

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 33 – Stereotypes)

People say “Don’t stereotype!” But this is impossible because stereotypes are a natural part of our mental and social functioning. Join Joseph Shaules and Ishita Ray as they explore the cognitive complexity of stereotypes, including the difference between innocent and aggressive stereotypes—differentiation and otherizing. We also hear from Emre Seven, Daniel Glinz and Zeina Matar about the challenges and occasional pleasures faced by cultural bridge people navigating a world full of stereotypes.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Zeina	(Hook) A Palestinian colleague reported to me that this professor referred to me as a “real oriental woman” and God knows what the gossip was. And I did get some echo of that. But ultimately, I didn't care because the job got me good money to live on and my life was not at the institute.
00:00:29	Joseph	Hello, I am Joseph Shaules and welcome to the Deep Culture Podcast, where we explore culture and the science of mind. And I'm here with Ishita Ray. Greetings, Ishita from wet and humid Tokyo, where we are now officially in the rainy season. If you hear dripping sounds that is nature outside my window.
00:00:49	Ishita	And hello Joseph from Kolkata in India where it is another blazing hot summer morning. And if you hear noise in the background, that's just the sound of normal life here in the city.
00:01:04	Joseph	So Ishita, the theme of this episode is stereotypes.
00:01:09	Ishita	Yes. And we wanted to talk about this because we hear people say “Stereotypes are wrong” or “Don't stereotype!”, and it sounds so simple.
00:01:23	Joseph	But in reality, it is not so simple. And in fact, it's impossible to follow that advice.
00:01:31	Ishita	And that's because stereotypes are a natural part of how our minds work.
00:01:37	Joseph	Which doesn't mean that stereotypes are good or that we don't have to be careful about them, but the fact is they are unavoidable.
00:01:46	Ishita	Because if you are face-to-face with someone whose cultural background, you know little about, then the first things that will come to mind will naturally be stereotypes.

00:01:59	Joseph	And if they know little about your cultural background, then their mind will be full of stereotypes and they will often treat you in this simplistic way.
00:02:09	Ishita	And this is something that happens to cultural bridge people all the time.
00:02:15	Joseph	Now some people think of stereotypes, primarily as a kind of moral failure or simply a sign of prejudice, but it's not that simple.
00:02:26	Ishita	No, it's not. Stereotypes are a reaction to ignorance. They plug the gaps in our knowledge, they enable quick judgments. They give us this certainty to take action in the face of the unknown.
00:02:43	Joseph	And stereotypes are something that cultural bridge people deal with all the time. We are stereotype navigators. And so understanding the cognitive dynamics of stereotypes can help us deal with them.
00:02:57	Ishita	And so in this episode, we will dig into the complexity of stereotypes, the cognitive efficiency of stereotypes, and the social functions of stereotypes.
00:03:09	Joseph	And we'll hear from podcast team members about how they navigate stereotypes.
00:03:15	Ishita	And that brings us to Part One: <i>The Power of Stereotypes</i>
Part 1: The Power of Stereotypes		
00:03:35	Ishita	So Joseph, as we often do, let's start with a basic definition and then dig deeper after that.
00:03:44	Joseph	Well, the word stereotype has quite interesting origins. It comes from the French "stéréotype" and refers to a printing method using solid plates. So, from this we get the idea of a stereotype being a fixed image.
00:04:02	Ishita	So a stereotype is a simplified idea about what is typical for a personal group. And these images can be prejudicial.
00:04:13	Joseph	And often this is as far as the discussion goes, it's a simplified image. It's prejudicial. That means we have to stop using stereotypes.
00:04:23	Ishita	But from the cognitive perspective, that is just not possible.
00:04:29	Joseph	And that's because the inescapable fact is that all of us have stereotypical images in our minds that occur to us when we think about a particular group of people. Germans eat sausage, Russians drink vodka, Italians are romantic, Japanese are polite, Californians surf.
00:04:51	Ishita	And these images are typically learned from the people around us or from society. Somehow, we pick up stereotypes unconsciously.
00:05:03	Joseph	And I find it remarkable that people agree so much on stereotypes. You know, it's as though all over the world people have similar mental images about Californians - you know, surfboards at the beach or Hollywood, Beverly Hills. Isn't that true of India too?
00:05:23	Ishita	Oh, sure. There are loads of them. Crowded trains, gurus, temples, cows on the road...
00:05:32	Joseph	And this is crazy. It's as though we all pick up on the same images. Even when we are talking about our own culture. I hear groups of

