

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 31 – Values)

Where do your feelings of right and wrong come from? Are values shaped by culture? In this episode, Joseph Shaules and Ishita Ray explore the hidden cultural “logics” of values. They discuss three approaches to understanding cultural values, argue that from the brain-mind perspective values are a feeling, and that moral intuitions are part of our animal nature . . . but reflect culture as well.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Joseph	(Hook) So here's your choice. If you don't pull the switch, five people die. But if you do pull the switch, one person dies instead of five, you will save four lives. So the question is, would you pull the switch?
00:00:28	Joseph	Hello, I am Joseph Shaules and welcome to the Deep Culture podcast, where we explore culture and the science of mind. This is a podcast for cultural bridge people crossing borders and living between cultural worlds. And I'm here today with Ishita Ray. Hello, from my apartment in Tokyo, Ishita. It is a beautiful spring day and it is great to be with you again.
00:00:48	Ishita	Hi Joseph. I am in Durgapur in Eastern India and we are already transitioning from spring to summer over here.
00:00:59	Joseph	Well try and stay cool, and Ishita, the theme for this episode is values.
00:01:07	Ishita	And the word values is something that you hear a lot when talking about culture.
00:01:12	Joseph	Right. For example, when I first came to Japan, I remember seeing people bowing and I thought, oh, Japanese really value respect.
00:01:22	Ishita	So, understanding what a cultural community values, what is important is one way that we make sense of cultural difference. I hear people say things like Germans value efficiency, or Americans value independence. And cultural conflict often happens because of differences in values, not simply because information is not clear.
00:01:49	Joseph	And I was reminded of this not too long ago when an exchange student came to me and she asked me, you know, I know that I'm supposed to respect cultural difference, but what if it conflicts with my values? Do I have to adapt to it anyway?
00:02:09	Ishita	What was the cultural difference that they were talking about?
00:02:13	Joseph	Well, she had come to Japan from Sweden and she objected to the way that she was supposed to use honorific language in Japanese.

00:02:22	Ishita	That is common in Indian languages too. The language that you use depends on age or status.
00:02:29	Joseph	Well then, she just wasn't comfortable with that. She said, you know, I was raised to treat everyone equally and it somehow feels wrong to her to emphasize hierarchy.
00:02:40	Ishita	And I have heard the opposite complaint from Indians that Europeans or Americans are disrespectful, even for example calling the supervisor by their first name.
00:02:54	Joseph	So the Swedish student was bothered by what seemed unfair. The Indians were bothered by things that seemed disrespectful. And this kind of conflict or misunderstanding, it happens all the time.
00:03:08	Ishita	It does, doesn't it? Differences and values create tension. The way that people do things can just feel wrong. And so you end up thinking, oh, those people are disrespectful, unfair, offensive, immoral, whatever.
00:03:26	Joseph	And those feelings about our values, they come from a very deep place within us. It's not something that we can just easily control.
00:03:35	Ishita	And so in this episode, we'll dig into cultural values. We'll talk about moral intuitions, which give us a sense of right and wrong.
00:03:47	Joseph	And we'll learn about cultural logics and look at research into cultural values.
00:03:54	Ishita	And that brings us to Part One: Values are a Feeling
Part 1: Values are a feeling		
00:04:12	Joseph	So let's do as we often do, and start with a definition. The Cambridge online dictionary defines values as: "the principles that help you to decide what is right and wrong and how to act in various situations."
00:04:28	Ishita	So if we say it's good to be honest, then we are talking about valuing honesty. Values remind us of what is important to us.
00:04:39	Joseph	But values can also be in conflict. Like if I get a new haircut and I say, "Hey, Ishita, how do you like my new haircut?" But maybe you don't think it looks good. You want to value niceness and say, "Oh, it looks great!" But you also may want to value honesty and say, "No, it doesn't look so good." So, you can be caught between these conflicting values.
00:05:05	Ishita	Well, I would probably just say, "oh, it looks great!" Although I might also feel insincere.
00:05:14	Joseph	And that's a reminder that from the brain-mind perspective, values are not just a principle or a concept. They are a feeling. We have a feeling for what's right and wrong, for what's fair, for the kind of person we want to be.
00:05:30	Ishita	And so, in the clash of values that we were talking about, the conflict is really between different feelings. We usually think of values as being high-minded, abstract principles such as fairness or kindness. But our sense for these things, the feelings that we get about fairness or unfairness, for example, is a form of embodied knowledge.

