

## 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 29 – Culture and Emotion)

Are emotions the same everywhere in the world? In this episode, Zeina Matar and Joseph Shaules explore the challenge of adjusting to different emotional “logics” across cultures. We look at research into whether “basic” emotions are the same around the world and argue that emotion is a “constructed” . . . and thus highly cultural, experience.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Daniel	(Hook) Wow. My girlfriend was back in Japan after two years abroad and she got no kiss, no hug, not even a slight touch on the shoulder. In what kind of family had I landed?
00:00:27	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 Zeina Matar.
00:00:36	Zeina	Hi Joseph.
00:00:38	Joseph	And I am in Mumbai, India. As you know, Zeina not my usual recording location, so if you hear some noise in the background, that's the sound of local life here.
00:00:49	Zeina	And I am in Stuttgart and there's not much sound of local life in my neighborhood, so you will not hear <laugh> much.
00:00:57	Joseph	So Zeina, the title of this episode is <i>Deep Culture and Emotion</i> . And when the podcast team was brainstorming about this topic, there was an outpouring of stories and impressions about culture and emotion.
00:01:12	Zeina	Outpouring is right. One immediate reaction was, wow, that's a difficult topic.
00:01:19	Joseph	But also, everyone had stories about cultural differences in how people express emotion.
00:01:26	Zeina	This topic really hit home for me. As you know, I come from a very touchy part of the world. I was raised in Lebanon where people often express their feelings very freely. We get excited, we hug, especially when we are with loved ones. We don't hold back.
00:01:43	Joseph	But you've also lived for years in Germany where I think emotion is expressed in a more reserved way.
00:01:51	Zeina	Yes. And so I have to adjust to that and sometimes I forget. I remember once I was saying goodbye to my son's teacher and I just hugged her.
00:02:02	Joseph	<laugh>. Oh no. Well what happened?
00:02:05	Zeina	Well, she just wasn't ready for that. It was like hugging a piece of wood.

00:02:10	Joseph	Well, as you know, I lived in Mexico for several years and I had friends tell me, oh, you Americans have no feelings, no heart. When you're at a party. I can't tell if you're having fun. But now I live in Japan, uh, and people have told me the opposite, oh, Americans are so expressive and friendly.
00:02:29	Zeina	And everyone on the podcast team had stories like this.
00:02:33	Joseph	And navigating those differences can be difficult because our emotional reactions are a very deep part of who we are.
00:02:42	Zeina	Emotion is a deep part of who we are, and yet emotion is shaped by culture.
00:02:49	Joseph	But this raises questions: in what way is emotion shaped by culture? Are emotions the same everywhere? Does culture just shape how we express emotions?
00:03:03	Zeina	And that's what we'll dig into in this episode, the relationship between culture and emotion.
00:03:10	Joseph	And we'll see that emotions are not just simple bodily reactions. And also there is research that suggests that the experience of emotion is also shaped by culture, that communities have their own emotional vocabulary.
00:03:26	Zeina	And that brings us to Part One: Emotion, Body and Mind
Part 1: Emotion, Body and Mind		
00:03:	Zeina	Joseph, let's start with some basics. When we say emotion, what exactly are we talking about?
00:03:51	Joseph	Well, as our listeners know, on this podcast, we like to take a close look at topics which seem simple but are more complex than we might expect. And that's true when we are talking about emotion across cultures.
00:04:07	Zeina	So if you look up emotion in the dictionary, you get a pretty easy to understand definition. Here's one from the Collins online dictionary. "An emotion is a feeling such as happiness, love, fear, anger, or hatred, which can be caused by the situation that you are in."
00:04:26	Joseph	So emotion is a feeling, a reaction to our experiences. So when a big dog suddenly barks at us, we react with an emotion, a feeling of fear.
00:04:37	Zeina	This seems straightforward. We experience something and we feel an emotional response. Simple.
00:04:44	Joseph	But as cultural bridge people, we know that how people express emotion varies a lot around the world. Uh, you talked about coming from a touchy culture, and I live in Japan, which is famous for reserve.
00:04:59	Zeina	And this raises a question, are emotions the same around the world?
00:05:04	Joseph	And I think a lot of people would say, of course, we're all human so we should all have the same emotion, right?
00:05:11	Zeina	So a Japanese person who feels anger may express it differently than a Lebanese person, but the emotion itself should basically be the same.