		international students joking about the stereotypes from their own country. Like I'll hear an Italian student say, "Hey guys, let's get together at my apartment and I'll make pasta. You know, I am Italian after all."
00:05:56	Ishita	And I have heard Indians say "Hh, sorry, I'm late. I'm just following Indian Standard Time."
00:06:05	Joseph	And so stereotypes become a kind of shared currency, a set of images that people used to talk about difference. Why do our minds work this way? What evolutionary purpose might they serve?
00:06:30	Ishita	And what we find is that there is a certain cognitive efficiency in stereotypes. Our ancestors survived by quickly judging people. Friend? Enemy? Are they nice? mean? We categorized people by quickly accessing salient information.
00:06:50	Joseph	And this is efficient in the sense that these images come quickly to mind and allow us to make quick judgements.
00:06:59	Ishita	So, from the cognitive perspective, stereotypes involve categorization and essentialization. Chinese people in one category, Indians in another category, Swedes in yet another, each with the qualities that define or mark that category.
00:07:20	Joseph	So, for example, eating baguettes is experienced as an essential feature of the category - French person.
00:07:28	Ishita	Right, and as we saw with your students, if we agree on those categories and aren't offended by the essential qualities, then interaction is very efficient and they may even help us get along.
00:07:44	Joseph	Also, it's not simply an intercultural phenomenon, it's an extension of the categorizing we do in everyday life.
00:07:53	Ishita	So, when I'm at the airport and I see a man wearing a suit and a tie, carrying a briefcase, talking on his cell phone, I put him in a category – "Ah, he's a businessman, maybe talking to a client."
00:08:09	Joseph	And then based on that category, we judge and make assumptions, oh, he's probably focused on success. Maybe he's married with kids.
00:08:18	Ishita	And cognitively speaking, when we do this, we are differentiating. We are judging what makes this person different from that one. What qualities is this person likely to have? How should I treat them?
00:08:34	Joseph	And this is so automatic that we don't notice it, but we are fundamentally social primates who constantly judge the people around us so we can manage our interaction and our relationships.
00:08:48	Ishita	So, insight number one from the brain and mind perspective is that stereotypes are indeed simplistic judgments. We rely on them all the time in daily life, and they're often enough to get the job done.
00:09:05	Joseph	And there can be an element of truth to them. Sausage is a common food in Germany, surfing is popular in California. You do find cows in the road in India.

00:09:17	Ishita	And they may even capture some important truths like saying that the Japanese are polite or Americans are friendly, or Germans are efficient.
00:09:29	Joseph	These are stereotypes, but they hint at cultural patterns that are real. So there they're a kind of shorthand, a quick generalization. Okay, so we've been talking about stereotypes as mental shortcuts that help us deal with diversity that we rely on in everyday life, that they're cognitively efficient, maybe even useful. But of course, stereotypes can also be weaponized.
00:10:04	Ishita	There is a whole category of stereotypes intended to demean - ethnic slurs, racial insults. You find them in all societies, often reserved for groups that are looked down on.
00:10:19	Joseph	And there's a distinction here. People who use those slurs recognize that particular images are meant to be insulting.
00:10:28	Ishita	And this raises a basic question: how do we tell the innocent stereotypes from the aggressive ones?
00:10:37	Joseph	And this is where the cognitive perspective is helpful, because in general, innocent stereotypes involve differentiation. Whereas aggressive stereotypes involve otherizing.
00:10:50	Ishita	Differentiation refers to this process of categorizing, defining how people are similar or different. And the more we learn, the more complex our categories are.
00:11:06	Joseph	So typically, innocent stereotypes are an invitation to learning. People are interested in knowing more about your category, so to speak. So if someone says, "Oh, you're from California, do you surf?" In fact, they're trying to find out more about me.
00:11:22	Ishita	Right? And Otherizing on the other hand, refers to stereotyping whose primary purpose is to draw a line between you and me - or between different groups to mark you as distinct and perhaps even inferior.
00:11:42	Joseph	And of course, ethnic or racial slurs belong to this category.
00:11:48	Ishita	So we may think about otherizing as simply a form of prejudice, but it's more than that. It creates social solidarity. Humans have a tendency to think in terms of us versus them. We love to gossip and complain about the management or the difficult relative.
00:12:11	Joseph	So when we say, "Oh, the management team is a bunch of jerks!", we are cultivating solidarity with our colleagues and we're following the same instinct as when we say, "Oh, Elbonians are lazy, you can't trust them."
00:12:26	Ishita	Used in this way stereotypes are psychologically powerful - We all know what <i>those</i> people are like - and we are constantly seeking confirmation about this.
00:12:40	Joseph	So let's summarize a bit. We've said that it's not enough to simply declare stereotypes are wrong because stereotypes are everywhere. Our minds are full of them, every society has them and they fulfill powerful social functions.