00:05:59	Joseph	And the technical term for this is moral intuitions. And we'll talk more about that later in the podcast. But moral intuitions are feelings we have about right and wrong, the feelings behind our values.
00:06:13	Ishita	And I first came across these ideas through the work of the Harvard philosopher Michael Sandal. He taught this series of lectures titled <i>Justice, what's the Right thing to do?</i> And episode 1 has more than 30 million views on YouTube. In that lecture, he poses moral questions and asks people what's the right thing to do?
00:06:41	Joseph	And he's trying to get us to pay attention to our feelings about right and wrong. And for example, in one lecture he asks you to imagine facing the following choice. You are standing near some train tracks, but you see that a trolley car is coming and it's going to hit five people on the tracks, but you can save them if you pull a switch, and that switch would send the trolley car onto another track. And on that other track, there's only one person. So here's your choice. If you don't pull the switch, five people die. But if you do pull the switch, one person dies instead of five. You will save four lives. So the question is, would you pull the switch?
00:07:41	Ishita	And the answer might seem obvious to many people, their intuitive feeling is yes, it's the right thing to do. You may even have an obligation to pull the switch. And they will explain their moral reasoning, the reason why that's the right thing to do, how we should try to save lives.
00:08:02	Joseph	But then in this lecture, he changes the story and then asks the same question again. And in this version, he says, imagine instead that you are on a bridge over the trolley tracks and you see the trolley will kill five people, but you notice there's a very large person next to you leaning over the tracks. If you push this person onto the tracks, the trolley will stop and you'll save the other five people. But of course, the person you pushed will die. So again, the question is, would you push the man onto the tracks?
00:08:41	Ishita	And in this case, the answer is often different. Many people say, no, I wouldn't push him onto the tracks. The feeling is that it's somehow wrong to do so.
00:08:56	Joseph	And logically speaking, of course, whether you pull a switch or push someone onto the tracks, the result is the same. You save four lives.
00:09:06	Ishita	But somehow pushing someone onto the tracks to save four lives feels wrong. But pulling a switch to save four lives feels like the right thing to do.
00:09:20	Joseph	And the keyword here is "feels". Our sense of right and wrong does not come from our rational analytic mind. It is rooted in our unconscious or intuitive mind. We are making intuitive judgments about right and wrong, good and bad, all the time. And those feelings are rooted deep in our evolutionary psychology. We are social primates and we have evolved an intuitive sense for what's fair or unfair, kind, unkind, loyal, etc. And these moral intuitions are part of our animal nature.

