what about people that are not typical? Am I less American if I act differently than other Americans?
00:00:26	Joseph	Hello, this is Joseph Shaules and welcome to the Deep Culture podcast, where we explore culture and the science of mind. And I am here with Yvonne Van der Pol, It's great to be with you on this episode. Yvonne. Greetings from Tokyo.
00:00:41	Yvonne	Hi Joseph. Greetings from the Netherlands. Wonderful to be here with you and good that you're here because you just told me there was an earthquake that you sensed.
00:00:50	Joseph	Yeah, I just had an earthquake. That's true <laugh>, but everything is fine.
00:00:54	Yvonne	But you're okay. Everything is fine. Wonderful.
00:00:56	Joseph	Yeah. Yvonne, we both work with intercultural educators and trainers and one question that we often get is what do you think about all this classic research into cultural difference?
00:01:11	Yvonne	Yes. And when they say something like classic research, they are usually talking about studies which compare different countries and give scores for things like collectivism or individualism. And perhaps the name you hear most often is Geert Hofstede who famously studied IBM employees in different countries.
00:01:32	Joseph	And sometimes there are country rankings saying, for example, that the United States is ranked as the most individualistic country in the world. And there are all these categories that are used to compare culture such as power distance or particularism or uncertainty avoidance. And so, people might say something like, Denmark is a low power distance country, or the Chinese are quite collectivistic.
00:02:02	Yvonne	And I think people ask us about this because there's so much disagreement and confusion about how to talk about cultural difference. For example, someone will say, calling Chinese people collectivist is a

		stereotype or dislike that countries are being compared because there's such a lot of diversity within countries.
00:02:26	Joseph	And yet research like this is trying to do something important to analyze cultural difference in a systematic way and that can help us understand our experiences.
00:02:39	Yvonne	Yeah. So we're talking about two things here. One is measuring cultural difference, but measuring or comparing is not the ultimate goal. The main goal is understanding our experience of cultural difference.
00:02:53	Joseph	So for example, if I'm collaborating with say a Dutch person and I feel like they give me very direct opinions, maybe even negative opinions, I might wonder if that's typical in the Netherlands.
00:03:06	Yvonne	Are you talking about me, Joseph here? <laugh>
00:03:09	Joseph	Well, as you know Yvonne, we Americans like lots of positive feedback.
00:03:14	Yvonne	Oh, don't I give you all these tons of compliments?
00:03:18	Joseph	You give me tons of positive feedback, Yvonne.
00:03:22	Yvonne	Ok, of course, of course. But anyway, we make sense of these things by talking about cultural difference. We might say that Dutch people are direct or Americans are friendly or whatever.
00:03:34	Joseph	And yet trying to make general comments about cultural difference can be difficult. Are we just repeating stereotypes? And what about people who aren't typical? It can be confusing trying to talk about cultural difference.
00:03:49	Yvonne	So in this episode, we're going to dig into this issue. We'll look at different ways we can talk about cultural difference and how to avoid confusion. And we'll look at research into cultural difference and how it can help us understand our foreign experiences. So before we get into cultural difference, we should mention a basic criticism. Some people will say we talk too much about cultural difference. We are all human beings who all get along better if we focus on what we share.
00:04:33	Joseph	In other words, talking about difference divides us.
00:04:37	Yvonne	And there's a truth to that. We have a shared humanity and we should never lose sight of that.
00:04:44	Joseph	And I think of this as the foundation of intercultural understanding without respect and recognition of shared humanity, the differences between us can rip us apart. But there's a reason we talk about cultural difference on this podcast. Recognizing our shared humanity is only the first step and only focusing on similarity can get us into trouble.
00:05:09	Yvonne	Yes, because we may assume that people are the same when they aren't.
00:05:13	Joseph	So to take a simple example, since clocks are basically the same all around the world, we may assume that people everywhere will think about time in the same way.
00:05:23	Yvonne	Which simply is not the case. There are deep differences in experience and use of time.