00:12:57	Ishita	And so what's a bridge person to do in this world full of stereotypes?
00:13:04	Joseph	And that brings us to part two: <i>Navigating Stereotypes</i>
Part 2: Navigating Stereotypes		
00:13:31	Ishita	So, when we were preparing this episode with the team, I loved the stories about how everyone handles situations when they are stereotypes.
00:13:42	Joseph	Well, let's call that navigating the stereotype landscape. And that's something that we've all done.
00:13:49	Ishita	And dealing with stereotypes often involves a kind of fork in the road. Stereotypes can be a point of departure for learning more, but they can also be a roadblock.
00:14:02	Joseph	It's as though stereotypical thinking puts you in a mental box. And depending on how you react, you can try to get out of that box, or you can get locked into that box.
00:14:13	Ishita	So as an example - Joseph, you live in Tokyo, but you don't look Japanese. So, do people often treat you stereotypically as a "foreigner?"
00:14:28	Joseph	You know, sometimes people will hesitate to sit next to me on the train or be surprised that I can speak Japanese, especially if I use honorific language, in a very polite way.
00:14:42	Ishita	So, they don't expect a foreigner to speak high level Japanese.
00:14:47	Joseph	Well, they don't expect a white foreigner to do so. And if, if I were Korean or Chinese, those are different boxes. And what about you, Ishita, when you were living in France?
00:15:00	Ishita	Well, I was living in a small town. Many people had probably never met someone from India before. And they were very nice and interested, but people often did react stereotypically.
00:15:15	Joseph	So, what did they say or, or do?
00:15:18	Ishita	They were curious - asking questions about everything from Bollywood to the caste system, arranged marriages...
00:15:26	Joseph	So, you were kind of exotic to them?
00:15:29	Ishita	I think so, yes. People were often surprised, for example, that I could speak French.
00:15:37	Joseph	So do you mean that they were thinking like, "Oh, a brown person speaking French?"
00:15:43	Ishita	Yes. That's, that's exactly it.
00:15:46	Joseph	And how did you feel about that?
00:15:48	Ishita	Well, I did appreciate the friendliness and the curiosity, but even with good intentions, they can be tiring or insulting. Like when one of my female colleagues would tell me I had beautiful skin, and she would touch my hair.
00:16:06	Joseph	Ouch, that's invasive. Um, let's explore that a bit. Someone can try to be friendly, yet still do things that feel insulting or invasive.

