

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 28 – The Complexity of Culture)

People often talk about culture in simple terms—as when someone says: I want to learn about ‘the culture’. In fact, culture is a highly complex phenomenon. In this episode, Joseph Shaules and Ishita Ray discuss how complexity theory can help us understand the dynamic nature of culture. They touch on emergent properties, fractals, and the “simplification bias” – our tendency to experience complexity in simple ways. We also hear from Emre Seven and Zeina Matar and explore the challenges of developing a more complex understanding of culture.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Ishita	(Hook) In my family, both my parents are educators. And when they were in school, there was a textbook series written by a Bengali educator named M. Sen. And his textbooks were known for endless footnotes and detailed explanations. So in my family, whenever someone overexplains something, we might say something like, “Oh, there goes M. Sen!”
00:00:41	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 today with Ishita Ray.
00:00:51	Ishita	Hi Joseph. So Joseph, the title of this episode is <i>The Complexity of Culture</i> . This season, we are digging into ideas that may sound simple but are full of complexity.
00:01:07	Joseph	And so we decided that in this episode we’ll look at the complexity of culture itself.
00:01:14	Ishita	This topic was also inspired by something that we both have noticed. There’s a common tendency to talk about culture in very simple ways.
00:01:25	Joseph	Yes. For example, study abroad students will tell me, oh, I’m interested in studying in China because I want to learn about ‘the culture’.
00:01:35	Ishita	I too hear things like ‘the culture’ fascinates me, I want to experience ‘the culture’. It makes it sound like culture is a single thing and that somehow you can understand the culture by simply going somewhere.
00:01:51	Joseph	But of course, a foreign culture is not an object, it’s an experience, and it’s a whole world of things that you have to make sense of and learn to navigate.
00:02:04	Ishita	For example, if you are going to China, you may need to learn how to use chopsticks or buy a ticket for the Shanghai Metro. But if you want to learn about quote unquote the culture in a deeper way, then that is just

		the beginning
00:02:21	Joseph	Because you will need to interact with people to learn how things work, how people think and learn Chinese, and all of those things will depend on where you are in China and who you are with. There are many regions and cultural communities within China. And so of course there isn't really a single culture. And cultural learning is really a complex, never ending challenge.
00:02:49	Ishita	And yet people talk about learning “the” culture in very simple, almost casual terms.
00:02:57	Joseph	And that does raise some questions. First of all, what does it mean to say that culture is complex? We will dig into that. And then when we are faced with this cultural complexity, why do we often talk about it or experience it in such simple terms?
00:03:16	Ishita	We are going to get a bit geekish in this episode, we'll talk about complexity theory because understanding complexity can help in making sense of culture and because frankly, complexity theory is cool.
00:03:31	Joseph	And we'll also see that our intuitive mind, our unconscious autopilot of everyday life manages complexity by simplifying our experience of things. We have a sort of simplification bias.
00:03:45	Ishita	And that brings us to Part One: It's not so simple.
Part 1: It's not so simple!		
00:04:05	Ishita	So we've said that culture is complex, but I think at least a few listeners must be thinking, well, what do you mean by culture?
00:04:12	Joseph	And there is a lot of debate about the meaning of this word culture, and many different definitions, whole books have been written about it.
00:04:20	Ishita	Still, I think it is safe to say that at the most basic level, culture refers to things that are first of all shared by a community, things like customs, values, and secondly, these things that are shared, are learned and passed on. That is culture is not part of our biology.
00:04:44	Joseph	And the most basic insight about culture is that humans are cultural beings. We are collectively shaped by our social environment. And this was a revolutionary concept in say, the 19th century. In those days, people typically believed that there were physical differences that caused groups of people to act in a certain way.
00:05:06	Ishita	Right! The idea that one could have royal blood or that the color of your skin or the shape of your head could indicate your character.
00:05:15	Joseph	And early anthropologists like Margaret Mead for example, would argue that no, the diversity we find around the world is not because of race or blood. It is learned as we grow up in our community.
00:05:30	Ishita	But there is still plenty of debate about the word culture itself.
00:05:36	Joseph	Although I think those are kind of old debates now because we are coming to a more scientific understanding of how our social environment shapes our minds.
00:05:48	Ishita	And interestingly, people who study culture from the brain and mind perspective don't spend much time arguing about the definition of

