

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 30 – Ethnocentrism)

Is ethnocentrism learned from our environment? Is it a natural part of how our mind works? Many intercultural educators believe that ethnocentrism is learned . . . but is this true? In this month's Deep Culture Podcast, Emre Seven and Joseph Shaules explore what brain and mind sciences can tell us about ethnocentrism. We hear about caste labeling from Ishita Ray, and Daniel Glinz tells us how language learning can expand our cultural self.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Ishita	(Hook) I was seven years old playing in the schoolyard with my friends. When I first heard it, exclaimed that my family was from a certain caste. It got me off guard. I had never heard it discussed at home. What? Why did others put me in a category that I didn't even know existed?
00:00:35	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. Hi Emre.
00:00:45	Emre	Hi Joseph
00:00:46	Joseph	It's a pleasure to be hosting this episode with you, Emre. I'm recording this, uh, at home here in Tokyo. Uh, how are you doing?
00:00:54	Emre	I'm glad to be here again with you. I'm in Sivas in Turkey and I'm trying to be fine.
00:01:03	Joseph	Yeah, trying to be fine indeed. I know of course that in Turkey, so many people continue to suffer from the recent earthquake there and I was glad to know that you and your family are well and I extend my condolences and sympathy from everyone on the podcast team and at JII.
00:01:23	Emre	Thank you and all our team for your support. Yeah, it's been a terrible experience and I can't really find the correct words to describe our grief as a country.
00:01:35	Joseph	Well, please take care Emre, and thanks for joining me today despite all that you are going through. At the end of the podcast, we'll be sharing information on how you can support those who are affected by this terrible tragedy. So Emre, our theme for this episode is <i>Ethnocentrism</i> . People often have strong reactions to this word. Uh, is this something you talk about to your students, Emre?
00:02:03	Emre	Yes, it is. I frequently talk about how ethnocentrism clouds our

		judgment, and I give some real time examples. And how about you Joseph?
00:02:14	Joseph	I do talk to my students about this. Sometimes I ask them directly, "Are you ethnocentric?"
00:02:20	Emre	That's a rather touchy question, isn't it?
00:02:23	Joseph	Well, it is a touchy question because you know, in some situations if you ask, are you ethnocentric? People might think that you are accusing them of being prejudiced.
00:02:34	Emre	I agree with you. But there is another way of thinking about ethnocentrism. We can see it as something natural, just part of how our mind works. And if you look at from that perspective, we are all ethnocentric.
00:02:51	Joseph	And that raises the question, is ethnocentrism primarily natural or is it learned? And so we'll dig into ethnocentrism in this episode, we'll argue that brain and mind sciences offer a pretty clear answer to this question. We'll also look at research that shows that intercultural educators and trainers don't seem to have consensus about this.
00:03:17	Emre	And that brings us to Part one - Reporting the Facts.
Part 1: Reporting the Facts		
00:03:40	Joseph	So Emre, let's start with a question from a survey carried out by the Japan Intercultural Institute: "Do you agree or disagree with this statement? I believe that ethnocentrism is something we learned from our environment. So it can be overcome with education."
00:04:00	Emre	Take a moment to think about this. Is ethnocentrism natural and thus unavoidable? Or is it something we learn from our environment? If you believe ethnocentrism is learned, then maybe education or the right attitude can overcome it. If it's a natural part of how our mind works, then it's not so simple.
00:04:29	Joseph	And this survey was given to intercultural professionals, trainers, and teachers. And 75% of intercultural educators agreed that ethnocentrism is learned and can be overcome by education.
00:04:43	Emre	I must say I was a bit surprised because personally I disagree. I think ethnocentrism is natural, but a lot of educators had a different view.
00:04:55	Joseph	Obviously this word can mean different things to different people. So let's start by looking at definitions of ethnocentrism. Merriam Webster defines it as the attitude that one's own group ethnicity or nationality is superior to others.
00:05:12	Emre	That sounds like a prejudice, like you feel you are better than others. And it is true that every society has some negative attitudes about certain groups. So we do indeed learn to look down on certain people.
00:05:30	Joseph	So maybe that's why many intercultural educators feel that ethnocentrism is learned. But let's dig a bit deeper because ethnocentrism is not a simple thing and so we need to look at more than that simple definition.
00:05:44	Emre	I'm interested in the way that anthropologists look at ethnocentrism.