00:05:31	Joseph	And you can check out episode 15 “Rubber time or Slaves to the Clock” and you can learn about different time logics.
00:05:39	Yvonne	And that's the point. If you don't understand that difference, you will misjudge, you may find them irresponsible, impolite, well, whatever. So in short, expecting people to be similar to us can lead to intolerance too.
00:05:55	Joseph	And that brings to mind an article by Milton Bennett called ‘ <i>Overcoming the Golden Rule</i> ’.
00:06:02	Yvonne	The golden rule refers to an idea found in the Christian New Testament Bible, the Gospel of Mathew 7:12 says “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you.” In other words, treat others as you want to be treated.
00:06:22	Joseph	And of course this is important. Others deserve to be treated well just as we want to be treated well. But Milton Bennett argues that in the case of intercultural communication, the golden rule is not enough. So here's a quote from that article: “The golden rule enjoins us to treat others as we would like to be treated. But inherent in the rule is an assumption of similarity that others are like ourselves and therefore want to be treated similarly. Essential similarity implies a single absolute reality and such thinking is the foundation of ethnocentrism.”
00:07:06	Yvonne	In other words, for the golden rule to work, we have to agree on how we want to be treated. And that's not how it works across cultures. People think differently, expect different things, do things differently. And we need to take that into account.
00:07:25	Joseph	And that takes us back to why it's not enough to simply recognize our shared humanity. Human beings are cultural by nature. So to truly respect humanity, we have to respect the cultural elements that are a deep part of all of us.
00:07:52	Yvonne	So let's get back to the confusion and disagreements about how to talk about cultural difference.
00:07:58	Joseph	A lot of the confusion about cultural difference comes from different ways of talking about culture. And to remember these three ways, just keep in mind three keywords: Culture can be seen as a way of being, a way of doing, and a way of seeing.
00:08:19	Yvonne	And none of these is better than the others, but some ways of talking about culture and cultural difference are simpler than others. Being is the simplest then comes doing, then comes seeing, which is the most complex way of talking about cultural difference.
00:08:37	Joseph	So let's go through each one. As we said, the simplest is culture as being. And this treats culture as a kind of essential quality to talk about who I am or who we are or who they are. So when I say I am Californian and proud of it, I am saying that my culture is who I am.
00:08:58	Yvonne	And talking about culture as being can express pride in one's community. I've heard someone say for example, “I'm not German, I'm Bavarian.”

00:09:08	Joseph	And it's so interesting when you talk about yourself in those terms, it often sounds good like "I'm a true Californian". But if you talk about someone else in that way, it can sound like you're talking down to them. "Oh, so you're a Californian, huh?" But talking about culture as doing is also common.
00:09:28	Yvonne	And by this we mean seeing culture as a set of behaviors or description of how they live. Like in Italy, people kiss each other on the cheek or like French people eat baguettes. But these general statements may include negative judgments, like people from that country are always late. And the third way to talk about culture as a way of seeing relates to a shared way of understanding things. You hear this when people say "From the Turkish point of view...", or "I don't really understand the local perspective about this", or "When I switch languages, my way of seeing things changes".
00:10:17	Joseph	And so talking about culture as seeing means looking at culture as patterns of shared meaning. And so culture doesn't cause people to act in a certain way, rather culture helps us understand how behavior should be interpreted.
00:10:34	Yvonne	Okay, so let's get this all straight. If culture as being "I'm very Dutch" or "I'm not very Dutch", then culture as doing "Chinese eat with chopsticks" or "Californians love surfing". And then culture as seeing, "Let's look at this from the Lebanese perspective".
00:10:57	Joseph	But it's easy to get tripped up if we mix these levels. For example, we hear person A say something like, Well Dutch people are very direct, and person B says that's just a stereotype. I have a Dutch friend who isn't direct at all. He barely ever gives his opinion.
00:11:19	Yvonne	This is fascinating because person A and person B are using nearly identical words. They are saying quite different things. Person A says "Dutch people are very direct" and that's an attempt to describe some essential quality of Dutch people, how they are in general. And this is talking about culture as a way of being.