		culture. In fact, their understanding of culture is pretty straightforward. It basically refers to shared patterns of mind.
00:06:07	Joseph	Yes, our cognitive systems are shaped by experience and in particular by social patterns. So growing up in a particular environment puts your mind in sync with the people around you. You learn what things mean, how to act, what's expected of you.
00:06:24	Ishita	And so when say a cultural neuroscientist talks about culture, they are referring to the cultural patterns in our minds and the cultural patterns in the world around us. And these patterns are so natural to us that we don't even notice them.
00:06:41	Joseph	And this is one reason that we think about culture in simple terms, because we don't notice the cultural patterns of our own community. And that helps us understand the person who says, I want to learn about "the" culture. If they've never had to adjust to a new cultural world before, then they simply haven't noticed culture yet.
00:07:04	Ishita	But if you ask this person, what do you mean by "the" culture, they can come up with a lot of different things. They'll talk about the food that people eat, the clothes they wear, how people act, their values, the language, history, traditions, ceremonies, whatever.
00:07:23	Joseph	And all of those things are in effect complex cultural patterns. In other words, a single item on the list, let's say traditions, is actually a whole domain of knowledge. And it's interrelated with other items on that list such as history.
00:07:41	Ishita	And the sum total of all that knowledge goes beyond what any one individual could fully understand. So, put simply everyday words we use to talk about culture represent highly complex patterns of knowledge with multiple domains. So let's get a bit geeky and talk about complexity and the nature of complex systems.
00:08:17	Joseph	Yes. So we've said that culture is a set of shared patterns that function as a complex system. And by that we mean that the patterns that we are calling culture emerge from the complex interaction of countless individuals.
00:08:31	Ishita	So let's unpack that a little bit. A complex system is one that emerges from interaction of simpler parts. The stock market, for example, individuals buy and sell stock - simple interactions. But all those interactions together create the unpredictable ups and downs of the stock market. So simple interactions combined to create complex patterns.
00:09:02	Joseph	And this involves self-organization what is sometimes called an emergent property. No one decides how the markets will move. That fluctuation emerges from the interaction of all that buying and selling.
00:09:15	Ishita	And emergent properties are found in the natural world all the time, like the simple interaction of individual fish that combine to form complex patterns of a school of fish, or atmospheric conditions interacting with land and water to create weather patterns.

00:09:35	Joseph	And in this same way, cultural patterns are a result of the interaction of countless individuals.
00:09:42	Ishita	And interaction creates shared experiences, shared meaning, shared ways to communicate, shared expectations.
00:09:52	Joseph	For example, every family has its own culture and its own way of communicating. When I was growing up, instead of telling us I love you in my family, my mother would say, 1-2-3. That was our kind of our special code.
00:10:06	Ishita	Oh, that is adorable. In my family, both my parents are educators. And when they were in school, there was a textbook series written by a Bengali educator named M. Sen. And his textbooks were known for endless footnotes and detailed explanations. So in my family, whenever someone over explains something, we might say something like, oh, there goes M. Sen. And we even do this sometimes in front of an oblivious outsider who doesn't get it while we share an insider chuckle. And this idea that culture emerges from interaction reflects an important lesson that complexity theory has for us. That culture emerges at different scales.
00:11:01	Joseph	So family interaction creates culture at a small scale, a kind of microculture and larger scale interaction creates culture at larger scales. Everything from the culture of a sports team or company culture or ethnic communities or a region or of course national cultures at the level of a country.
00:11:23	Ishita	And because we interact with different communities, culture overlaps and interacts in complex ways. I interact with other Indians in different parts of India. I also interact with Bengalis in Eastern India, with Hindu believers in my local village.
00:11:43	Joseph	But somehow all this complexity feels normal to us as we navigate our interactions with people in different contexts.
00:11:52	Ishita	This is really true in India, my cousin who is Bengali married a Kannada woman from southern India, and their four year old daughter spoke Hindi, English, Kannada and Bengali, and she knew exactly when, where, and with whom to use which language inside the family and outside.
00:12:23	Joseph	So this is one lesson from complexity theory that culture exists at different scales and interacts in complex ways, but we experience it as simply navigating different contexts.
00:12:37	Ishita	And there are other ways that culture exhibits the quality of complex systems, and this really does get geeky, but let's give a few examples.
00:12:47	Joseph	So first of all, complex systems have no clear boundaries.
00:12:51	Ishita	Which means culture isn't contained within national borders. It's hard to say exactly who is and isn't a member of a cultural community. Rather we participate in communities.
00:13:05	Joseph	Also, complex systems can be both very dynamic, yet highly stable.
00:13:11	Ishita	For example, a tropical storm is very dynamic, but also moves in a predictable fashion. Cultural communities are constantly evolving over