00:05:21	Joseph	But that's not an easy question to answer because it's easy to compare how people act whether they hug or not. But how do we know what they're feeling inside? Is the experience of emotion the same? That's hard to research.
00:05:37	Zeina	Well, the most famous researcher in this area is Paul Ekman. He's a well-known psychologist. And his approach to researching the question: "is emotion the same world over?" was quite interesting.
00:05:50	Joseph	His starting assumption is pretty straightforward. He supposes that although there might be cultural differences in how emotions are expressed, ultimately, he assumes there are basic emotions shared by people everywhere.
00:06:03	Zeina	And to test that question empirically, he thought, well, I need to find a cultural community that is isolated from the modern world and test people there.
00:06:13	Joseph	So in the 1960s, he traveled to the highlands of Papua New Guinea to conduct experiments among the Fore people. At the time, the Fore were largely living a stone age lifestyle and had only started having contact with the outside world.
00:06:29	Zeina	And his reasoning was that if people in the Fore community understood the same emotions that we are familiar with, this would provide evidence that emotions are the same for people everywhere.
00:06:42	Joseph	And his methods focused on so-called basic emotions that he thought most likely to be universal in particular, anger, surprise, happiness, sadness, fear and disgust.
00:06:56	Zeina	And of course, it's hard to know what people are actually feeling. So he looked at the facial expressions one makes when we feel these emotions.
00:07:06	Joseph	And he brought with him photographs with different facial expressions which correspond to those basic emotions, anger, surprise, happiness, et cetera. And he translated those words into the local language and asked the Fore, which face went with which word.
00:07:19	Zeina	And the results showed that the Fore matched the faces and emotion words in the same way that you or I would.
00:07:27	Joseph	And research like this has been carried out in other places as well, using this same methodology and results show that people around the world correctly identify the expressions associated with those words.
00:07:52	Zeina	But what does it tell us? The photos of the faces he used were very exaggerated. Human emotion is often very subtle and not "basic". And also personal experience tells me that the same expression can mean very different things.
00:08:09	Joseph	Yes, for example, I ask my students sometimes: "Is a smile the same everywhere in the world?"
00:08:17	Zeina	I would say no. Everyone recognizes that a smile is used to show happiness or pleasure, but a smile can do a lot more than that.

00:08:25	Joseph	Well, in Japan, a smile is sometimes used to cover up anger or embarrassment.
00:08:30	Zeina	We may flirt with a smile or smirk or look down on someone with a smile. In the end, the ability to recognize the basic meaning of a smile tells us very little about all the subtle ways that a smile is used.
00:08:44	Joseph	Well, I have heard it said that the <i>what</i> of basic emotions may be the same, but the <i>how</i> those emotions are expressed is shaped by culture.
00:08:54	Zeina	But this doesn't really answer the question, is the experience of emotion different? For me personally, I feel that the experience of emotion is really shaped by culture. For example, I have learned to speak German and I adjust my communication style, but I don't think I could equally adopt a German way of feeling things.
00:09:15	Joseph	Right? It would be hard for you to stop hugging your children because you moved somewhere where people didn't do that.
00:09:22	Zeina	I will never stop hugging my children.
00:09:25	Joseph	<laugh>. And even if humans share the same basic emotional architecture, the same building blocks of emotion, that doesn't mean that the experience of emotion will be similar.
00:09:37	Zeina	We see that with cultural difference in food, all humans have the capacity to taste basic flavors, salty, sweet, bitter, sour, and savory. But there is an enormous variety of food experience across the world.
00:09:53	Joseph	So we could say that Paul Ekman's research was asking people to identify basic flavors of emotion, and they could.
00:10:00	Zeina	But that doesn't mean that people everywhere around the world experience emotion in the same way.
00:10:06	Joseph	Well, and we've only been talking about Paul Ekman's work, there are other approaches to thinking about and researching emotion.
00:10:13	Zeina	And some research really challenges some of our common-sense ideas about emotion.
00:10:20	Joseph	And there's evidence that the idea that emotions are simply an automatic body response is not correct. Some people are talking about emotions as a constructed experience.
00:10:30	Zeina	And we'll dig into that more in Part three. But before that, let's explore a bit more the challenges that culture bridge people face dealing with emotion in different communities.
00:10:41	Joseph	And that brings us to Part Two: Do you feel what I feel?
Part 2: Do you feel what I feel?		
00:10:58	Joseph	So the podcast team members had a flood of stories and impressions about culture and emotion. But one thing that was clear was that being a cultural bridge person often means navigating these different cultural expectations about how we express ourselves.
00:11:16	Zeina	Absolutely. For example, in Lebanon, a friend of mine has just been through a tough time health-wise. I need to show support, but not just with some get well wishes, the words need to be expressed with a lot of