00:16:17	Ishita	Well, if people have only a simple category to think about you, then in some sense you're being treated like an object. You are not a fully individualized human being.
00:16:29	Joseph	And this gap, the fact that someone using stereotypes can be well-intentioned and yet still come across as rude or insulting, that is in some sense at the heart of intercultural communication. So, let's get back to the question of how cultural bridge people react to these situations. Do you just trust in people's good intentions? Do you point out stereotypical thinking? Do you get offended?
00:17:07	Ishita	So, let's hear from some of our podcast team members about this, starting with Daniel Glinz who reminds us that dealing with stereotypes can be a playful process.
00:17:22	Daniel	When I was a student in China, people would ask me, "Which country are you from?" I would say "Switzerland." They would immediately answer, "Oh, Swiss watches are the best!" And then I started to get fed up. So, I invented a country named <i>Pingo</i> . This is a wordplay. In spoken Chinese, it can mean an apple or a "flat country". They looked puzzled. I explained that I had come from Holland, which is a flat country. Sometimes people from Latin America say to me, "Don't be so Swiss!". Usually this happens when I give a serious answer to a stupid question such as "what are the characteristics of a Swiss?" Sometimes I make fun of it. And then I say, "Of course I own a bank, a watch factory, and I eat a lot of chocolate when skiing downhill from our mountains." Making fun of their questions also shows that contrary to their expectations, Swiss people can be somewhat funny.
00:18:47	Joseph	And so, Daniel is dealing with attitudes about Swiss people when he is in other countries. But sometimes we may have to deal with stereotypes in our own country. As we hear from podcast team member Emre Seven.
00:19:04	Emre	I always face surprise from people from different countries because I do not look like the image of a Turk in their mind. First of all, my appearance, instead of having a dark, short hair, stubbly beard and moustache and wearing a suit, I have long hair that is light colored. I wear earrings and have a casual style. But beyond my appearance, what sets me apart is my traits and manners. I do speak English and I do not speak any Arabic. In my family, we don't have harsh patriarchy. Instead, we always decide anything together with my wife Elvina. So, I'm always having to work against the typical image of what it means to be a Turkish man.
00:20:11	Ishita	Well, I definitely sympathize with Emre. You are in your home country, but somehow you are seen as different.
00:20:21	Joseph	And how is that for you?
00:20:23	Ishita	Well, I don't look unusual, but I am untypical in many ways. As a secular professional woman living on my own, I have often been seen as different.

00:20:36	Joseph	And so how do people interpret you?
00:20:40	Ishita	Well, you know, India has so many social categories, language, region, caste, religion, the list can go on; gender, education, economic status, profession. People are interested, for example, to know which sub caste you belong to, which sect of the religion, which city you live in, which neighborhood, what dialect of the local language you speak, what's your accent like. Everything and everybody has a place, a position. People are often trying to identify which box to put you in.
00:21:19	Joseph	Well, that sounds quite difficult. How do you navigate that?
00:21:24	Ishita	I actively try and avoid it. For example, I speak Hindi and English with a very neutral accent. Even Indians cannot tell from my English and Hindi which region I come from. When talking about my family, I talk about my parents' profession and not the social background. I talk about speaking different languages when I was growing up, instead of talking about my first language or which community I belong to. I do not talk about my religion or caste. I don't use typical phrases that are related to any religion or community.
00:22:03	Joseph	So, if people are used to putting others in a box or boxes and you make that difficult, then how do people react to that?
00:22:13	Ishita	Well, it does become difficult for people to put me in any box and as a result I become a category of my own, which is just "different". And that's one reason I was so impressed by hearing how our podcast team members often take stereotypes in stride, especially Zeina Matar.
00:22:40	Zeina	I have a very nonchalant attitude towards being stereotyped. Once a cab driver told me in Munich, "You are a typical German woman", which was interesting for me. What is a typical German woman? Based on my physical appearance, I have been called Filipina and American Indian, among other descriptions, also Greek, Italian, etcetera. When I'm asked where I come from, I turn the question around and say, "What do you think?" And this is amusing. When I arrived to Germany, a colleague from the institute where I was working told his landlady that I was looking for a flat. And she had a flat. When I met her, I had a beret on my head and she wanted me to take it off and show her my hair. It was a bit surprising, but I got the flat.
00:23:43	Joseph	I like that she can see stereotypes as amusing even though people may be prejudiced against her. Because in cases like this, we're not just navigating the stereotype but also unfair treatment.
00:23:56	Zeina	But Zeina has this ability to keep her eye on her goal and not the stereotypical treatment she was receiving. Zeina's stories are also a reminder that stereotypes are much more difficult to deal with when there is a power imbalance. When I rented an apartment in New Delhi, the fact that I was a woman who wasn't living with family or a husband was automatically suspicious.