		time, but can have great continuity.
00:13:25	Joseph	And the behavior of complex systems are very hard to predict and can't be described perfectly in cause and effect terms. And this is why culture cannot be reduced to etiquette rules. Culture is just far too dynamic for that.
00:13:41	Ishita	And we have to mention the fractal nature of some complex systems.
00:13:45	Joseph	And this is also a bit abstract, but fractals describe things that are self-similar at different scales.
00:13:53	Ishita	For example, at the microscale of our cognitive processes, you find that East Asians process information more holistically and Westerners more in terms of objects and categories. And that difference can be found at the larger scale of how people act. Asian societies are more collectivistic, while Westerners are more individualist.
00:14:18	Joseph	So the cultural patterns we find in people's minds are reflected at larger scales in how people act and even the structures of the society at large.
00:14:29	Ishita	Wow, we have put a lot of complexity in part one of this episode, but we've also said that culture is experienced as something simple.
00:14:40	Joseph	Which brings us to Part Two: Simply Complex.
Part 2: Simply Complex		
00:15:00	Joseph	We've been saying that culture is complex, but we've also said that our experience of culture can be quite simple.
00:15:02	Ishita	This shouldn't surprise us at all. Weather is complex, but our experience of weather is often simple.
00:15:10	Joseph	Sure, we'll say, oh, it's hot today, or it looks like a storm is coming.
00:15:15	Ishita	We may have no idea of the atmospheric conditions that have led to that storm. We just experience it from our perspective. We participate in weather and we often don't even notice it because it's just in the background.
00:15:30	Joseph	And the same is true about culture, isn't it? We swim in our culture like a fish in water without ever noticing all its complexity because we are so used to navigating those waters.
00:15:41	Ishita	Until of course we have a foreign experience. In a new country, we have to navigate in different waters.
00:15:49	Joseph	And this brings us to another simple but important insight from complexity theory. Because cultural patterns are complex, they can only be explained in context.
00:16:02	Ishita	And that is why it's an oversimplification to say she did that because of her culture. We need to know the context to understand the reasons someone might give for doing something.
00:16:14	Joseph	And this is also why cultural trainings that focus on dos and don'ts or cultural etiquette will never be fully effective. Understanding behavior requires being able to look at a situation from a particular cultural point of view.
00:16:30	Ishita	But when I was working as a training consultant in international

		business, we often got requests for cultural trainings to cover those things.
00:16:40	Joseph	So that's another example of how we have this tendency to simplify our experience of culture.
00:16:47	Ishita	But there are many other ways that our minds simplify our experience of culture. We asked our podcast team about this, and this is what Zeina Matar had to say.
00:17:01	Zeina	The first thing that comes to my mind when I think how people simplify things when talking about culture is stereotyping. I remember when growing up in Lebanon that in April and May, expats from European countries and the US would start going to the beach, while the Lebanese usually find it's still too cool. For them, the Lebanese, the beach season doesn't really start before June. So you would hear people say, oh, well those foreigners do that although it's crazy... a certain behavior would be explained by stereotyping. And I suppose people felt better, felt they were right, while those crazy foreigners were not. Easy, simple, reassuring. Do I understand the complexity of culture? No, I feel that I'm ever exploring, getting surprised again and again. But if you realize that you can never quote unquote "learn a culture", then you recognize and acknowledge its complexity. And this is a big step forward towards becoming curious and wanting to go further, or not.
00:18:18	Ishita	I like that she says stereotyping is reassuring. It's like a cushioning for the brain. It reduces uncertainty.
00:18:26	Joseph	And we talked about the need to reduce uncertainty in Episode Nine, "Bias is not bias".
00:18:33	Ishita	Put simply, stereotypes are simplified images of a complex reality. Stereotyping is one way our mind handles information overload, or when we encounter something unusual, like foreign tourists going into the ocean in May, and we use a very simple category to explain our experience.
00:18:57	Joseph	And one of the points made in Episode Nine was that biases like stereotyping are a natural part of how our minds work, but they can lead us to wrong conclusions. As podcast team member Emre Seven explains:
00:19:16	Emre	International students come to Turkey from different countries. And when I ask them what things they find different, they say the culture is different. I had a similar experience with a friend of mine from Mexico who was an exchange student when I was in high school. And people were always asking him, why did you choose Turkey for your stay? And he would say, "Because I searched for Turkey and I saw that Mexico and Turkey have a similar culture: In Mexico, we have spicy food and you have spicy food here too." So he traveled tens of thousands of kilometers to Turkey just to have similar food. And of course, Turkish food is really different from Mexican food. Ultimately, I think culture is simplified because our brains filter information around us in familiar surroundings. Cultural patterns are totally taken for granted. And in