00:11:41	Joseph	Person B on the other hand says, "My Dutch friend isn't direct, he barely ever gives an opinion" and they're talking more specifically about how their Dutch friend acts, what this person does, culture as a way of behaving, as doing.
00:11:59	Yvonne	And this teaches us something important. Talking about culture as a kind of essential quality can sound very proud when talking about ourselves. "I am Dutch" or very simplistic or stereotypical when we talk about others - "Oh, he is being very Dutch".
00:12:18	Joseph	And this is because talking about culture as being is simple. It treats culture as an essential fact - "Rome is the capital of Italy", "Italians are passionate" as though these are just simply facts.
00:12:34	Yvonne	In our example, person B resists this idea that Dutch people are a certain way they want person A to realize that things aren't so simple. That there are many types of Dutch people and they aren't all direct.

00:12:48	Joseph	And the unfortunate thing is that person A probably wasn't trying to stereotype or say that every Dutch is always direct, they were simply trying to express a generality.
00:13:00	Yvonne	And this is exactly why talking about cultural difference is so tricky. When we talk about culture, we are trying to express a generality by definition. Culture is something that is shared among people.
00:13:14	Joseph	And this idea that culture relates to things that are shared is key. And being, doing and seeing are three different ways to talk about what is being shared. Being implies that there's some shared essence, doing implies that how people behave is shared. But in that case, what about diversity and what about each person being a unique individual?
00:13:41	Yvonne	And as we will see, this is why talking about culture as seeing is so important. If we see culture as shared way of interpreting things, we can resolve the misunderstanding between our friends - person A and person B.
00:13:56	Joseph	Yes, it helps us see that there's no contradiction between sharing a culture and having a diverse society full of unique individuals.
00:14:05	Yvonne	And that brings us to part two: I am, you do, we see
Part 2: I am, you do, we see		
00:14:29	Joseph	So here's a question for our listeners. If culture is about things that are shared within a community, then what about people that are not typical? Am I less American if I act differently than other Americans?
00:14:44	Yvonne	And some people will answer yes to that question. A lot of research into cultural difference is based on the assumption that culture is a sort of conditioning that influences behavior.
00:14:57	Joseph	And if you look at culture that way, talking about cultural difference means making general statements about the attitudes and values that influence people to act in a certain way. And this is a kind of cause and effect way of looking at culture. Uh, culture influences us, it makes us do things.
00:15:17	Yvonne	But this raises complications as well. Um, and in your book Joseph, " <i>The Intercultural Mind</i> ", you talk about this and you mention a critique of cross-cultural research by David Matsumoto and he argues that "even though standard quantitative testing methodology produces statistical differences as cross-cultural measures, those measures aren't necessarily meaningful and practical terms."
00:15:48	Joseph	And the point he's making is that many things influence behavior, culture is just one. And so measuring culture is not that useful for understanding the specific reasons that people will give you for what they do. Every individual is unique and every situation is unique.
00:16:08	Yvonne	And this is really a limitation of looking at culture as doing as a set of behaviors.
00:16:14	Joseph	From the brain and mind perspective, there is no contradiction between being a unique individual and sharing in a culture.

00:16:23	Yvonne	And that's because from the brain mind perspective, culture is about how we make sense of the world, understanding one's environment, intuitively, knowing how things work and what they mean.
00:16:36	Joseph	And this is what allows us to operate on autopilot.
00:16:40	Yvonne	And we spend so much of our lives on autopilot doing routine things, interacting in routine ways and sharing in a culture means understanding what's normal in that culture regardless of whether you decide to act in a typical way or not.
00:16:57	Joseph	And sometimes we talk about this as knowing the rules of the game. So what makes me share in American culture is not whether I act like other Americans, but that I know what Americans will think about my behavior.
00:17:21	Yvonne	And I think this is really a blind spot for many people. We tend to look at other cultures in terms of what's typical. Those people do things in that way. But we don't notice how typical our own behavior often is.