00:10:05	Ishita	But that may sound strange to some people, to say that morality is part of our animal nature. We usually tend to think of morality as a high-level abstract concern - the kind of thing that philosophers debate about.
00:10:23	Joseph	Well, the thing that really convinced me about this was a Ted talk of the primatologist Franz De Waal. And the title of his talk is <i>Moral Behavior in Animals</i> .
00:10:35	Ishita	What's impressive to me is the part where the researcher gives capuchin monkeys different rewards for the same task. One monkey is rewarded with a grape and the other with a slice of cucumber. And at first the monkey who got the slice of cucumber is happy to have it until it sees that the other monkey got a grape, which is what capuchins like much more. So when it sees that the other monkey is getting a better reward, it really gets enraged.
00:11:11	Joseph	Yes, it bangs the cage, it even throws the slice of cucumber away, all because of this perceived unfairness of the other monkey getting a better reward. So indeed, these monkeys are animals, yet they have a clear sense for what's fair and what isn't fair, and they let you know it.
00:11:32	Ishita	And really this is not surprising. Monkeys are social primates and these moral instincts guide behavior. They are kind of rules for how to get along. It is what gives a monkey troop its ability to function.
00:11:51	Joseph	So let's connect the dots here. Values relate to our feelings about right and wrong, good and bad. And we might think about them as abstract or philosophical. But from the brain-mind perspective, they relate to very deep parts of the self. They are felt intuitively. They're rooted in our evolutionary psychology.
00:12:13	Ishita	But there are more dots to connect there, because this raises questions. We are saying that our values are based in feelings which are very deep within us, a part of our animal nature even. But on the other hand, our values are shaped by our cultural community and by our individual preferences too.
00:12:37	Joseph	So we have to make sense of our values, both as something all humans share, but also something that is shaped by culture and something we have personal feelings and reactions to. And that's quite a lot to unpack.
00:12:55	Ishita	Which brings us to part two: Cultural Logics
Part 2: Cultural Logics		
00:13:10	Ishita	So Joseph, let's get back to the question your student asked. She said she wanted to respect cultural difference, but that sometimes it didn't agree with her values.
00:13:25	Joseph	And let's just guess that her reaction is at least partially cultural. You know, she was from Sweden, where being treated as equal is important.
00:13:33	Ishita	It's something that Swedish people might easily agree with.
00:13:38	Joseph	And this fascinates me about cultural values because they feel so personal. Uh, even if my students' reactions might be in some way typically Swedish, she experiences it as something very dear to her personally.

00:13:54	Ishita	Did being in Japan make her reflect on her values? Maybe she recognized that her reaction to Japanese politeness was influenced by her cultural background.
00:14:07	Joseph	I think it did. I mean, being in a foreign place often makes us reflect on our values. I remember for me, after I was living in Mexico, I started to feel that in United States family isn't valued enough.
00:14:22	Ishita	And spending time in the Netherlands and France, I understood that there are societies where social differences are not as marked as in India, where there is more gender equality.
00:14:36	Joseph	And did those things, you know resonate with you personally?
00:14:39	Ishita	Oh, I loved it. I think everyone finds certain values that they disagree with in their own society. For me personally, I have always found gender roles in India to be very constricting.
00:14:55	Joseph	So we are shaped by our cultural values, but that doesn't mean we always agree with them. You find some values in Indian society alienating, but that doesn't make you less Indian, right?
00:15:07	Ishita	That is so true. I am reacting to Indian values as an Indian, and then when we experience foreign cultures, we also find some things that appeal to us and maybe some others that don't feel fair or right to us. For example, your student felt that the hierarchy in Japanese was unfair even though she knew it was normal in Japan.
00:15:36	Joseph	Right. And in fact, there is a different cultural logic at work.
00:15:42	Ishita	So let's explore this a bit. You said that there is a different cultural logic at work. In other words, cultural communities have different assumptions about the world, different ways of making sense of human relations. So let's take the example of your student. The cultural logic of respect is different in places like Sweden or in the United States compared to more explicitly hierarchical societies like Japan or India.
00:16:14	Joseph	Yeah, I think she found the social distinctions in Japan arbitrary. For example, why should you change how you talk to someone just because they're older? But I think many Japanese would say that honorifics are a sign of respect and that showing respect helps people get along.
00:16:33	Ishita	So, can you give me an example of how that might work in Japanese?
00:16:38	Joseph	Well, for example, even a simple word like "to eat" has different forms depending on the status markers of the speakers. There is a neutral word that means to eat <i>taberu</i> , but there's also a word used in casual situations, especially by men <i>kuu</i> . But then there are more formal forms. Uh, the word <i>itadaku</i> means to eat, but it's used primarily to refer to yourself.
00:17:07	Ishita	So using <i>itadaku</i> implies that you lower yourself as a sign of humility and it is the difference in status that is emphasized.
00:17:18	Joseph	Exactly. And equally there's another word <i>meshiagaru</i> which you would not use for yourself, but when referring to someone else of higher status, who is eating.

