

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 **Emre Seven** 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 40 – Cultural Explorer Franz Boas)

In this episode, Joseph Shaules and Emre Seven tell the story of cultural explorer Franz Boas. Born in 1858, Boas brought a scientific mind to the study of human diversity. We learn about his near-death experience studying the Inuit in the Canadian arctic, and the scientific debates he engaged in (e.g. against racism). His insights are relevant for all cultural bridge people even today.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Daniel	(Hook) Despite Franz's education and intelligence back home, in Inuit communities in the Arctic, he was ignorant and helpless. He was forced to depend absolutely on his hosts for directions, for food, and for companionship. He was in their world...
00:00:31	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. Greetings from Tokyo, Emre.
00:00:43	Emre	Hello, Joseph. Greetings from Sivas, Turkey. How are you doing?
00:00:47	Joseph	I'm doing great. And today we have the vocal talents of Daniel Glinz, who is helping us out with narration. Hello Daniel.
00:00:57	Daniel	Hello, Joseph. Hello, Emre. Nice to be together with you virtually.
00:01:03	Joseph	Emre, in this episode, we are going to look at the life and the cultural insights of Franz Boas.
00:01:10	Emre	Yes, I'm really looking forward to this. You know I became a fan of Franz Boas when I was studying anthropology. He's sometimes called the quote unquote father of modern anthropology. He started the first PhD program in anthropology in the United States in 1896 at Columbia University. His students were people like Margaret Mead, Edward Sapir, Ruth Benedict. Huge names...
00:01:39	Joseph	Well, I think of Boas in two ways. The first is as a cultural explorer, and in those days, that often meant ethnographic expeditions to faraway places. He nearly died after getting lost in the Arctic.
00:01:56	Emre	He was studying what were then called ' <i>primitive</i> ' communities, and that's a word that we don't use now. But as we will see, he did not believe the communities he visited were inferior or simplistic.
00:02:10	Joseph	Also, what strikes me is that he was really a scientist, and he wanted the study of human diversity to be empirical, to avoid bias.
00:02:20	Emre	Yes, I found a quote from Ruth Benedict. She says that when Boas started his career, anthropology was, quote, " <i>a collection of wild guesses</i>

		<i>and a happy hunting ground for the romantic lover of primitive things.”</i> But that thanks to him, it became, quote, “ <i>a discipline in which theories could be tested.</i> ”
00:02:44	Joseph	Well, I love this quote. I think that these days, the word diversity has become somewhat political. But what we are talking about here is the scientific attempt to understand human diversity, which is something that is still being researched.
00:03:00	Emre	Boas lived 150 years ago, but he was asking questions that all cultural explorers face today, like, how can we understand cultural difference? Or is it possible to be objective about culture?
00:03:17	Joseph	So in this episode, we will tell the story of Franz Boas's cultural and intellectual exploration. We'll see that his ideas were not mainstream at the time, and we'll look at how his thinking stacks up against modern science.
00:03:33	Emre	And that brings us to Part one – The Scientist
Part 1: The Scientist		
00:03:51	Joseph	So, to understand Franz Boas we need to see his work in historical context. So let's start with his background and the intellectual climate at the time.
00:04:02	Emre	Franz Boas was born in 1858 in what is now Germany. He loved natural sciences, and he excelled in school. He was awarded a PhD in Physics when he was only 23 years old. He studied the optical properties of water.
00:04:22	Joseph	And this got him thinking about the idea that perception may be subjective. And I also think his background in Physics helps us understand his dedication to avoiding bias and seeking empirical truth.
00:04:38	Emre	So he studied Physics, but then he fell in love with Geography
00:04:45	Joseph	Which is not just maps and country names. The study of geography is a wide-ranging discipline. For example, this is the Wikipedia definition:
00:04:57	Daniel	<i>“Geography is an all-encompassing discipline that seeks an understanding of earth and its human and natural complexities, not merely where objects are, but also how they have changed and come to be.”</i>
00:05:12	Emre	And the keywords here are “ <i>...its human and natural complexities</i> ”. Boas was fascinated with the complexity of human societies and the relationship between humans and the natural world.
00:05:26	Joseph	So he wasn't simply interested in customs or traditions. He wanted to understand how biological and cultural diversity evolves. And he saw that as happening through the interaction of multiple factors, biological evolution, environmental factors, cultural development over time, the spread of ideas. And he recognized that all of these things interact.
00:05:54	Emre	And let's put all this into context. Let's step back into the intellectual debates of the time.
00:06:10	Joseph	The late 19th century was an age of technological change. The machine age was starting. People were fascinated by electricity, steam engines,