		In Zeina's case, she got an opportunity to work in Germany under a professor there, but found he had certain assumptions about her.
00:24:42	Zeina	The professor I worked for in Frankfurt was an orientalist. And it seems I fit his stereotype of the Arab, the so-called Oriental woman. I honestly do not know what his image of an Arab woman was, but he called me "Mylady". I felt that I was kind of his thing, but he treated me with utmost quaint and sometimes ridiculous respect. I was made to assist his projects even though he didn't really have any. So, I was digging into boxes and going through index cards.
00:25:19	Zeina	One way I kept the balance of power was through language. At the time, my German language was very basic, so we spoke English and his English was pretty bad. Later he attempted to switch the language of communication to German, but I resisted and succeeded. A Palestinian colleague reported to me that this professor referred to me as a "real oriental woman" and God knows what the gossip was. And I did get some echo of that. But ultimately, I didn't care because the job got me good money to live on and my life was not at the institute. Also, I had no academic ambitions in Germany, so I didn't need to depend too much on that professor.
00:26:16	Ishita	I love the matter-of-fact way that Zeina handled all of this, but it's fortunate that she wasn't more dependent on this professor.
00:26:26	Joseph	And this is one ugly truth about negative stereotypes. When we are in a weak social position, we often simply must put up with stereotypical attitudes and unfair treatment.
00:26:39	Ishita	And sometimes we have to fight back. And regardless of how we handle stereotypes, it's good for us to understand where they come from.
00:26:49	Joseph	And that brings us to Part 3: <i>Cognitive Categories</i>
Part 3: Cognitive Categories		
00:27:06	Joseph	So, let's ask the most basic question from the brain mind perspective. Why are stereotypes so common and what is their evolutionary purpose?
00:27:15	Ishita	And there are two ways to answer that question in terms of cognitive function, how our minds work - and in terms of social function - how they affect human relations. And we've pointed out that cognitive systems have evolved to make quick judgements. It is key to our survival. This is why we typically dislike ambiguity. From the cognitive perspective, stereotypes are our mind's reaction to something foreign about which we only have limited understanding.
00:27:51	Joseph	But of course, there is an obvious disadvantage when our mind has come to a conclusion, even if it's a sloppy one, it often stops taking in new information.
00:28:03	Ishita	And when that happens, we can easily get caught in a confirmation bias. Our mind's natural tendency to seek out information that supports what we already believe.

00:28:16	Joseph	And I had an odd experience with this when I was giving a presentation in Germany. At the end of the talk, a participant approached me and said, "Wow, I can really tell that you've been influenced by living in Japan." And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "Well, sometimes during your talk you would pause and you'd get a very serene Zen-like look on your face."
00:28:41	Ishita	Um, Zen-like look? What was that about?
00:28:46	Joseph	Well, my best guess is that this presentation content was abstract and sometimes I had to search for words. And I suppose I was kind of looking off in the distance.
00:28:57	Ishita	And so this was interpreted as Zen-like - you were trying to collect your thoughts, but somehow your actions confirmed some preexisting image I guess people had about Asians having some spiritual or mystical quality about them.
00:29:17	Joseph	Well, and this is a rather harmless example, but sometimes the confirmation bias reinforces negative stereotypes. And this gives birth to prejudice.
00:29:28	Ishita	So, if you have grown up hearing that Elbonians are lazy and you travel to Elbonia and see a group of people standing and chatting around the corner, you might say: "Oh, look at those lazy Elbonians standing around doing nothing."
00:29:46	Joseph	So in this case, stereotypes are really a roadblock to learning and they can reinforce prejudice and discrimination.
00:29:54	Ishita	But there's something very odd about how we experience stereotypes. When someone is drawing a conclusion based on a stereotype, they often feel like facts – "Hey, look at those lazy Elbonians!"
00:30:17	Joseph	And that's because cognitively speaking, there's an inverse relationship between our level of knowledge and the confidence we feel in our judgments.
00:30:27	Ishita	In other words, the less we know, the more confidence we have. And this is sometimes called the Dunning-Kruger effect. And on the face of it, it's a bit strange. Why would we overestimate our ability when we are ignorant?
00:30:46	Joseph	And one possible explanation is that if we have little information, we can't judge how accurate our performance is.
00:30:55	Ishita	And let's not forget the fundamental attribution error because this also goes along with stereotypes.
00:31:04	Joseph	Indeed. And this refers to our tendency to explain the behavior of others by assuming some essential inner quality, whereas we judge our own behavior relative to the environment.
00:31:17	Ishita	So, if the person we are supposed to interview for a new job is late, we think, "Oh, they must be irresponsible." But if I am late, I think about how the heavy traffic made me late.
00:31:33	Joseph	So, to go back to the Elbonian example, if we see Elbonians standing around on the corner, we may think, "Oh, they're standing around