00:17:37	Joseph	But of course we are all typical. We express ourselves in normal ways. We talk to the cashier in the supermarket in a normal way. We know how to disagree in a normal way. We know how to give compliments in a normal way so that people understand our intentions.
00:17:55	Yvonne	And of course we are all unique. In fact, you have to know the limits to be able to express yourself unconventionally. You can't be unique by yourself. You have to know the rules of the game in order to be able to break them.
00:18:11	Joseph	You have to know what is typical to be unique. So let's get back to this idea of culture as being, as doing and as seeing. We've talked mostly about culture as being and doing. So let's talk about culture as a way of seeing - a shared way of interpreting things.
00:18:42	Yvonne	And of course the idea that culture relates to how we see the world isn't new. We even use the term worldview to talk about that.
00:18:51	Joseph	I think that what's new in recent years though is that brain-mind research has given us a better understanding of how our mind works. It tries to answer the question, how is my experience of the world shaped by my cultural background?
00:19:09	Yvonne	And maybe the most fundamental, although maybe the most subtle way, is that cultural patterns act as a kind of developmental program as we grow up. Cultural patterns shape our minds and give us an everyday sense of how the world works and what things mean, what's normal.
00:19:28	Joseph	You know, it's interesting, we talk about our native language, something that feels completely a part of us, yet we don't typically talk about our native culture, the cultural world that feels most natural to us.
00:19:42	Yvonne	We do sometimes talk about how culture is like water to a fish. It's another way of saying that our intuitive mind is in sync with our cultural environments.

00:19:53	Joseph	And that's the autopilot we always talk about. We function smoothly in familiar environments because there's a good match between the programming of our autopilot and the world around us.
00:20:05	Yvonne	So why is this important? As educators, as cultural bridge people, we are interested in the experience of cultural difference. Our minds react to new cultural patterns, different normals. And this is closely related to looking at culture as a way of seeing.
00:20:23	Joseph	Yes. And in our work, we use seeing metaphors all the time. We talk about learning to put on a new pair of cultural glasses, of entering into another worldview, of gaining a new perspective, of gaining empathy, the ability of looking at the world from another's point of view.
00:20:42	Yvonne	And our job as educators is to help people do this. And that's why we focus on the experience of cultural difference, its impact on us.
00:20:52	Joseph	And in this podcast for example, we've talked about the Oz moment, the odd sticky memories we get when we first arrive in a foreign environment. And we talk about resistance, our psychological self-protection mechanism when faced with cultural difference.
00:21:08	Yvonne	The research being done in cultural psychology, cognitive science, cultural neuroscience, it's shedding light on all these things. For me personally, I like the fact that this research is grounded in the ways our mind actually work, not simply asking people to fill out a questionnaire.
00:21:29	Joseph	And that brings us back to the question that we started this episode with. What about the classic research into cultural difference and what do we think about it?
00:21:39	Yvonne	To talk about that we need to first look at some different approaches to measuring cultural difference. And that brings us to part three: "Catching Culture".
Part 3: Catching Culture		
00:22:01	Joseph	Yvonne, let's dive into some theory. Now, this may not be for everyone, but I find the whole question of how we can measure cultural difference to be fascinating.
00:22:13	Yvonne	Okay, we'll look at it in three ways or three approaches. We call them an 'Anthropological approach', 'Psychological approach', and an 'Experiential or Neurocognitive approach'. And these are our terms by the way.
00:22:29	Joseph	Right. And we'll also mention why we think the third one, an 'Experiential or Neurocognitive approach' can be so useful for educators.
00:22:39	Yvonne	Historically speaking. Probably the first scientific approach to studying or measuring culture involves methods developed by anthropologists, often by interacting, directly with members of a community, observing what people did, asking about the thinking behind those behaviors - ethnography.