		Anthropology was first conceived of as the “scientific” study of culture. And this was in the late 19th and early 20th century. One important goal was being objective.
00:06:05	Joseph	And this was a time when anthropologists would set off to faraway places to study cultural communities. But they discovered that the idea of studying different cultures objectively was difficult or maybe even impossible because we invariably see the world through our own cultural glasses.
00:06:26	Emre	And that is ethnocentrism, looking at things through the familiar lens of our previous experience and cultural worldview.
00:06:36	Joseph	And this is so common we experience it any time we make a value judgment about some cultural difference. And it can be the smallest of things.
00:06:46	Emre	Yes, I remember years ago I noticed my own ethnocentrism at breakfast when I was traveling in France.
00:06:54	Joseph	At breakfast when you were traveling in France?
00:06:57	Emre	Well, the tour guide had mentioned that there was a buffet breakfast, which I was really excited about. But when I approached the table, I see there is only croissant, coffee and cheese. And I thought, is that all? Man, that's no buffet!
00:07:25	Joseph	And so why wasn't this a buffet?
00:07:27	Emre	Because in Turkey, a good breakfast is often seen as having lot of different ingredients and they are all served together.
00:07:38	Joseph	Well, you know, I have no experience with breakfast in Turkey. So I did a Google image search for Turkish breakfast, and sure enough, I find photos with all kinds of things. There's olive, cheese, bread, eggs, salad things, coffee.
00:07:55	Emre	Exactly. And so that was a cold unquote “normal” breakfast for me, a croissant, sound, coffee, cheese, you know, that just wasn't enough. It wasn't what I expected. It wasn't normal.
00:08:10	Joseph	And so from the anthropological point of view, this is at the core of ethnocentrism - the feeling that what is familiar to me is normal and anything else is somehow wrong or not up to standard. It has also been defined as a bias or tunnel vision in which “an individual views the world from the perspective of his or own group, establishing the in-group as archetypal and rating all other groups with reference to this ideal”.
00:08:41	Emre	Exactly. The image of breakfast in my head was an archetype, a kind of mental model. And it was based on my experience and my expectations.
00:08:54	Joseph	And of course we have a strong tendency to make a negative judgment about things that don't meet our cultural standard. So you were disappointed, critical maybe, of the breakfast buffet in France?
00:09:06	Emre	Yes. And worse yet, my experience in France was years ago. And since then I think I've learned a lot of things about intercultural understanding. But not that long ago, even a few years ago, I was in Morocco. And once again, I found myself inwardly feeling critical of the

