

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, Emre Seven** and **Ishita Ray** 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 46 – Beyond WEIRD Approaches to Intercultural Education Part 1)

Intercultural education is sometimes criticized as being too WEIRD—Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic. But what does that mean? In this two-part episode, Joseph Shaules, Ishita Ray and Emre Seven trace the origins of the term WEIRD to the work of Joseph Henrich. He argues that people from WEIRD countries are psychological outliers. We hear Liu Liu reflect on the challenges of adjusting to WEIRD psychology and discuss how intercultural education has been influenced by its WEIRD roots.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Joseph	(Hook) Not dividing the world into WEIRD versus non-WEIRD. He is not saying that there are two types of people in the world.
	Joseph	Hello, this is Joseph Shaules and welcome to the Deep Culture podcast, where we explore culture and the science of mind. And I am here today with Ishita Ray and Emre seven. How are you doing?
00:00:28	Ishita	Hi, Joseph. Hi, Emre, from a hot and humid Durgapur. And if you hear construction or any noise, that's just normal life in the background.
00:00:41	Emre	Hi Joseph Hi Ishita. Hello again from a hot and sunny Sivas, Türkiye.
00:00:48	Joseph	And it's hot here in Tokyo as well.
00:00:52	Ishita	So the title of this episode is <i>Beyond WEIRD approaches to intercultural education...</i>
00:01:00	Joseph	Now, the three of us are all intercultural educators. I teach classes and run an NPO. Some people do training in international business. Ishita, you have a lot of experience with that.
00:01:11	Ishita	And a lot of our listeners work in university education. Emre, you work with study abroad students, you teach intercultural communication.
00:01:23	Joseph	So there's no clear definition of just what is and isn't intercultural education. There's no real consensus on how to go about it. There are different theories and models. But today we want to talk about a criticism that we sometimes hear.
00:01:40	Emre	And that's that intercultural education is dominated by the theory and methods from a few countries, in particular, so-called western countries, Europe, North America...
00:01:53	Joseph	It is true, of course, that the field of intercultural communication was first developed in the US and then also in Europe. Many intercultural specialists are from those countries.

00:02:05	Ishita	But this does raise some questions. First of all, do approaches to intercultural education developed in, quote unquote, western countries work in other places?
00:02:18	Joseph	So, for example, does an intercultural training program designed in Germany for Germans work for Peruvians in Peru?
00:02:26	Emre	This question relates to theorizing, too. Are the concepts used in English, for example, equally useful in other languages?
00:02:36	Ishita	And are we missing out on ideas from other places? What can Europeans learn about diversity, for example, from interculturalists in India?
00:02:49	Joseph	And when people talk about this issue, they often use the acronym WEIRD. And that stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. I've heard people talk about so called WEIRD approaches to intercultural education or theorizing from WEIRD countries. So in this episode, we'll dig into the question, is intercultural education WEIRD? Is it biased in some way?
00:03:16	Emre	And this topic is too big for one episode. So today we will focus on what it means to be WEIRD and how intercultural education is influenced by its WEIRD origins. Then in another episode, we will talk about what to do about that.
00:03:35	Ishita	And that brings us to part one, The Story of WEIRD
Part One – The Story of WEIRD		
00:03:50	Joseph	We mentioned that WEIRD is an acronym, but there is an important story behind that acronym.
00:03:56	Ishita	Joseph Henrich, an anthropologist at Harvard, created the acronym WEIRD. He used it to refer to a demographic category in psychological research. He was interested in the question, are the subjects of psychology experiments typical of the world population?
00:04:18	Joseph	This is how he and his authors started their 2010 article, <i>The WEIRDest people in the world?</i> : <i>“Behavioral scientists routinely publish broad claims about human psychology and behavior in the world's top journals based on samples drawn entirely from western educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic societies. Researchers often implicitly assume that either there is little variation across human populations or that these standard subjects are as representative of the species as any other population. Are these assumptions justified?”</i>
00:05:00	Emre	So Henrich was calling into question the idea that people's minds work similarly around the world. In fact, the subjects of psychology experiments in the United States have often been white American college students, largely because psychology professors can easily get them to take part in their experiments.
00:05:24	Ishita	And Henrich's question was, can we draw conclusions about human psychology from such experiments? And he shows that, in fact, there is