		mechanization. And along with that, Europeans and Americans were fascinated by faraway places and so called primitive peoples.
00:06:35	Emre	This was really the first wave of globalization. From 1865, a transatlantic cable allowed for nearly instantaneous communication between Europe and the United States. The steamship meant distant destinations could suddenly be reached in a matter of weeks.
00:06:56	Joseph	Explorers were busy climbing mountains, exploring jungles and tropical islands. Japan opened to the world in 1854. Mount Everest was confirmed as the tallest peak in the world in 1857.
00:07:13	Emre	There was, of course, a very colonial mentality. Europeans felt they were, quote unquote, discovering faraway places and supposedly exotic peoples. At the same time, there were big advances in natural sciences. In 1859, Charles Darwin published the <i>Origin of the Species</i> , which laid the groundwork for evolutionary biology.
00:07:40	Joseph	So there were accounts of exotic people and customs, but how could that diversity be categorized or understood?
00:07:50	Emre	And the dominant idea at the time, the thinking that Boas would have been surrounded by is, what today we call <i>scientific racism</i> , which Wikipedia defines as:
00:08:03	Daniel	<i>"The pseudoscientific belief that the human species can be subdivided into biologically distinct taxa, called races and that empirical evidence exists to support or justify racism. Before the mid-20th century, scientific racism was accepted throughout the scientific community, but it is no longer considered scientific."</i>
00:08:31	Joseph	So, just to be clear, racism is not scientific. But the term <i>scientific racism</i> refers to the pseudoscience common in the past. And the key idea was the belief that people of different so-called races were biologically different, with white Europeans more evolved and superior. And so people tried to use supposedly scientific methods to support racist ideas to prove their own biases. But there were others, like Boas, who used scientific methods to look for the truth.
00:09:10	Emre	At the time, the science was unclear. For example, some people said you could tell someone's character by the shape of the skull. And let's remember that if you had been born in 1840, things we take for granted today would not have been so obvious.
00:09:29	Joseph	So in those days, people knew that there were different body types, skin colors, features, what people referred to as the races. And there was tremendous diversity in how people lived. There were hunter-gatherers in deserts, there were tribal communities in rainforests. There were seafaring islanders in the south Pacific, communities living in the Arctic. People knew about ancient, highly complex civilizations - China, the Ottoman Empire, the Incas of South America.
00:10:03	Emre	And naturalists came up with different classification schemes to make sense of this. For example, Carl Linnaeus, who is famous for creating a taxonomy for flora and fauna, believed humans could be divided into