		breakfast that I found there.
00:09:30	Joseph	I have been living in Japan for many years, and typically if there's a breakfast buffet, you find food like rice porridge, a fried fish, miso soup. But that still doesn't feel like breakfast to me. I still want bacon.
00:09:45	Emre	And so this is something that anthropologists discovered - that we always carry our cultural glasses with us, and yet most often we don't even notice them.
00:09:59	Joseph	One odd thing about ethnocentrism is how invisible it often is. Somehow when we are making ethnocentric judgments, we feel like we are just reporting the facts. But often there's a negative value judgment involved. So for example, you somehow found Turkish breakfast superior to the breakfast buffet you found in France.
00:10:21	Emre	Yes, but I also have seen something else. We sometimes make ethnocentric judgments against our own society or community. Because I sometimes hear Turkish students say that, "Oh, Turkish people are not good at that." Or "Oh, if something comes from Japan, it must be good."
00:10:44	Joseph	Ethnocentrism is grounded most fundamentally in the unconscious assumption that there is a single standard by which things are judged.
00:10:54	Emre	If there's a single standard of right or normal, you don't recognize that your perceptions depend on your previous experience. And that raises the question, why is this so? What is actually happening in our mind when we are being ethnocentric?
00:11:13	Joseph	And that brings us to part two: "Naturally Ethnocentric"
Part 2: Naturally Ethnocentric		
	Joseph	So let's take a look at the cognitive architecture of ethnocentrism. What's going on in our heads?
00:11:39	Emre	And perhaps the most fundamental process related to ethnocentrism is something referred to as predictive processing.
00:11:49	Joseph	Our mind navigates the world using internal models. We're constantly making unconscious predictions about what we experience. And the world is often a predictable place. So when you flip the switch, the light comes on, it's all automatic.
00:12:06	Emre	If every time we saw a light switch, we had to think about turning on the light, we would constantly be overwhelmed.
00:12:14	Joseph	So instead, we're constantly anticipating what will happen next. And ethnocentric reactions are a natural result of predictive processing because our expectations about how the world works or how it should work come from our previous experience.
00:12:31	Emre	So predictive processing is kind of the starting point for ethnocentrism.
00:12:51	Joseph	But ethnocentrism is not only a product of predictive processing, it is also deeply rooted in our mind and it is held in place by a number of natural cognitive biases.
00:13:05	Emre	When we use the word 'cognitive bias', we are talking about the many ways in which our minds naturally take shortcuts, pass judgments, over generalize, jump to conclusions, pay attention to certain things, and

		ignore others.
00:13:24	Joseph	Cognitive biases are ways for us to make quick judgments that are good enough most of the time.
00:13:31	Emre	One cognitive bias that is closely related to ethnocentrism is the familiarity bias. This is sometimes called the 'mere exposure effect', and that refers most simply to the fact that what is familiar is often experienced as more positive than something that is different or unknown. And then there is the confirmation bias.
00:13:57	Joseph	And that's the tendency to look for information that confirms what we already know or believe. So for example, I've heard people say, "Oh, what I learned from going abroad is that I'm glad that I was born in America or Japan or whatever."
00:14:11	Emre	Their foreign experiences reinforce their feeling of cultural superiority.
00:14:17	Joseph	And then there's a desire for cognitive ease, what I like to call the McDonald's effect. When I was first traveling in Asia years ago, I was in Hong Kong. And I remember walking the streets and being fascinated by everything I saw. But as I started to get hungry and tired, I happened upon a McDonald's.
00:14:38	Emre	And you went in, of course.
00:14:40	Joseph	Well, I did go in and I remember thinking to myself, "Why am I going in here? What am I doing? I'm here in Hong Kong, but I'm going to have a Big Mac."
00:14:50	Emre	But this is a common experience. Cognitive ease refers to the fact that things that are familiar to us require less cognitive processing, and that gives us a sense of comfort and reassurance.
00:15:07	Joseph	So ethnocentrism is rooted in predictive processing and it relates to a number of cognitive biases - familiarity bias, confirmation bias, cognitive ease. And together with all this, we have one of the most powerful of human biases, the in-group bias.
00:15:25	Emre	Yes, we have a natural tendency to favor people that are similar to ourselves. We are social primates. And the in-group bias triggers a sense of togetherness. And this is a core survival mechanism.
00:15:44	Joseph	And everyone has experienced the in-group bias. For example, sports fans feel solidarity with others who support the team. Uh, we naturally want to defend our friends and we gossip, uh, with people we know as a way to bond. And we're often suspicious, uh, of those who look or think differently than we do.
00:16:05	Emre	And ethnocentrism goes hand in glove with the in-group bias. People who are perceived as the other are seen as less legitimate and more worthy of suspicion.
00:16:21	Joseph	For me personally, there's something disturbing about how ethnocentrism creates solidarity because as we favor our in-group, we create community, but that also creates barriers to understanding others.
00:16:36	Emre	And this is something that our podcast team member Ishita Ray has