		more psychological variation around the world than many people realize.
00:05:41	Joseph	As he says in the article, <i>“There is substantial variability in experimental results across populations, and WEIRD subjects are particularly unusual compared with the rest of the species - frequent outliers. The domains reviewed include visual perception, fairness, cooperation, spatial reasoning, categorization and inferential induction, moral reasoning, reasoning styles, self-concepts and related motivations, and the heritability of IQ.”</i>
00:06:18	Emre	Okay, let's pause for a moment to digest this. He is talking about cultural variation in fundamental aspects of how we experience the world, even things like visual perception. In other words, even the way our eyes see the world is influenced by culture.
00:06:50	Ishita	I was struck by the idea of cultural variability in moral reasoning, how we think about right and wrong. That's so personal. And I such an important part of who we are.
00:07:03	Emre	Another area that feels highly personal is our self-concept. There is cultural difference in the way we experience our identity, our sense of self.
00:07:17	Ishita	And the list goes on. Culture shapes our psychology in profound ways. Ways of thinking and feeling and judging and relating that feel totally natural to us are in fact deeply shaped by the society that we grew up in. But for the most part, we don't notice this.
00:07:41	Joseph	Which brings us back to this idea of WEIRD countries. The psychological makeup of people from WEIRD countries is an outlier, not typical, and I think this is the first lesson that we can draw from this research into WEIRD psychology. As an intercultural educator, I need to understand that. For me, growing up in the US has shaped my mind in powerful ways.
00:08:09	Emre	And that's true for me. My mind was shaped by growing up in Turkiye.
00:08:13	Ishita	As was mine growing up in West Bengal, India.
00:08:20	Joseph	But we need to be careful here, because Joseph Henrich is not dividing the world into WEIRD versus non-WEIRD. He's not saying that there are two types of people in the world.
00:08:31	Emre	But people sometimes use the term WEIRD in this way. And sometimes there is political critique. For example, the idea that WEIRD thinking has been imposed on the rest of the world. But that's not what Henrich is saying or implying.
00:08:49	Joseph	Well, I also hear things like WEIRD thinking is too rational, or WEIRD people are unfeeling.
00:08:57	Ishita	And I also feel that people idealize so called non-WEIRD thinking, that it's holistic and somehow better.

00:09:07	Emre	But these kind of statements are missing the whole point of Henrich's work, which is to look at the complexity of cultural variation in psychology.
00:09:19	Ishita	And of course, there are different thought traditions, ideas that develop in certain parts of the world. So called western philosophy is traced back to the Greeks, for example. Chinese civilization is said to be influenced by the ideas of Confucius. And if you want to talk about that, maybe it's best to use cultural terms like Western, Chinese or Asian.
00:09:48	Joseph	But the term WEIRD relates specifically to differences in psychology. People from WEIRD countries share some psychological characteristics due to similarities in social structures. But to understand that, we really need to dig into the research.
00:10:07	Emre	And this is what Henrich does in his article, which has turned into one of the most widely cited psychology papers in history.
00:10:18	Ishita	And since then, Henrich has continued his work. He published a book which explains what is unusual about the psychological makeup of people in WEIRD societies and the social conditions that led to those characteristics.
00:10:35	Joseph	And we will talk more about that in part three. But for the moment, let's get back to the question of how research into WEIRD psychology relates to intercultural education.
00:10:47	Emre	Which brings us to part two: Is that WEIRD?
Part 2: Is that WEIRD?		
00:11:02	Joseph	So, Henrich's research identified a blind spot in the field of psychology. But the question we want to ask is, how do these insights shed light on intercultural education?
00:11:15	Ishita	I think his work can help us recognize aspects of intercultural education that we might not notice otherwise and that maybe don't travel so well. So let's brainstorm a bit here. What are the common ideas or approaches that we find in intercultural education?
00:11:38	Emre	Well, you find a lot of key concepts and definitions. What's the definition of culture? Or what do we mean by intercultural competence?
00:11:48	Joseph	And there are lots of theoretical models, such as the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, the Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence, the W-Model of Acculturation, the U-curve hypothesis... And you know, we could go on and on.
00:12:03	Emre	And there is a lot of cross-cultural comparison, like the value dimensions of Geert Hofstede, Dilemma theory by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, or the World Values Survey.
00:12:18	Ishita	So how does knowing about WEIRD psychology help us?
00:12:24	Joseph	You know, the first thing that strikes me is that these concepts or models can get pretty abstract. And one aspect of WEIRD psychology is a tendency towards analytic rather than holistic reasoning and a tendency to categorize and conceptualize.