00:23:00	Joseph	And this treats culture as a collection of behaviors and explanations for those behaviors. And it allows you to compare, for example, what community A does compared to community B and the traditions and

		beliefs that people use to explain those behaviors. So this is a rather comparative uh, or taxonomic view. And Yvonne, you studied anthropology, so how was that for you?
00:23:27	Yvonne	Well, it was great <laugh> I, I really enjoyed it and it gives you sneak peeks into societies I wasn't familiar with at first. And my all-times favorite is Nigel Barley, "The Innocent Anthropologists" from the early eighties where he describes his two years living with the Deva people in Cameroon. And it made me appreciate how diverse and sophisticated human societies can be and also how difficult it is to deeply understand other cultural logic overall, the anthropological literature is very diverse, um, but can also give you this sense of from what you might call exotic behavior. And that's a risk. And also we could easily get lost in the detail in elaborate lists and taxonomies of different customs and belief. Yet this was my wonderful starting point that has influenced me throughout my life.
00:24:25	Joseph	And paying attention to the details of life in a foreign place and not judging them - that that's an important skill for any cultural bridge person.
00:24:34	Yvonne	Yes, I think every cultural bridge person is a bit of an anthropologist.
00:24:48	Joseph	So then in the late 20th century you start to see what might be called a psychological approach to measuring cultural difference. We've mentioned Geert Hofstede who borrowed testing methodology from psychology. And this often involved creating questionnaires to measure value dimensions like collectivism or power distance.
00:25:11	Yvonne	This approach treats culture as something that influences behavior. There's a focus on values because that values affect what people do. So by measuring values you can anticipate in general terms the cultural tendencies of a population.
00:25:27	Joseph	And there's a lot of research like this. And one thing much of this work has in common is a focus on categories of cultural difference. Often with scores or rankings.
00:25:41	Yvonne	In my trainings, participants ask a lot of questions about this type of research. They talk about Geert Hofstede, World Values Survey, Fons Trompenaars, Philippe Rosinski, Erin Meyer...
00:25:54	Joseph	So many competing models, which is already confusing. But what do people say?
00:26:00	Yvonne	Well there is often some confusion. For example, someone will tell me they looked up a score for a particular country and they say, "Oh, interesting, I see that friends score very high in power distance. I always notice that with the French I work with some people lowering rank, never communicate with their director." But then someone says "Yes, but that happens in Germany too. The score for power distance is low for Germany. How can that be if often refer to Herr doctor and Frau doctor?"

00:26:35	Joseph	So they see France ranked as high in power distance and Germany ranked low in power distance, but it doesn't fit their experience.
00:26:44	Yvonne	Exactly. But the fundamental problem is that participants are trying to explain behavior using these categories because French go high in power distance, they do such and such. And that's the fundamental problem with looking at culture in terms of doing, we naturally want to know what makes people do the things they do. And when these categories are used in that way, it leads to all sort of confusion.
00:27:17	Joseph	And to my mind, this is a fundamental limitation of looking at culture as doing. It can make us look for simple cultural reasons to explain complex human behavior. And as we said, it doesn't predict behavior.
00:27:33	Yvonne	And to be clear, Hofstede himself says that studying cultural difference is not about predicting behavior. He is looking for population level patterns.
00:27:43	Joseph	Culture and cultural difference function largely at a level that is deeper and more diffuse than can easily be measured using traditional social science methodology.
00:27:57	Yvonne	And one reason that values are so difficult to measure is that we are often not aware of our own unconscious cultural values. In other words, it's hard to measure cultural values because they rest on unspoken assumptions. And you mentioned an example of from the World Value Survey.
00:28:17	Joseph	Yes, there's one item in particular which asked what qualities were important when raising children. And in the latest data from the World Value Survey, both China and Japan score higher than the Netherlands and the US. 55% of Americans and Dutch emphasize the need to encourage children to be independent compared to 60% of Japanese and 78% of Chinese. And well on the face of it, this seems like a contradiction.
00:28:50	Yvonne	Why wouldn't Americans and the Dutch say they value independence? It seems like a core value in these two countries.