		experience with.
00:16:46	Ishita	It is difficult for me to take ethnocentrism lightly. I live in India, a country that is celebrated for its diversity of culture and languages, but where time and again there has been conflict and unrest because of these differences. Ethnocentrism has literally cost lives over and over again. And yet ethnocentrism is natural, a collective survival mechanism. It is the glue that holds communities together. India is a highly networked society. Daily life here means confronting a harsh reality of scarce resources and a dense population. This creates strong community bonds and social stratification as people at the top compete for status, while those at the bottom compete for survival. The fact is ethnocentrism often feels good. It gives a sense of security and solidarity in a hostile world filled with “others”. I for example, grew up surrounded by the idea that I have a right to condescend the language of my neighbors.
00:18:09	Ishita	There were countless conversations at lunch, at dinner where friends, family poked fun at Hindi for conjugating verbs based on the gender of the subject, Urdu for pronunciations that exercised the epiglottis, Tamil for being the language you could master only if you had pebbles in your mouth, Konkani for being the fisherman's Marathi - the list could go on and on. That's the idea that my language is the standard was reinforced then casually invalidating other languages, we were invalidating the lived experiences of the people of those communities. And because our ethnocentric instinct is primordial, so visceral, it becomes a breeding ground for prejudice.
00:19:19	Joseph	This is a powerful thought. Uh, ethnocentrism is a breeding ground for prejudice. It's the primordial instinct that intolerance is built on.
00:19:33	Emre	These days we find ethnocentrism being manipulated in many places in the world. Politicians who talk about the threat of the other, of the enemies who seek to destroy us. They're taking advantage of this psychological response for their own gain.
00:19:54	Joseph	And it's a reminder that ethnocentrism is in the end a form of collective self-protection. And this is why we easily fall prey to it when we feel threatened.
00:20:06	Emre	And this is true for all of us as podcast team member Daniel Glinz recalls.
00:20:15	Daniel	I feel that we tend to become most ethnocentric whenever we are verbally attacked, insulted, or simply referred to in a negative way. I feel it has a lot to do with pride and self-esteem. I remember a young rather arrogant woman who came from a small city in Germany and who started to work in the International Committee of the Red Cross. She commented, “The food supermarkets in Switzerland have much less choice than in Germany. The quality is good though, but there's much less choice.” I vividly remember that I felt hurt by her comment as a Swiss and that my reaction came as a total surprise to me. I have never expected that something like a negative comment would touch me. But when I think of it, it is the way she said it, rather than what she said that