		warmth, repeatedly showing my love for the friend, my affection. So there is more time spent in showing feelings. I become very much aware of this when I'm back in Lebanon.
00:11:43	Joseph	And so do you shift between different modes, so to speak, in different contexts?
00:11:48	Zeina	Oh yes. Things are very different in Germany. Especially in Swabia where I live, people are known to be more reserved, even a bit taciturn, especially the older generations. A mother and the son would not embrace when they met, rather shake hands. Although these days things have changed a bit. Still this was an absolute shock when I arrived here.
00:12:10	Joseph	Well, how does it feel to you now?
00:12:13	Zeina	Well, it's not just a question of whether we show emotion or not. Everything needs to be understood in context. Even if the mother and son love each other deeply, they might be very reserved about showing it to the outside world.
00:12:27	Joseph	So like there's a different emotional grammar.
00:12:30	Zeina	And I remember something that Emre mentioned: that what triggers which emotion is mostly cultural. Hugging may trigger happiness and joy for people in a very proximate culture like Turkey or Lebanon, but trigger discomfort or even disgust for somebody from Scandinavia.
00:12:49	Joseph	So that's a challenge too because these things touch us very deeply and it's, it's not easy to change our emotional reactions.
00:12:58	Zeina	The contrast to coming back to Germany from the Middle East hits me pretty strongly. And yes, it does feel like a coldness here, but I adjust by becoming more reserved in Germany than I am in Lebanon.
00:13:10	Joseph	Well, I remember thinking in Mexico that I really needed to let loose, but in Japan, uh, the adjustment was more difficult. I would sometimes be holding back my feelings because everyone around me was so reserved, but inside I had this frustration or I was, you know, bothered.
00:13:28	Zeina	Like in what types of situations?
00:13:31	Joseph	Uh...I don't know. Just like riding on a super crowded train, packed in so tight, yet it's silent and it feels like everybody's acting so cold. Or being with people who are deciding where to eat, but no one gives an opinion. Or even just like watching TV, and there's a scene where someone is sobbing, but the friend sitting next to them doesn't hug them or touch them at all.
00:13:55	Zeina	So for cultural bridge people, the challenge is not just that people express emotion differently, it's the difficulty of reading the emotional grammar, knowing what people are thinking and feeling.
00:14:08	Joseph	Well. And human beings are very social creatures. Sharing an emotional language is what makes us feel connected. And if we can't make out those patterns, it can be really disturbing or alienating.
00:14:23	Zeina	Yes, and that's something that podcast team member Daniel Glinz talked about originally in episode 13. He recounted his experience meeting his