		foreign environments, we are forced to simplify the things that we don't understand.
00:20:27	Joseph	This story is a great example of how we simplify things by comparing something new with something we already know.
00:20:35	Ishita	And this idea that our mind uses simple experiential categories when we have little experience is an important element in the work of Milton Bennett.
00:20:47	Joseph	So Turkey was a very simple category in this Mexican student's mind. And so for Bennett, the process of cultural learning involves differentiation, making our perceptual categories more complex.
00:21:01	Ishita	He talks about the process of cultural learning as incorporating cultural difference into one's worldview. The challenge is to enrich our perceptual categories to accept that things are different and to gradually learn to look at things from a new cultural perspective. And we do that by experiencing cultural difference and making sense of it. In effect, a process of developing a more complex worldview.
00:21:32	Joseph	And Yvonne and I talked about this in Episode 26 when we discussed the variety of ways that people talk about cultural difference. One of the simplest ways is to talk about culture as being, seeing culture as an essential quality or a simple fact like "I'm a San Diegan".
00:21:50	Ishita	And somewhat more complex is talking about culture as 'doing', seeing culture as a set of behaviors. The idea that culture makes us act in a certain way, like Hindus celebrate Diwali, the festival of lights, to honor the triumph of good over evil.
00:22:10	Joseph	And an even more complex way of looking at culture is as 'seeing' - the idea that culture provides us with a way of looking at the world. So for example, "Let's look at this from the Tunisian perspective."
00:22:23	Ishita	And you and Yvonne made the point that none of those different ways of viewing culture is wrong, but some are more sophisticated, more complex than others.
00:22:36	Joseph	And this brings us back to our tendency to simplify things. One way we do that is through essentializing, looking at culture as some singular internal quality, "Oh, you are so Californian".
00:22:49	Ishita	As though being a Californian is a single thing. And centralizing leads to another simplistic way of looking at culture in terms of cause and effect.
00:23:02	Joseph	For example, many times I've had Japanese people express surprise that I can use chopsticks even if they know I've been in Japan for many years.
00:23:11	Ishita	So in their minds, the fact of being a foreigner equals 'can't use chopsticks'. Simple cause and effect thinking.
00:23:20	Joseph	Their mind is taking a shortcut using a simple image of foreigners who don't use chopsticks and drawing a quick conclusion.
00:23:29	Ishita	And so we can add this to the list of ways our mind simplifies our experience of culture, what we could call a simplification bias, stereotyping, essentializing, simplistic cause and effect reasoning, jumping to conclusions.