00:17:28	Ishita	So again, the difference in status is emphasized, except now you are raising the other person up instead of lowering yourself.
00:17:48	Joseph	How is that similar or different to how respect and politeness are shown in India?
00:17:53	Ishita	Well, in India too, use of language depends on the person you're speaking to. In Hindi and Bengali for example, there are three different categories of second person pronouns.
00:18:07	Joseph	So in effect, there are different ways to say 'you'...
00:18:12	Ishita	That is correct. And the word you use depends on social distance - age for example, or social position with respect to you. And then there are honorific titles. For example, many Indians would not be comfortable addressing an older person by their first name. And certain actions raise the status of the person with respect to you. For example, touching the feet of someone older is a mark of respect.
00:18:43	Joseph	So, let's get this straight. We're saying that in India and Japan, people emphasize difference in status to show respect. And the cultural logic is that this helps people get along by validating their place in the fabric of the community.
00:19:00	Ishita	So what is the logic of respect in more egalitarian societies?
00:19:05	Joseph	So I think then there's an opposite cultural logic at work. An American boss may say that he has staff call him by his first name because he respects them as equals.
00:19:19	Ishita	But he's still the boss, right? They aren't equal, at least not in the workplace. He is the boss after all. So in effect, what the American boss is doing is pretending that they are equal in order to show respect.
00:19:38	Joseph	Yes, I suppose that's true. So it seems that Americans assume people should be equal and aren't so comfortable with explicit status and hierarchy.
00:19:48	Ishita	Whereas Indians assume that everyone has their place in society.
00:19:55	Joseph	And there's something similar in Japan, just as in a family, the parents and children aren't equal. Each person has their role in the family. In human relations there will always be those who are in a higher position and who must care for others.
00:20:10	Ishita	So some societies show respect by minimizing social distance and others by recognizing social distance. But I think we should stop here for just a moment. I think we need to make a distinction. We are talking about cultural assumptions related to egalitarianism and hierarchy, which is not the same as social equality and inequality.
00:20:40	Joseph	That is a good point. Social distance is not the same as social inequality. And I think that Japan and the US are a great example. The US emphasizes the cultural value of equality, but by many objective measures, the US is a more unequal society than Japan, even though Japan emphasizes respecting social distance.
00:21:06	Ishita	And then there is India where people talk about respecting one's place in society, but there is also terrible social inequality.

00:21:17	Joseph	Wow. So we have gone deep into this cultural value of respect. We've analyzed it, but this is just one. There are so many other values too. There is just so much to make sense of.
00:21:32	Ishita	And that brings us to Part 3: The Science of Values.
Part 3: The Science of Values		
00:21:47	Ishita	Well, Joseph, we are already on part three and it seems like we've barely scratched the surface talking about values. So let's try to make sense of the big picture here. The ways that cultural values are studied, how specialists talk about values.
00:22:07	Joseph	And fair warning, this section will get rather technical.
00:22:12	Ishita	So let's start with the different ways that cultural values are studied. And we talked about something similar in the episode on cultural difference.
00:22:23	Joseph	And I think we can divide approaches to understanding values into three categories: an emic approach, a comparative approach, and an embodied or intuitive approach.
00:22:37	Ishita	These are our categories by the way, but let's run through each one. The emic approach tries to understand how people in a community understand their own values.
00:22:50	Joseph	So I was once told for example, that to understand Mexico, I needed to understand the idea of <i>dignidad</i> , this particular idea of dignity that was important in Mexico. I have been told for example, that to understand Japanese society, you need to understand <i>amae</i> , which roughly translated is a kind of nurturing dependence. And that caring for and being cared for is a core value in Japan. And you might hear that say independence is a core value for understanding the United States or that liberty, fraternity, and equality are core values for understanding France.
00:23:35	Ishita	Trying to understand values from this insiders' perspective, the emic perspective, is commonly found in anthropology and I think it's a great starting point for trying to make sense of foreign values.
00:23:52	Joseph	And I think we should include the World Values Survey in this category. This is an enormous online database that was created by social scientists who ask people around the world how they feel about a range of issues. So that's the emic view. And then the second one we talked about is the comparative approach. And the basic idea is that you define key value dimensions and you compare cultural communities across those dimensions.
00:24:25	Ishita	This gets technical, but value dimensions are found in different domains, which refers to how that value is manifest in a society. So for example, if we say that collectivism is a value orientation, we may find evidence of collectivism in say the education system. In Japan for example, elementary school children often work together to clean their classroom at the end of the day or serve each other food at lunch. The value dimension is collectivism and the domain, the situation, the dimension can be seen in, is in school.