		Japanese girlfriend's parents for the first time. Let's listen back to his story.
00:14:40	Daniel	About two weeks after my arrival in Tokyo, Mitsuko told me she wanted to introduce me to her parents. Mitsuko and I had met in China two years before, while we were both exchange students at Nanjing University. I was curious to see Mitsuko's parents' reaction to the formal announcement that she was now living together with a foreigner. Her parents were living in the countryside about one hour north of Tokyo, where they owned a small farm. From Ueno station in Tokyo, we took a local train to Omiya, and then a bus to a village named Okegawa. It was a sunny Sunday morning and there were lush rice fields and trees all around us. From the bus stop we walked about 10 minutes and then we were home. She had spent two years in China without a break, and it was the first time she visited her parents since returning. She rang the doorbell, and we waited a few minutes in suspense. When we heard some noise coming from inside, Mitsuko opened the door and we stepped into the entrance hall. In front of us, stood a small and elderly woman. She was holding both her arms along the sides of her body. Mitsuko bowed to her and simply said: "Tadaima" - I am back. Her mother bowed from her knees until her head was almost touching the floor, and she said: "O-kaeri nasai" - Welcome back! Then she turned towards me and said something like, "Thank you for taking good care of my daughter." That was all. Mitsuko and I removed our shoes and stepped up from the entry hall into the house. Her father was watching TV in the living room. It felt so strange to think that mother and daughter had not met for two years. And when they were reunited, all they did was to politely bow at each other. Wow. My girlfriend was back in Japan after two years abroad, and she got no kiss, no hug, not even a slight touch on the shoulder. In what kind of family had I landed? How did they show their feelings towards each other? Well, did they have any feelings at all?
00:17:33	Zeina	This is such a striking story. Daniel's challenge doesn't relate to whether Japanese have the same basic emotions. He is having difficulty reading the emotional signals he sees. He just doesn't know what they are feeling.
00:17:49	Joseph	Yes, he even says, what kind of family have I landed in? And of course, we naturally make value judgements, oh, they're so cold, or they're not open.
00:17:59	Zeina	Or they are aggressive, they are out of control.
00:18:02	Joseph	And it's difficult, maybe impossible to not react deeply to differences in emotional expression. I mean, even if Daniel knew in his head that this difference was largely cultural, doesn't stop him from having those reactions.
00:18:18	Zeina	Joseph, you've lived in Japan for many years, would you say that Mitsuko and her mother's behavior is typical?

00:18:24	Joseph	Well, I would say it's not untypical. I don't think it would surprise most Japanese people.
00:18:30	Zeina	Well, if I hadn't seen my child for two years, I would definitely express myself. It's remarkable that there can be such a difference in emotional vocabularies. So for someone like me from a touchy culture like Lebanon, how can I understand this?
00:18:45	Joseph	Well, you know, the work of Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden Turner has been a big help for me to make sense of these differences. And this gets a bit abstract, but fundamentally, they argue that humans face a fundamental contradiction when it comes to emotion. Emotion is natural, and expressing emotion is critical for human relations. We need it. It's what connects us. Emotion needs to be expressed.
00:19:14	Zeina	But at the same time, emotion must be controlled. We can't simply shout and scream whenever we feel like it. Anyone who has raised the toddler knows that.
00:19:24	Joseph	And so according to this thinking, this dilemma, emotion must be controlled, but emotion must be expressed is at the core of many cultural differences in emotion expression.
00:19:37	Zeina	So to kind of oversimplify: in some communities, there's more emphasis on the idea that it's by keeping our emotions under control, that we maintain good relations.
00:19:48	Joseph	And so in the case of Daniel's story, it's precisely this ability to experience emotion in this restrained way that allows you to connect with people. So if Mitsuko's mother had broken down crying, for example, it might interfere with their ability to really savor the moment of Mitsuko's homecoming.
00:20:09	Zeina	So restrained emotion is experienced as positive, whereas for me growing up in Lebanon, it's by expressing your feelings that lets me feel connected. If I haven't seen my child in two years, then you can be sure that I fret long before they arrive and show it, hug them, kiss them, re-hug them, re kiss them, smile, laugh, etc.
00:20:45	Joseph	And Trompenaars and Hampden Turner have done research on this by asking questions such as: if you're upset at work, would you show it openly? And you get very different answers depending on the community.
00:20:58	Zeina	Only 26% of Japanese said they would show their feelings openly if they are upset at work. 81% of Spaniards said they would. And it doesn't surprise me that the three countries that scored highest in that study were from the Middle East - Kuwait, Egypt, and Oman.
00:21:16	Joseph	And I have asked many of my students this question, and I have students from all over the world, and I get very similar results to this research. But what's interesting is, when I ask them to explain why they will or they won't show their feelings openly, they often give the same reason for opposite answers. Students will give the same reason for not showing emotion as students who say that they will show emotion.