		irritated me. She had used a condescending tone of voice. Deep in our collective unconscious, the Swiss are quite sensitive when they are being looked down by either the French and especially by the Germans, our two biggest and strongest neighbors whose languages we share.
00:21:40	Joseph	It's amusing to think of Daniel feeling bothered by someone's comments about Swiss supermarkets. But you know, we've all had experiences like this. So we've been talking about the mental processes of ethnocentrism. But let's get back to this question in this survey: Can ethnocentrism be overcome by education?
00:22:02	Emre	Personally, I clearly don't think so. It's a very deep part of our mental functioning, of our evolutionary psychology.
00:22:12	Joseph	But this also raises a question because it may be true that ethnocentrism runs deep and can't be completely overcome. But clearly not everyone is equally ethnocentric.
00:22:26	Emre	It's obvious that some people really do judge less. Some people look at things from multiple cultural perspectives and some kind of perceptual shift does seem possible. And what can we do to move beyond ethnocentrism?
00:22:45	Joseph	And that brings us to part three: "The Paradigm Shift"
Part 3: The Paradigm Shift		
00:23:03	Emre	We will always judge things based on our previous experiences. We will always have cognitive biases.
00:23:10	Joseph	But that doesn't mean we are completely a prisoner of ethnocentrism. We can learn to look at the world with new cultural glasses. It's possible to undergo a kind of paradigm shift. We experience a fundamental change to how we view the world.
00:23:30	Emre	And rather than judging things from one absolute standard, we learn to accept and respect that there are other ways of looking at things. Joseph, how have you experienced this?
00:23:43	Joseph	When I was in my early twenties, I was living in Zacatecas, Mexico and I started noticing something odd. When I would cross the border to take a flight to Zacatecas, I would have this sensation that I was transitioning into a different world. And this included a...a feeling of separation that my American friends couldn't really understand what it was like for me in Mexico and my Mexican friends couldn't really understand what it was like for me in California.
00:24:18	Emre	Well, I remember a similar set of feelings when I returned from the US to Turkey. When I stepped in the airport in Istanbul, I felt like I was not the me who left from there four months ago, I came back as a new person with a new way of looking at the world.
00:24:39	Joseph	And that raises the question of what's actually happening in our minds during experiences like this.
00:24:46	Emre	Well, one simple insight that has been powerful for me is that cultural learning is the process of pattern recognition.
00:24:55	Joseph	So when we're in a familiar environment, we can easily read the

		patterns around us. But in a foreign environment, our normal interpretive frameworks don't work. So how do we make sense of these new patterns?
00:25:11	Emre	And the ethnocentric answer is that we continue to use our existing interpretive schema. We judge new patterns based on our familiar standards.
00:25:24	Joseph	But it's also possible for us to somehow create a new, seemingly separate mental structure and alternative set of interpretive patterns.
00:25:35	Emre	So living in Mexico, you developed a new set of interpretive patterns, which you experienced as separate, just as I experienced when I came back to Istanbul.
00:25:48	Joseph	And for me, this idea has also helped me make sense of all the aha moments that we have during foreign experiences. Because once we have seen a pattern, we cannot unsee it.
00:26:02	Emre	But then why do some people spend years abroad but never really manage to understand the local perspective?
00:26:11	Joseph	Yes, that's interesting, isn't it? Someone can be surrounded by cultural patterns for years yet never fundamentally change their perspective. It's as though ethnocentrism wins in the end.
00:26:30	Joseph	But I also think that there's the opposite phenomenon. My wife, Ayako, for example, told me that when she arrived in Los Angeles on her first trip to a foreign country, she was shocked, uh, by the bathroom doors at the airport because they didn't extend all the way to the floor. And she thought, "Well, what kind of place is this where you can see people doing their business in the bathroom?" But she also says that a kind of light went off in her head and she had this realization that this was really a whole different world. And she decided then and there that she wanted to try living in a foreign country.
00:27:09	Emre	So on the one hand, some people live abroad for years and seem quite stuck into ethnocentrism and others have a small foreign experience and it has a big impact. It can bring about a fundamental shift in perspective.
00:27:27	Joseph	To go beyond ethnocentrism there needs to be a fundamental acceptance of the legitimacy of other cultural worlds. We have to go beyond our tendency to split the world into us and other.
00:27:42	Emre	And one person on our podcast team who has experience with this is, again, Ishita Ray.
00:27:52	Ishita	I was seven years old playing in the schoolyard with my friends. When I first heard it exclaimed that my family was from a certain caste. It got me off guard. I had never heard it discussed at home. Why did others put me in a category that I didn't even know existed? It was deeply disturbing. I was angry. When I got home from school, my father was in the kitchen, cooking. I blurted out what my schoolmates had said. I looked straight into his eyes. "Is that true?" He paused, turned off the stove, took me to the living room, sat down with me.