00:25:11	Joseph	And we should probably mention that Edward Hall was a pioneer in this comparative approach. He created value categories like low versus high context communication or polychronic versus monochronic time. And he used them to compare different cultural communities. Hall was a pioneer in this area, but the person who is best known for this kind of work is Geert Hofstede, who we have discussed on this podcast before.
00:25:39	Ishita	And he has extensively researched a number of value dimensions and they are individualism versus collectivism, power distance, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long versus short-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint.
00:26:03	Joseph	And these different categories are too much for us to go into one by one here because there are also other categories of comparison created by other researchers as well.
00:26:16	Ishita	One that is getting a lot of attention these days is tightness and looseness. Tightness refers to strong social norms with little tolerance for deviant behavior, whereas looseness refers to weaker norms and acceptance of deviance. So India would be considered a rather tight society following norms is really important here, whereas the United States is rather loose.
00:26:46	Joseph	And I'd like to mention a couple of value dimensions that I have found useful from the work of Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner. One is achieved status versus ascribed status. Ascribed status - official titles, rank, age. Achieved status - the recognition you get from accomplishing things. And also, I have found useful, the idea of universalism versus particularism. The former refers to valuing predictability and systematic thinking to ensure fairness and efficiency. Whereas particularism values flexibility and taking special circumstances into account.
00:27:41	Ishita	Well that is really information overload, but that does give a sense for the complexity of trying to understand culture using different value dimensions. And there are critiques of work like this. Some people say it encourages stereotypical thinking. And then there are lots of questions of methodology, how these dimensions are measured, the usefulness of the results.
00:28:12	Joseph	Okay, so let's slow down a bit here. Let's regroup because this podcast likes to focus on culture from the brain-mind perspective. And we haven't really talked about that.
00:28:23	Ishita	Right. We mentioned the emic perspective and the comparative approach, but we need to touch upon the embodied or intuitive approach.
00:28:34	Joseph	And this refers to looking at values not by comparing attitudes in different communities, but by exploring the cognitive structures involved with experiencing values, what are referred to as moral intuitions.

00:28:50	Ishita	And this relates back to what we were saying in part one, that values are a feeling. We make value judgments intuitively. We simply feel that something's respectful, fair or whatever.
00:29:05	Joseph	And this is a relatively recent field of research, and I have learned about it through the work of Jonathan Haidt. And I'm going to read directly from the back cover of his book, <i>The Righteous Mind</i> : "Why do people hold such wildly differing beliefs and why can others' views seem so illogical? Jonathan Haidt reveals that moral judgments arise not from reason, but intuition."
00:29:35	Ishita	And Haidt's fundamental insight about moral intuitions starts with the idea that our feelings of right and wrong have their roots in evolutionary psychology.
00:29:47	Joseph	We talked about the capuchin monkeys that were enraged when treated unequally, how this seemed to trigger a feeling of unfairness and that these feelings of right and wrong are part of our evolutionary heritage as social primates.
00:30:04	Ishita	And Haidt talks about six moral intuitions; care, fairness, loyalty, liberty authority, and sanctity - that human beings have an intuitive feeling about, for example, whether something is fair or not, someone is loyal or not, or whether something is pure or impure.
00:30:28	Joseph	And he argues that these intuitions developed as a response to evolutionary pressure. As social primates, for example, caring for others is an important part of what allows us to survive as a species. So it's natural that we value caring and feel critical of people who we feel are uncaring. And he makes an evolutionary argument for each of his six proposed moral intuitions.
00:31:07	Ishita	One thing I like about Haidt's work is this idea of reason riding the intuitive elephant, that our moral intuitions are like an elephant that has a mind of its own, and that we typically use our analytic mind to explain and justify our intuitive judgments - like a lawyer riding on an elephant.
00:31:33	Joseph	So we may feel like our moral reasoning explains our values. But in fact, our values are largely feelings that are produced by the unconscious or intuitive mind.
00:31:46	Ishita	But what might not be clear here is that our moral intuitions are a universal aspect of human nature shared with other primates at least. But there is also great cultural variation. And this can seem like a contradiction. You might think that if it's part of our animal nature, then it should be the same across cultures.
00:32:13	Joseph	And this question is something that Haidt addresses directly. He compares our moral intuitions to our taste buds. Everyone's tongue has the same taste receptors. We can all taste salty, sweet, sour, bitter, and savory flavors. But at the same time, our experience of food depends heavily on the cuisine we grew up with.