00:21:44	Zeina	And so you are finding a different emotional logic at work.
00:21:49	Joseph	Yes. For example, my Japanese students most typically say they won't show their feelings openly. And the reasons they give is that showing emotion will upset others. It will kind of damage human relations.
00:22:01	Zeina	But I can easily imagine the opposite answer as well.
00:22:05	Joseph	Exactly. Students from more expressive cultural communities often say they will show emotions for the same reason. It's necessary to do so for people to get along. So they'll say things like, well, if you don't show your feelings and you can't work things out, or if you hide your feelings, it cuts people off.
00:22:23	Zeina	And so the point is that communities have different assumptions about emotion and those assumption shape the experience and the expression of emotion in very powerful ways.
00:22:35	Joseph	And so we can see that there are these different emotional logics. But let's get back to the situation with Mitsuko's mother. She was not expressing emotion outwardly. She wasn't hugging or crying. Uh, but what was she feeling inside?
00:22:51	Zeina	Was she experiencing emotion in the same way that someone might be hugging and crying?
00:22:57	Joseph	And that brings us to Part Three: The Geography of Emotion
Part 3: The Geography of Emotion		
00:23:16	Zeina	One of the challenging things about this topic is that experts don't agree. There isn't even an agreed upon definition of what emotion is.
00:23:25	Joseph	I think we can say however, that the commonsense way of thinking about emotion, that emotions are just a body response that we simply express in different ways is a bit too simple.
00:23:37	Zeina	And to see why this is, let's get back to Paul Ekman. He argues that there are a number of basic human emotions that are universal, that in every society people will experience anger, joy, disgust, etc. in the same way.
00:23:54	Joseph	But there have been major challenges to this view. One researcher whose work looks at emotion in a fundamentally different way is Lisa Feldman-Barrett.
00:24:03	Zeina	She even refers to the idea that there are universal emotions a myth.
00:24:09	Joseph	And to understand why she says that gets a bit technical. But in effect, she argues that emotions can't be said to be universal because there is no singular physiological marker that corresponds to even supposedly basic emotions.
00:24:25	Zeina	In other words, we might think that an emotion like anger is a basic automatic body response. And thus, we should be able to identify what body state corresponds to anger, what are the physiological markers of anger?
00:24:42	Joseph	But there's a lot of evidence that there isn't a single universal body response called anger.



00:24:50	Zeina	And maybe that sounds strange if we think of emotions as simple responses to our environment. But it's not so strange when we think about how complex emotions are in real life.
00:25:01	Joseph	Right, I may get angry and shout at a rude driver, but I also might feel that my blood runs cold with anger. I may feel some detachment or there might be a kind of smoldering resentment that I describe as anger. There are many states that we experience all under this umbrella term anger.
00:25:23	Zeina	Lisa Feldman Barrett says that emotions are constructed. She calls them emotional concepts.
00:25:31	Joseph	So anger is an idea that we associate with a wide range of situations and bodily responses. And the same is true of other emotions as well. There's nothing basic about them.
00:25:42	Zeina	And so if we look at emotions as complex constructions, then cultural difference in emotional expression starts to make more sense. For example, the feeling of love, the emotional concept, love is something that is expressed in a variety of ways and with a variety of different bodily states.
00:26:03	Joseph	And so Mitsuko's mother may be expressing and feeling love in a way that is very Japanese.
00:26:21	Zeina	But I can also hear listeners say, yeah, but isn't emotion just like a natural instinct? People all over the world feel love for their children or get angry when someone is rude to them, right?
00:26:33	Joseph	Well, there certainly is some truth to that. Humans are social primates. We form bonds of affection. We are territorial. We do get upset at unfairness.
00:26:44	Zeina	Jonathan Haidt talks about this in terms of moral intuitions. We have a feeling for what's unfair, for betrayal, for caring. So emotion can be seen as a part of our intuitive reaction to the events in our lives.
00:26:59	Joseph	But that also means that emotion is full of meaning. For example, what's the difference between impatience and anticipation or irritation and impatience? Emotions are rich and complex.
00:27:14	Zeina	Which is why we have so many different words to describe emotions. Instead of saying that we are angry, and we might say that we are annoyed or frustrated or bitter or infuriated or mad or insulted or vengeful.
00:27:30	Joseph	And we experience each of these things as distinct because we have learned these complex categories are emotional vocabulary as we grow up in our cultural community.
00:27:42	Zeina	And different communities have different emotional vocabularies. And these vocabularies are a reflection of the values and habit of those communities.