00:12:42	Emre	It sometimes feels like a horse race between terms. Which is better? Intercultural competence, intercultural sensitivity, Intercultural awareness, Cultural intelligence?
00:12:55	Joseph	And this raises a big question. How do abstract definitions like this help people make sense of their intercultural experiences? So how does knowing the right definition of culture help my study abroad student from Sweden, for example, make sense of hierarchy in Japan?
00:13:14	Ishita	I think it's safe to say that one limitation of this kind of theorizing is that it is so language dependent.
00:13:23	Emre	That's right. These terms are often in English. It can be hard even to translate them into other languages . . . In Türkiye, for example, you find carbon-copy "translations" ... The word "competence" has 15 different translations in Turkish . . . such as " <i>yeterlilik</i> " which means "proficiency", " <i>kabiliyet</i> " which means "ability", " <i>ustalık</i> " means "mastery" . . . and depending on which one you pick, a Turkish speaker will get a different feeling for what "competence" means, or worse they get no feeling at all...
00:14:01	Ishita	I found a dozen translations for competence in Bengali, eight in Hindi, and none of them fit the feeling of competence in English.
00:14:12	Emre	That reminds us that language is not neutral. We have a feel for what things mean in a particular language.
00:14:23	Joseph	Which means that if specific concepts and definitions are your starting point in intercultural education, then a lot is going to get lost in translation.
00:14:34	Emre	So what does this mean in practice? Podcast team member, Liu Liu was not raised in a so-called WEIRD country, but he has worked as an educator and a trainer all over the world. So we asked him about his experience with intercultural education and WEIRD psychology...
00:14:56	Liu Liu	I grew up in China, a developing country, and made the transition to living and working in the UK. And yes, I have felt the psychological gap as I adjusted to a so-called WEIRD society. This involved more than speaking a foreign language. It was a different world with new cultural codes, ways of communicating, of making friends, different working styles. This was psychologically challenging. It involved deep change and sometimes self-doubt, but also personal growth. Over the years, I have taught in over 30 countries on subjects such as management, environment and climate change. I have found, for example, that for people from more interdependent societies, storytelling can be more effective than business models based on logic - full of squares and boxes and arrows and lines going all over the place. And many cultural models, such as the cultural dimensions of Hofstede, feel rather WEIRD to me because there is so much emphasis on categorizing, putting culture into a neat set of boxes, like when we classify animals or plants or stone tools.