		four categories: The Americanus, the Europeanus, the Asiaticus and the Africanus.
00:10:27	Joseph	It was assumed that the physical differences reflected differences in character, that the Americanus was stubborn and zealous, the Europeanus was inventive and gentle, the Asiaticus was greedy and austere, and the Africanus was lazy and capricious.
00:10:48	Emre	Well, this kind of thinking is still with us for sure, but it was extremely common in the 19th century. Many people felt there was an obvious connection between body type and how people lived, that this went from primitive to advanced.
00:11:05	Joseph	And Darwin's theory of evolution, which was a super hot topic back then, showed how diversity in the natural world evolved from simpler to more complex forms. And people used those ideas to argue that sophisticated technology and complex societies reflected superior mental abilities
00:11:25	Emre	Which we know is not true. But it was an open question back then.
00:11:44	Joseph	So let's get back to Boas' story. These ideas might just seem offensive today, but at the time they were very common and it was not easy to prove things one way or the other.
00:11:57	Emre	And this was the debate that Franz Boas jumped into. He was a lifelong opponent of scientific racism, but he saw this as a scientific question, not simply a moral one. As he says in his book, <i>The Mind of Primitive Man</i> :
00:12:17	Daniel	<i>"We must investigate how far we are justified in assuming achievements to be primarily due to exceptional aptitude and how far we are justified in assuming the European type to represent the highest development of mankind."</i>
00:12:35	Joseph	So here Boas is calling for investigation - science - to prove or disprove the ideas that Europeans were the most developed. And he set out to do just that. And that brings us to part two: The Explorer
Part 2: The Explorer		
	Joseph	Emre, you and I have a connection thanks to my book, <i>The Beginner's Guide to the Deep Culture Experience</i> .
00:13:12	Emre	That's right. I first contacted you to translate it into Turkish, and that book really spoke to me. And in one chapter it talks about Franz Boas, who I was already a fan of. So I was really happy to see him in <i>The Guide</i> .
00:13:27	Joseph	Well, what inspired me was his expedition to study Inuit communities in Baffin Island, which is an island in the Canadian Arctic.
00:13:38	Emre	At that time, geographers were debating whether cultural diversity was primarily a product of environment or was it related to the spread of ideas.
00:13:49	Joseph	So he was trying to answer a scientific question. But when you read his account, it was also personally transformational for him.
00:14:00	Emre	And this raises a question. On the one hand, the goal of science is objectivity, but we all have cultural biases, including scientists.

00:14:12	Joseph	And in this case, he gained insights into his own biases during that expedition.
00:14:20	Emre	Let's hear an excerpt from the <i>Beginner's Guide to the Deep Culture Experience...</i>
00:14:37	Daniel	<p><i>"The year was 1883. Franz Boas was exhausted, freezing cold and famished. He knew that he was at risk of dying in a harsh landscape of ice and snow. He had been sledding for 26 hours through the Arctic, with temperatures at times -46, he and his companions had gotten lost. He was an accomplished man back in Germany, a scientist with a doctorate in Physics. Yet now he was helpless. Finally, however, to their great relief, Franz and his companions found shelter with an Inuit community. They were given hospitality. They were able to warm up and rest.</i></p> <p><i>[Inuit song]</i></p> <p><i>It had been a harrowing experience that affected Franz deeply. The following day, he reflected on his increasing appreciation for his own ignorance. Despite Franz's education and intelligence back home, in Inuit communities in the Arctic, he was ignorant and helpless. He was forced to depend absolutely on his hosts for directions, for food and for companionship. He was in their world.</i></p> <p><i>[Inuit song]</i></p> <p><i>This experience was a formative one. In Franz's time, it was usually considered that culture evolved from simple to more complex. Thus, a community living in small groups with few possessions was considered less developed than, say, a nation, state or empire. But Franz came to think that the essence of the human experience is not technical, the tools that we use, but mental. What most clearly distinguishes one community from another is the patterns of meaning that each community shares, what they believe about the world and what they expect of the people around them. Franz's time in the Arctic helped him experience the world of meaning that the Inuit live in, one as rich and complex as the one he knew in Germany."</i></p>
00:17:54	Joseph	By experiencing his own ignorance in an Arctic community, he realized that the world of the Inuit was just as sophisticated as the world he knew back in Germany. Perhaps an Inuit in Germany might seem like a so-called primitive, but in the world of the Inuit, he was the simpleton.
00:18:18	Emre	I think there is something else in this passage as well. Boas saw culture is a world of meaning. Culture is not simply a set of customs or traditions. It's a way of making sense of the world.
00:18:33	Joseph	This view fits with our current understanding of cognitive systems, that our eyes are not cameras and our ears are not simply hearing devices. Our experience of the world is constructed.
00:18:47	Emre	And I think this is where science and personal insight come together, because we want to understand how all of us can come to a deeper understanding of culture.
00:18:59	Joseph	Well, I love the fact that he was only 25 at the time, and it seems that