00:32:36	Ishita	So just as different cuisines may have different flavor profiles, different cultural communities can have different value profiles. The basic categories of values - care, fairness, loyalty -are universal. But the specific cultural emphasis or the particular cultural logics related to those values are cultural. So our moral taste buds can be the same. Yet we develop very different kinds of moral cuisines.
00:33:10	Joseph	And ultimately that gives human communities a lot of flexibility. And that has been a key to our survival as a species.
00:33:19	Ishita	Well, once again, we've covered a lot of ground in this episode, but to get back to where we started, did you have any advice for your student, the one who wondered how to respect cultural difference even if it disagrees with your values?
00:33:36	Joseph	Well, I did. First of all, respecting cultural difference doesn't mean you have to agree with it or necessarily adapt yourself to it. We have to keep our moral compass. But what I asked my student was, can you respect something that you don't understand?
00:33:55	Ishita	No, you have to understand something in order to really respect it.
00:34:02	Joseph	And that's the challenge. So I ask my student how well she understands Japanese honorifics and if she understands how Japanese think about politeness, and I might ask her what cultural assumptions there are behind Japanese values and how they might contrast with Swedish values.
00:34:24	Ishita	So you are really trying to help the students see that understanding different cultural values is not easy and that we have to be willing to examine our own cultural assumptions.
00:34:39	Joseph	Because I think that as we come to understand different values more deeply, we tend to be more sympathetic to them, less critical, even if we don't agree with them.
00:34:50	Ishita	Which brings us to a conclusion that we often reach on this podcast, that the topic of values across cultures is a lot more complex than it might appear at first. But digging into these things can help us make sense of cultural patterns and navigate difference.
00:35:11	Joseph	So let me ask you something, Ishita. You said that there are values in India which you have trouble accepting. So how is it for you to navigate in a society that disagrees with some of your personal values?
00:35:28	Ishita	Hmm. I get really frustrated sometimes, but it's like you said, I often don't agree with particular values like some communities being seen as less worthy. But I also see that it's natural for people to accept the values that they grew up with.
00:35:49	Joseph	So you are sympathetic even if you don't agree.
00:35:53	Ishita	I think that is true. Yes. And I think that the strong moral purpose with a deep respect for difference is what you need to work towards a better society.
00:36:06	Joseph	Well, and that reminds me of a very famous quote by Mahatma Gandhi. Uh, perhaps you could read it.

00:36:16	Ishita	<i>"I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the culture of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible, but I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."</i>
00:36:36	Joseph	<p>And that seems like a good place to bring this episode to a close.</p> <p>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, spread the word on social media. You can write us at dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org.</p>
00:31:07	Joseph	And thanks to the whole JII team – our sound engineer Robinson Fritz, Yvonne Van der Pol, Zeina Matar, Daniel Glinz, Emre Seven, Ikumi Fritz, and all the members of JII. And of course, thanks to you Ishita for sharing this time with me.
00:37:19	Ishita	Thank you, Joseph. As always, it was a lot of fun.