00:28:58	Joseph	And I suspect that it's because the Chinese and Japanese parents take strong social bonds more for granted than American and Dutch parents and thus tend to value independence as a sign of maturity. American and Dutch parents may be so used to seeing their children express their individual self that they'd like them to learn to be more cooperative.
00:29:22	Yvonne	So simply asking parents what values they want to pass on to their children, they miss the largely unconscious cultural values that they take for granted. So this brings us back to the question that participants ask about these categories of cultural difference. What do you tell your students, Joseph?
00:29:43	Joseph	Well, I tell them there's nothing wrong uh, with the categories themselves. I use cultural categories in my work, but we do need to be careful how we use them. If we try to use them to explain behavior,

		Culture as doing, it leads to confusion. They are just a way to talk about cultural patterns.
00:30:05	Yvonne	Research into cultural difference should help people in their process of pattern recognition, learning about new normals. And once again there I quote from <i>"The Intercultural Mind"</i> : "A deep understanding of cultural difference requires an intuitive experiential learning process. We need to allow our minds to detect cultural patterns intuitively stumbling around and bumping into unexpected cultural topography and thereby sharpening our intercultural minds."
00:30:52	Joseph	So we've been talking about the many challenges of using these classic categories of cultural difference. We've said they treat culture as something that influences behavior, which can lead to over-simplification or cause and effect thinking.
00:31:07	Yvonne	But of course listeners of this podcast will know that we are big fans of a different kind of research into cultural difference. And we specifically talk about the work of Shinobu Kitayama – pioneer - together with researchers like Richard Nisbett who have a very different approach to looking at cultural difference.
00:31:27	Joseph	They look for cultural difference in human experience, in patterns of cognition, in ways of experiencing identity or regulating emotion.
00:31:39	Yvonne	This is much more related to culture as seeing the ways that culture shapes our experience of the world.
00:31:46	Joseph	And I think this represents something of a paradigm shift. We're looking more directly at the cognitive structures of perception, emotion, and thought. So culture is not just a behavior, it's not just a value orientation. It is embodied within us. It is the programming of our autopilot. It shapes how we view the world, the things we take for granted, our gut reactions to our experiences, our judgment about what is quote unquote "normal" and also our values.
00:32:22	Yvonne	And all of these things - the deep and subtle ways that culture shapes our experience - bring to mind the key insight of Edward Hall that the influence of culture is powerful precisely because it is invisible.
00:32:38	Joseph	Indeed. Great to bring in Edward Hall, but probably also a good place to end this episode.
00:32:48	Joseph	We have been referencing the work of different individuals. Feel free to check them out. We've talked about <i>'Beyond the Golden Rule'</i> by Milton Bennett, Geert Hofstede has many influential publications. One of them is <i>'Culture and Organizations - Software of the Mind'</i> . You should also check out the World Values Survey. There is an online database which allows you to explore the results. We have also been quoting a lot from the book <i>'The Intercultural Mind'</i> . If you would like a PDF copy of the chapter that talks about measuring cultural difference, just email us at dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org and request it. The Deep Culture Podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute and NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I'm

		the director of JII. If you liked today's episode, please spread the word on social media. Thanks to the whole podcast team Robinson Fritz, Zeina Matar, Ishita Ray, Daniel Glinz, Emre Seven, Ikumi Fritz, and of course all the members of JII. And thanks to you, Yvonne, for sharing this time with me.
00:34:07	Yvonne	Well, thank you Joseph. It was enriching to work together on this episode with you and the whole team. And for the next couple of months, I'll be on a sabbatical. I will be taking some time to recharge batteries, to reflect on the world, on life and so on, and to enjoy life as well. And I'm happy that you and the team already have quite some wonderfully ideas for future podcasts. So I'll be back at the end of the season and thanks everyone for listening today and wish you well.
00:34:39	Joseph	And Yvonne, of course, no matter where you are, you are always with us. And that goes for all of our listeners too. See you again soon.
00:34:48	Yvonne	Indeed. See you again soon.