		this experience informed his whole career, because here is a reflection that he wrote while still on Baffin Island:
00:19:15	Daniel	<i>"I often ask myself what advantages our quote unquote good society possesses over that of the quote unquote savages, and find the more I see of their customs, that we have no right to look down upon them. All service, therefore, which a man can perform for humanity, must serve to promote truth."</i>
00:19:42	Joseph	So, faced with his ignorance, Boas committed himself to science and to avoiding bias.
00:19:50	Emre	And his intellectual accomplishments were enormous. For example, in 1911, he published a long-term study based on the results of the skull measurements of 17,821 immigrants. By revealing that the skulls of the immigrant parents and their children born in the USA are very different from each other, he refuted the idea of a genetically transmitted skull size, which was being used for determining racial categories.
00:20:23	Joseph	He was a meticulous scientist, and results like this threw all other racial classifications and characterizations into doubt. He found brilliant ways to challenge racist assumptions scientifically. And he was attacked for this. His 1911 book, <i>The Mind of Primitive man</i> , which we are quoting from in this episode, was burnt by the Nazis in Berlin, and it caused the cancellation of his doctorate degree at Kiel University.
00:21:03	Emre	But he was not just measuring bones. He went on ethnographic expeditions, did linguistic studies, and he recognized that understanding human diversity requires a multidisciplinary approach. And so when he started the first anthropology department, he divided it into four fields: Physical anthropology...
	Joseph	...which deals with the biological aspects of human diversity.
	Emre	Archaeology...
00:21:29	Joseph	which focuses on understanding life in the past and how it has developed and changed over time.
00:21:40	Emre	Linguistic anthropology
	Joseph	...which relates to the relationship between language and culture
	Emre	...and cultural anthropology...
00:21:50	Joseph	...Which focuses on current cultural communities.
00:21:55	Emre	Boas contributed in all of these areas. His academic output was enormous. He literally changed the way that we understand ourselves as humans.
00:22:08	Joseph	And there's one point that we should touch upon about his approach, even though it's a bit theoretical. We said earlier that he saw culture as being a result of the interaction of multiple factors. Well, the idea that multiple factors interact to produce a complex outcome... Today we refer to this as complexity theory or dynamic systems theory. He was way ahead of his time.
00:22:39	Emre	We talked about complexity in episode 28. You should definitely check that out.

00:22:44	Joseph	Which raises a question. Boas went to Baffin Island 150 years ago, but the world is such a different place today. So is there still really something for us to learn from him?
00:22:59	Emre	And that brings us to part three: Boas Ahead of his Time
Part 3: Boas Ahead of his Time		
00:23:11	Joseph	Well, Emre, you've been a fan of Franz Boas for a long time. So what do you think are the lessons that he has to offer for bridge people today?
00:23:21	Emre	Oh, there's so much. But for sure, Boas's ideas about cultural relativism are useful for all bridge people.
00:23:31	Joseph	And basically, cultural relativism is the idea that cultures must be judged in context rather than by absolute standards. In 1887, for example, Boas said, :
00:23:47	Daniel	<i>"Civilization is not something absolute, but is relative, and our ideas and conceptions are true only so far as our civilization goes."</i>
00:24:00	Emre	I think Boas' key point is that we all see the world through the lens of our own culture, meaning that to understand a different culture, you need to put on a new pair of cultural glasses.
00:24:13	Joseph	And we sometimes call this the <i>emic perspective</i> , an insider's view.
00:24:19	Emre	And unfortunately, I think some people misunderstand cultural relativism. They think it means we are not allowed to make judgments about other societies.
00:24:30	Joseph	I know that sometimes students will say to me, "I'm supposed to respect cultural difference, but what if it goes against my ethics or moral beliefs?"
00:24:40	Emre	And what if cultural practices come into conflict with human rights? Does cultural relativism mean we have to accept everything?
00:24:50	Joseph	And the answer is clearly no.
00:24:54	Emre	Cultural relativism is not a moral stance. It's a reminder that in order to have an opinion about a cultural custom, you need to understand how people in that culture see such things. Ethics must be based on understanding.
00:25:10	Joseph	Respecting cultural difference doesn't mean agreeing with or adapting to everything. It means understanding things from the local perspective so you can make your own judgments. And there's one more thing about Boas. I'm impressed by how psychologically insightful and sophisticated his ideas were. For example, he talks about how cultural patterns operate out of conscious awareness, and that it's only when something foreign happens that we become aware of culture within ourselves. He says, for example:
00:25:52	Daniel	<i>"The custom is obeyed so often and so regularly that the habitual act becomes automatic and remains entirely subconscious. It is only when an infraction of the customary occurs that all the groups of ideas with which the action is associated are brought into consciousness."</i>
00:26:13	Joseph	And there's one more quote we need to include, one that echoes what psychologists today call moral intuitions, the idea that our value