		Understanding psychological variation around the world requires deep adjustment to our ways of navigating in society, as I was required to do in the UK. For better or worse, however, many privileged interculturalists never experience this. We all have met with people who are well traveled, but who have simply visited many tourist spots around the world. In the international humanitarian work I do, there is often a requirement that employees have overseas experience, but this may simply be an office job in another capital city, living in an enclave of expats. Compare that with the challenges faced by economic migrants or political refugees, who often must navigate a foreign and even hostile society simply to survive. The whole notion of the global citizen, all world traveler often ignores the experience of people in this situation. So, yes, I have many thoughts on how intercultural education can expand beyond current approaches, and I look forward to sharing these ideas in future episodes.
00:18:08	Joseph	You know, listening to all of this reminds me of just how complex these issues are and why simply dividing the world into WEIRD and non-WEIRD is not useful. We need to focus on specific aspects of psychology that may or may not travel well.
00:18:27	Emre	Well, one thing that is obvious to me is the majority of people in the world are less individualistic than what is common in WEIRD countries, and that feels like it influences intercultural pedagogy.
00:18:44	Ishita	I see this in the ways that educators talk about the goals of intercultural education. So let's try an experiment. Let's ask our listeners, what is the mental picture, the image in your mind, of the goal of intercultural education?
00:19:04	Joseph	Is it of a person who has developed intercultural competencies, a skill set, so to speak, is the sign of their success, their ability to produce positive outcomes?
00:19:17	Ishita	Well, that image is very individualistic. Intercultural abilities presented as a way to add economic value to one's personal skillset. It is really a transactional view.
00:19:33	Emre	I also see individualism in how culture is conceptualized as a form of identity that each individual carries within them, something that makes them unique. You hear people say, "We all have many cultures".
00:19:49	Joseph	Well, you know, psychologically speaking, that represents an independent construal of self, the idea that each of us is defined by the unique traits that we carry within us.
00:20:02	Ishita	Whereas in more collectivist societies, culture is who you are in relation to your community, your society. I am a Bengali. I am so and so's neighbor, colleague, cousin, mother.
00:20:19	Joseph	I think there's another sign of individualism in intercultural education. Many educators seem to feel that individuals can go beyond culture. You hear people say, oh, I'm not just German, I'm a global citizen.

00:20:33	Emre	According to research by the Japan Intercultural Institute, more than 50% of intercultural educators say that they identify more as global citizens than as citizens of a given country.
00:20:48	Ishita	And this idea just doesn't make sense to someone who sees himself as an integral part of a larger community, which is the majority of people in the world.
00:21:10	Joseph	I think there's another blind spot in intercultural education, and that's a near total lack of discussion of religion and morality. Learning goals are often talked about in very idealistic and secular terms. For example, the idea that, "Well, in the end, we're all human", or "It's a small world after all", or "We are the world".
00:21:38	Ishita	And in many parts of the world, you cannot talk about cultural difference without talking about religion. Religion shapes people's worldviews. It's the organizing principle for many societies. People connect through religion, and they also set themselves apart with it.
00:21:59	Emre	In Türkiye, 95% of people identified themselves as Muslim, and others are non-Muslim or " <i>gavur</i> ", that's the word that is often used pejoratively. And being Muslim may be a stronger identifier than being a Turk. For example, the Gagauz, a Turkic ethnic minority living in Moldova, are mostly orthodox Christians, and they may be considered less 'us' than someone who isn't a Turkish but is a Muslim.
00:22:32	Ishita	And I see this, too. It can be hard for a Hindu Bengali in India to connect to a Muslim Bengali from Bangladesh. I have heard people say things like, "They aren't Bengali, they are Muslim".
00:22:48	Joseph	You know, I think that intercultural theory sometimes sanitizes otherness by talking about it largely in terms of foreign countries and foreign individuals, when the reality is that religious and ethnic differences create very powerful forms of otherness.
00:23:08	Ishita	So how can intercultural education help? We need approaches that can address the otherness found in different societies.
00:23:19	Emre	I hear intercultural educators say you need to be, quote unquote, open to other cultures, to honor them. But what do you say to someone who feels that non-believers must be avoided or struggles with questions of faith because of their experiences with other value systems?
00:23:40	Joseph	Well, I think many people in WEIRD societies are not that comfortable talking about religion. It can be taboo even to bring up the subject. It's not easy for me, but that's normal. If you grow up in a secular society like I did, it's hard to navigate issues like religious belief around the world.
00:24:01	Ishita	We all bring our particular psychology to the work that we do. There's nothing wrong with being shaped by weird psychology, if that's your background. But of course, we want to be aware of how culture has shaped us.
00:24:17	Joseph	And one way to do that is to learn more about the psychological diversity that Henrich talks about.