		because they're lazy" which is a fundamental attribution rather than, "Oh, maybe they're waiting to be picked up", which is a situational interpretation.
00:31:53	Ishita	And finally, stereotypes should be contrasted with implicit bias, which is a negative attitude that we aren't consciously aware of.
00:32:04	Joseph	Stereotypes are images that come to mind, whereas implicit bias is a result of having learned negative associations. We have negative feelings about a particular group of people.
00:32:18	Ishita	So again, maybe you've grown up hearing people put down Elbonians, how they are dishonest, lazy, and pretty soon you simply have a negative feeling about Elbonians and you probably don't even recognize it.
00:32:36	Joseph	But let's circle back to the evolutionary purpose of stereotypes - their social function. And as we said in part one, stereotypes serve the purpose of categorizing people and groups. They're a way to make sense of diversity, dividing the world into desirables and undesirables, friends and enemies.
00:32:55	Ishita	And by otherizing the outgroup, we reinforce the ingroup. So if a Bengali comments to another Bengali about Tamil speakers, this reinforces solidarity as Bengalis.
00:31:33	Joseph	Or men may bond by standing around with other men complaining about their wives.
00:33:16	Ishita	Or wives complaining about their husbands. All this is getting rather discouraging. But let's summarize a bit. So, stereotypes reflect our ignorance. They put up roadblocks to learning. They reinforce prejudice. We often mistake them for facts. They lead to solidarity for the ingroup, but at the expense of the outgroup.
00:33:43	Joseph	But on the bright side, we can learn to recognize stereotypes and we can watch for them. Unlike many biases, we can often control our use of stereotypes, which is why many classes in intercultural communication focus on identifying stereotypes.
00:34:00	Ishita	And for cultural bridge people, stereotypes can be extremely frustrating. People are constantly putting us in boxes. Boxes you have little control over.
00:34:13	Joseph	And sometimes you may benefit if they're positive stereotypes and sometimes you suffer from that because of negative stereotypes.
00:34:21	Ishita	But in either case it's not under your control. And that can be frustrating and dehumanizing.
00:34:29	Joseph	Although as we've seen with Daniel, Emre and Zeina, cultural bridge people often have thick skins. We play with stereotypes or actively try to get around them.
00:34:41	Ishita	So, in the end, stereotypes occupy this odd place in the lives of cultural bridge people, they are unavoidable, something we are forced to deal with. They exist at the boundary between complex understanding and

		simple misunderstanding. They are a door to learning, but also a roadblock to deeper relations.
00:36:36	Joseph	And I think that's a good place to bring this episode to a close. 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're interested in culture and the mind, check out <i>JII's Brain, Mind and Culture Masterclass</i> . It's a blended learning course and online community of cultural bridge people. To find out more, just do a web search for the Japan Intercultural Institute. If you liked today's episode, spread the word on social media. You can reach us at dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org . And a special thanks goes out to Daniel Glinz, Emre Seven and Zeina Matar for sharing their stories with us today. And to the rest of the podcast team, Yvonne Van der Pol, Robinson Fritz and Ikumi Fritz. And of course, as always, thanks to you Ishita for sharing this time with me.
00:36:05	Ishita	Thank you, Joseph, as always, I had a lot of fun.