		judgments are largely unconscious and that we use conscious reasoning to justify or rationalize them. He says...
00:26:31	Daniel	<i>"A close introspective analysis shows these reasons to be only attempts to interpret our feelings of displeasure, that our opposition is not by any means dictated by conscious reasoning, but primarily by the emotional effect of the new idea, which creates a dissonance with the habitual."</i>
00:26:55	Emre	He's saying that "dissonance with the habitual", in other words, a feeling of foreignness, provokes negative judgments and rationalizations. We talked about this in episode 31, <i>Values</i> and episode 39, <i>Culture and the unconscious</i> . Check them out.
00:27:14	Joseph	Well, Emre, I'm afraid we are overloading our listeners here. But that's also simply because Boas was so enormously insightful and productive.
00:27:27	Emre	He left behind nearly a thousand scientific articles, six books, did countless research projects, taught dozens of students, who became the most important theorists in the history of anthropology.
00:27:40	Joseph	Well, it's hard to choose some final words from Boas for this episode, but how about this?
00:27:49	Daniel	<i>"Our tendency to evaluate an individual according to the picture that we form of the class we assign him is a survival of primitive forms of thought. Freedom of judgment can be attained only when we learn to estimate an individual according to his own ability and character. Then we shall treasure and cultivate the variety of forms that human thought and activity has taken."</i>
00:28:19	Emre	I love that when he talks about "primitive forms of thought", he's not speaking of some cultural group. He's talking about our tendency to judge by categories and not by character.
00:28:33	Joseph	So let's take up his call to treasure and cultivate human diversity in all its forms. And I think this is a good place to bring this episode to a close. We should mention some of our sources today: We quoted from and highly recommend Boas's book <i>The Mind of Primitive Man</i> . The quote about cultural relativism comes from <i>Museums of Ethnology and their Classification</i> , Science, 1887. The quote about unconscious culture comes from <i>Some Traits of Primitive Culture</i> , in the <i>Journal of American Folklore</i> , October-December 1904. We also took quotes from <i>Human faculty as determined by race</i> , an address that he gave to the Anthropology section of the American Association for the Advancement of Science at the Brooklyn meeting in 1894. Sound credit goes to Zwellin Sounds, Be-Steele and Klankbeeld for the blizzard, sled dog, and steam train sounds. They can be found on Free Sounds and the Baffin Island Inuit singing is from <i>Baffin Island Inuit Peoples: Angakuts, Shamans, Healing & Culture</i> , which you can find on

		<p>YouTube.</p> <p>The Deep Culture Podcast is sponsored by JII, the Japan Intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. This podcast is purely nonprofit. If you want to support our mission, please become a member of JII. Just do a web search for the Japan Intercultural Institute or write us at dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org.</p> <p>Special thanks to Daniel Glinz for his help with narration and Ishita Ray, who co-produced this episode. And thanks to everyone on the podcast team, Yvonne Van der Pol, Zeina Matar, Ikumi Fritz, our sound engineer Robinson Fritz, and thanks to you, Emre, for sharing this time with me.</p>
00:30:39	Emre	Thank you, Joseph. It was great to be talking about Boas.