		<p>“Are you any different than you were this morning?”</p> <p>“No”, I said.</p> <p>“Did the words your friends use change you?”</p> <p>“No.”</p> <p>“So, you see”, he said looking into my eyes, “these words that people use to talk about you, they have nothing to do with who you are.”</p> <p>I now know that my father sought to inoculate me in some small way from a toxic process of othering. Once you have been labeled, you cannot unknow the category that people put you in. You cannot change the attitudes that go along with it.</p>
00:29:35	Ishita	<p>And yet my father was telling me that I was not the label. Yes, the label was a reality of the society that we lived in, but he did not attach any value to it. Instead, he drew my attention to my relationships with those I love, my experiences in the world, the friends who had labeled me in this way. My father an educator with every bone in his body, taught an important lesson that day. I learned to ignore the label, to pause, to pay attention, to look for more than one side to a story. And that when we do, we see a situation, we see a human being.</p>
00:30:40	Joseph	<p>Wow, what a story. And what a delicate task to tell a seven-year-old how to look beyond these ethnocentric labels, these prejudicial labels that she hears. It strikes me that Ishita’s father needed to reassure her. She was feeling defensive and she needed to feel secure. So going beyond ethnocentrism in some form requires that we don't feel threatened by these new ways of making sense of the world, that it enriches our lives.</p>
00:31:16	Emre	<p>And this fits with the research into empathy, the ability to look at the world from the perspective of others.</p>
00:31:24	Joseph	<p>And we have talked about the research into empathy by Jamil Zaki on this podcast before. Uh, in effect, our ability to empathize with others is motivated. That is to say it can be turned on by positive feelings and turned off by negative feelings. And this reminds us that we can take on new perspectives and we can expand our sense of cultural self. And Daniel Glinz has a lot of experience with this.</p>
00:32:00	Daniel	<p>I remember feeling my cultural self expand after some time living in a foreign country. My first “exotic” experience was as a student in China and later in Japan and in India. I remember developing a feeling of solidarity and even belonging to those countries. I remember feeling sad and touched when something bad happened to them on the political, social, or economic level. I guess that to some extent. I started to feel part of the bigger group, as if somehow my loyalty had shifted to my host country. More recently, since I've been learning Turkish, I react defensively when somebody makes a negative comment about Turkey. And this is not just an intellectual exercise. Learning a foreign language is a big investment. It expands our identity, it expands our cultural self. It requires somehow letting go our own mental and grammatical structure and it creates a distance from the original ingroup. This is a subtle shift,</p>

		but I have felt it very clearly.
00:33:34	Joseph	So I really like Daniel's practical perspective on this. You know, when we invest ourselves in our foreign experiences, when we learn a foreign language, this can all help us go beyond ethnocentrism.
00:33:49	Emre	So Joseph, we've covered a lot of ground today. We started with the question of whether education is enough to overcome ethnocentrism.
00:33:59	Joseph	And I think it's safe to say that ethnocentrism is a natural part of how our mind works. And it is encouraged by the prejudices that we learned growing up. It is reinforced if we feel threatened and it can be manipulated.
00:34:15	Emre	On the other hand, when we have positive experiences with cultural difference, we are more likely to accept that there are other normals that should be accepted and respected.
00:34:28	Joseph	And that's probably a good place to bring this episode to a close. But before we do that, let's mention some of the sources we've been relying on today.
00:34:40	Joseph	<p>The research we mentioned about the attitudes of intercultural educators was carried out by the Japan Intercultural Institute. The data from that survey is available upon request. Just contact JII. And for more information about empathy being motivated, checkout <i>Empathy: A Motivated Account</i> by Jamil Zaki. Our definitions of ethnocentrism came from an Oxford Bibliographies entry written by Elizabeth Baylor. And finally, many people in Turkey are still in need of assistance after this terrible earthquake. If you'd like to offer support, I recommend a checking out the website, Charity Navigator. It lists highly ranked charities that are providing support in Turkey.</p> <p>The Deep Culture Podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute. If you liked today's episode, spread the word on social media and you can 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.</p>
00:30:36	Emre	Thank you, Joseph it was really great.