00:27:52	Joseph	So for example, in Japan, it's often said that people hide anger with a smile. And it wouldn't surprise me if that experience is a particularly Japanese experience of anger.
00:28:04	Zeina	And because Daniel simply wasn't familiar with the emotional vocabulary in Japan, he didn't have a feeling for how emotions are experienced and expressed by Mitsuko and her mother. But as someone who comes from a rather expressive cultural community, I'm also curious about emotional intensity. For example, is Mitsuko's mother's feeling of love for her daughter as intense as someone from a different community who would react to the same situation by hugging and crying?
00:28:35	Joseph	Of course, this is very difficult to judge. We don't know what it feels like to be Mitsuko's mother, but there is some very interesting research into emotion suppression. And there's evidence that East Asians can more effectively suppress the physiological markers of emotion. In effect, they're better at controlling not just the expression of emotion, but also the bodily experience.
00:28:57	Zeina	And researchers hypothesize that in more collectivistic societies emotion regulation is valued as a way to get along with others. In fact, individuals with a more collective, more interdependent sense of self, were more able to suppress emotion.
00:29:16	Joseph	And this raises an interesting possibility that relates to Mitsuko's situation. It may be that just as it can feel good to express emotion, it can feel good to moderate or regulate emotion.
00:29:30	Zeina	So in that case, although Mitsuko mother may not be hugging her daughter or crying, she may indeed be experiencing a powerful, perhaps even sublime form of love that is directly related to having been raised in Japan.
00:29:45	Joseph	And I think none of this would surprise many cultural bridge people. Our emotional vocabulary and the emotional logics that shape our experience are deeply influenced by culture.
00:29:58	Zeina	Emotions are not simple at all. But wait, Joseph, what about that research done by Paul Ekman, which shows that people all over the world can recognize the same facial expressions?
00:30:09	Joseph	Well, further research has shown something very interesting when you show people the same faces, but you don't give them a list of predetermined words as Paul Ekman did, and they can freely describe it as they want, people are much less likely to identify these supposedly basic emotions.
00:30:29	Zeina	So our emotions do really seem to be tied to the concepts that we use to give meaning to our feelings.
00:30:38	Joseph	And I think this is probably a good place to bring this episode to a close. But first, let's share some of the resources that we have been relying on. You can easily find more information about the work of Paul Ekman online. And if you're interested in the idea that emotions are

		constructed, then check out the book <i>How Emotions Are Made</i> by Lisa Feldman Barrett. The research into emotion suppression that we refer to comes from <i>Interdependent self-Construal predicts emotion suppression in Asian Americans: An electrocortical investigation</i> by Brian Krause and Shinobu Kitayama. And that can be found in <i>Biological Psychology</i> . To learn more about the emotional logics as described by Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden Turner, check out <i>Riding the Waves of Culture</i> .
00:31:31	Joseph	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 liked today's episode, please spread the word on social media. Let someone know. You can also write us at <a href="mailto:DCpodcast@japanintercultural.org">DCpodcast@japanintercultural.org</a> .
00:31:07	Joseph	And thanks to the whole JII team, our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz, others on the podcast team include Yvonne Van der Pol, Ishita Ray, Daniel Glinz, Emre Seven, Ikumi Fritz, and all members of JII. And of course, thanks to you Zeina Matar for sharing this time with me.
00:32:11	Zeina	Thank you, Joseph.