00:24:24	Ishita	And that brings us to Part 3: Deeply Cultural
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00:24:37	Ishita	So let's dig a bit deeper into Henrich's work.
00:24:40	Joseph	And let's start with a quote of his from an interview he did: <i>"A lot of what you read in psychology textbooks, or any of your typical psychology papers, come from sampling one particular population. And as psychologists and anthropologists and economists began to measure psychology around the world, we found a great deal of variation along things like individualism, the relevance of shame versus guilt, the importance of analytic versus holistic thinking, the role of intentionality in things like moral judgment and a number of other areas - time thrift, temporal discounting. And I could keep going."</i>
00:25:27	Emre	Wow, that's a lot to digest. But Henrich is saying that our minds are deeply cultural. Many aspects of our psychological makeup are shaped by the society that we grew up in.
00:25:41	Ishita	But let's pause to point out how different this is from dominant ideas in intercultural education.
00:25:49	Joseph	That's so true. Intercultural educators often talk about cultural difference in terms of value orientations, and that treats culture as a factor that influences behavior. Because you value this, you do that. Which is a kind of cause and effect thinking. And this is supposed to explain cultural difference.
00:26:12	Ishita	What you end up with is a list of different value orientations. Individualism, power, distance, uncertainty, avoidance. And I think this is what Liu Liu was referring to, the feeling that many cultural models are like taxonomies, a list, a set of categories.
00:26:33	Emre	But Henrich talks about how culture shapes the architecture of our mind, the psychological structures which allow us to navigate successfully in daily life. And I think that is a more contextualized, perhaps even more holistic way of looking at culture.
00:26:53	Joseph	I like this idea that culture shapes the architecture of the mind. It's not some X-factor that causes us to do things. It's what allows us to be psychologically in sync with our surroundings.
00:27:09	Emre	And also, talking about culture as a set of categories does not show the interrelation between different aspects of culture. In other words, individualism is not just valuing independence. It is related to other cultural patterns.
00:27:28	Joseph	Yes, Henrich uses the term 'individualism complex' to talk about other cultural patterns associated with individualism. And so here's another quote: <i>"At the core of it is the notion that we think of ourselves as unitary selves and not as a node in a relational network. And that tends to have clustering around it, things like overconfidence, a reliance on guilt versus</i>

		<i>shame, a tendency of self enhancement. So, putting your best foot forward, emphasizing your attributes and suppressing your deficits or deficiencies."</i>
00:28:17	Ishita	Henrich explains that this individualism complex developed in Europe for very specific reasons. Many of them related to the breakup of kinship networks due to the practices of the Catholic Church, which discouraged cousin marriage, for example, and encouraged individual property ownership rather than collective ownership.
00:28:43	Joseph	This encouraged nuclear families. People found marriage partners in other communities and started new forms of association, such as professional guilds. And there's a lot more to the argument than that. But the key point is that changes in society triggered shifts in psychology.
00:29:06	Ishita	And religion played an important role in this. Another example is that universalist religions, which have a belief in heaven and hell, encourage higher levels of social trust. The feeling that God is watching all of us makes it easier to believe that strangers will behave fairly.
00:29:29	Emre	And so this is how people in weird countries started to think of themselves as unitary selves focused on developing their inner qualities.
00:29:40	Ishita	That is different from India, where there is always a feeling of "what will people think?". That everything you do have an impact on the people around you.
00:29:52	Emre	In many ways, I'm not a typical Turkish man. Perhaps I am even rather individualistic. But this collective sense of self is very much a part of me. I feel it whenever I sense that it is violated, especially when I'm abroad.
00:30:10	Joseph	And this brings us back to those ideal goals we often hear, like being a global citizen or going beyond culture. This research is teaching us that just as there is no universal language, there is no universal mind. Culture is as deep as mind and body.
00:30:40	Emre	So with all this in mind, I think it would be fun to ask questions so our listeners can reflect on their own psychological architecture.
00:30:50	Ishita	How about this: Does higher self-esteem lead to greater happiness?
00:30:58	Joseph	Well, I think many Americans will definitely say yes. Psychologists talk about self-esteem, self-worth, self-confidence. Someone with quote unquote low self-esteem might be told to see a therapist.
00:31:13	Ishita	Well, for enmeshed communities in India, happiness is not something that comes from within, it comes from between.
00:31:22	Emre	It's the same for me because in the Turkish context, focusing on your own needs and desires is regarded as being selfish.
00:31:32	Joseph	So, an emphasis on self-esteem is not a universal aspect of human psychology. People in more interdependent societies focus on other esteem - your standing among the people you're close to.
00:31:48	Ishita	Here's another question related to weird psychology: Is a person's intentions important when judging behavior? From the WEIRD