00:23:45	Joseph	And for better or for worse, these biases are simply how our minds work, which is a reminder that cultural learning requires going against some very natural tendencies.
00:23:57	Ishita	And that brings us to Part Three: Against the Tide.
Part 3: Against the Tide		
00:24:18	Ishita	So Joseph, we've been talking about complexity in a couple of different ways in this episode, we talked about culture being a context phenomenon created by interaction. And so it can't be understood with simple cause and effect thinking. It happens at different scales. And cultural communities have no clear boundaries.
00:24:37	Joseph	And we've also talked about our mind's simplification biases.
00:24:43	Ishita	So let's bring those two things together. Culture is a complex phenomenon, and cultural learning requires that we make sense of that complexity, but at the same time, our mind naturally simplifies things.
00:24:59	Joseph	But as cultural bridge people, our goal is to have a more complex understanding of culture and cultural difference. So our challenge is to go beyond this simplistic thinking, we're swimming against the tide so to speak, because our tendency to simplify is so powerful.
00:25:19	Ishita	And one way to go against the tide is to continue to integrate new cultural experiences into our view of the world. We need to develop new cultural glasses. And we can't do it all at once because the patterns we must learn are often not obvious. It takes time and experience for them to make sense to us.
00:25:42	Joseph	And that's a never-ending process. There are always new patterns to recognize and uncover, and that's just another sign that cultural patterns are complex.
00:25:53	Ishita	This brings us to one final point. We've been talking about complexity, and that will give the impression of things being abstract or mentally complicated. But from the brain and mind perspective, complex knowledge is experienced intuitively.
00:26:12	Joseph	And an everyday example is language. Language is enormously complex, but we use language without really being able to explain its structures. We just have a feel for how to use it.
00:26:25	Ishita	But we do get a taste of that complexity when we try to learn a new language. And the mark of using a new language well is to do so spontaneously and creatively without a need for conscious thinking.
00:26:40	Joseph	So at the highest levels, complex skills can be experienced as something simple, which is something that I think our fellow podcast team member, Zeina Matar can appreciate.
00:26:55	Zeina	Keep in mind that simplicity can be very deep. A simple poem or song can be profoundly moving and meaningful. In the same way, even supposedly simple intercultural experiences can move us at deep levels of the self. And as educators, we need to keep this in mind. What we need aren't more abstract theories, but ways to help learners find the aha moments that come from making sense of complex experiences.

00:27:30	Ishita	That is beautiful.
00:27:32	Joseph	It is. And when I spoke to her about this, it, it made me curious, you know, does she see her own life as complex? She was raised in Lebanon, but was forced away from home because of war and political conflict. She has lived in Australia, the United States, Germany has a multinational career and a multicultural family. And through it all has said that she remains deeply attached to her roots in Lebanon. So I asked her, do you experience your life as being complex?
00:28:06	Zeina	Certain parts of it, yes, definitely. The complexity comes from the fact that there are so many things which are interrelated, so it becomes complex. But I prefer to use the word rich. I find that my life has been extremely rich, and I'm thankful for this.
00:28:35	Joseph	And so given all this complexity, all this richness, I asked Zeina, what anchors her?
00:28:46	Zeina	The love of the people that are in my life. It's not only family, it's also very good friends. I mean, it's people I care for who care for me, who, and it's, it's the knowledge that I love them, and they love me. And yeah, and every now and then, you have proofs of this extraordinary love and yeah, it makes life a good, good life. <laugh>
00:29:15	Ishita	Wow, what she says is so moving and it brings together so much of what we are talking about here. Being a cultural bridge person, navigating the complexity of different cultural worlds. These things aren't always easy, but can bring rich rewards, new connections, and caring about others.
00:29:40	Joseph	And we hope this podcast will help us connect to you, our dear listeners. And on that note, I think that may be a good place to bring this episode to a close. But first, we'll share some of our sources. Today we talked about the work of Milton Bennett. You can check out " <i>Towards Ethnorelativism: A Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity</i> ". And you can find that in <i>Education for the Intercultural Experience</i> . Also, the Deep culture podcasts we referenced in this episode are episode 9, <i>Bias Is Not Bias</i> , and Episode 26, <i>the Trouble with Cultural Difference</i> . And you can find those on the website of the Japan Intercultural Institute. The Deep Culture Podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I am the director of JII. If you are interested in Culture and the Mind, check out JII's Brain Mind and Culture Masterclass. Also, JII has a learning circle where we share research and best practices. To find out more, just do a web search for the Japan Intercultural Institute, and please spread the word about this podcast, post it on your favorite media platform. And as always, you can write us at dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org .
00:31:07	Joseph	A special thanks to Zeina Matar and Emre Seven for sharing their wisdom with us. And thanks as usual to everyone on the podcast team, Yvonne Van der Pol, Daniel Glinz, Ikumi Fritz, and of course our sound

		engineer, Robinson Fritz. And thanks to you so much Ishita for sharing this time with me today.
	Ishita	It is always so much fun.