		psychology perspective, it is. But for many people in the world, the effects of your action are more important than what you intended.
00:32:10	Joseph	And this is related to the WEIRD tendency to think about people in terms of dispositions, stable internal qualities that are the same in all situations. We think of someone as being an honest person, or a clever person, or a kind person.
00:32:26	Emre	Related to that, do people everywhere feel guilt when they do something wrong? And again, in a more relational society, shame may be a much more powerful feeling.
00:32:40	Ishita	Well, we have piled on a lot of information here, but there's one final thing I think we need to clarify. The same psychological dynamics that we see in WEIRD societies can be found in other societies as well. For example, we hear that westerners are individualistic. But it's also true that Chinese people coming from wheat growing regions of China are more individualistic than Chinese people coming from rice growing regions.
00:33:16	Joseph	In other words, our mind is not shaped by geography. It's shaped by the patterns of the society we grow up in. In Japan, the Meiji restoration encouraged more individualistic psychology due to the breaking up of kinship networks, something that happened in China during the Cultural Revolution. So, let's summarize a bit. Henrich's work reminds us that our mind is deeply cultural, and that talking about culture in terms of lists and categories may not capture its depth and complexity. Also, learning goals like intercultural competence can seem quite abstract. And, you know, his work has also helped me see things in myself that I didn't fully recognize as cultural, like WEIRD ideas about self-esteem.
00:34:06	Ishita	And this has helped me understand why some key concepts in intercultural education, such as intercultural competence, feel a bit off in the Indian context.
00:34:18	Emre	Well, these are some issues I have been struggling with for years, such as translating key terms.
00:34:26	Joseph	And as we've been digging into these things for the podcast, I've really been feeling that intercultural education needs to take these insights into account. There is just so much new research. The paradigms are shifting. It's very exciting, but it is a bit daunting.
00:34:45	Ishita	And this is the last episode of season four. The podcast team will be brainstorming over the summer, and we will start season five in September with part two of Beyond WEIRD approaches, where we will look to the future of intercultural education.
00:35:05	Joseph	And I think that's a good place to end this episode. But first, let's look at some of our sources we've been talking about: the 2010 article <i>The WEIRDest people in the world?</i> by Joseph Henrich, Stephen Heine, and Ara Norenzayan, as well as Henrich's 2020 book <i>The Weirdest People in the World: How the west became psychologically peculiar and</i>

		<i>particularly prosperous</i> , and we featured quotes from a podcast interview Henrich did with Ezra Klein for the New York Times. That's a very good place to start to get a sense for his work.
	Joseph	The Deep Culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I'm the director of JII. Do you want to dig deeper into these topics? You should definitely take JII's <i>Brain, Mind, and Culture Masterclass</i> . To find out more, just do a web search for the Japan Intercultural Institute. And JII members are developing educational materials to go along with the Deep Culture podcast. We currently have four teams hard at work, more updates to come, and all materials will be made freely available. If you're an educator who would like to join in the effort, get in touch at dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org . Special thanks to Liu Liu for sharing his thoughts today and to the rest of the podcast team, Yvonne Van der Pol, Zeina Matar and Daniel Glinz, and our sound engineer Robinson Fritz and Ikumi Fritz and everyone at JII. And of course, thanks to you Ishita and Emre for sharing this time with me.
00:36:38	Emre	Thank you, Joseph and Ishita. It was great to be here again.
00:36:43	Ishita	Thank you, Joseph and Emre. It was fun digging into this important topic with the two of you.