

## 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 **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 49 – Cultural Misunderstanding)

In this episode, Ishita Ray and Joseph Shaules explore reasons for cultural misunderstanding. We learn about cultural blind spots, and the “cognitive cascade” that can lead us to misjudge foreign situations. We hear stories of misunderstanding by Emre Seven (about the expression *Inshallah*), and Liu Liu (about counting toilets!) and Sanne Bosma—who talks with her partner Armèn about overcoming misunderstanding in an intercultural relationship.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:01	Ishita	(Hook) What does it mean to ask about the number of toilets? For the Dutch manager, it is professionalism, attention to detail. And for the Jordanian administrator, it showed a lack of trust.
00:00:25	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 Ishita Ray. How are you doing today, Ishita?
00:00:39	Ishita	Hi, Joseph. We are in season five, episode 49, and I'm so happy to be here with you again.
00:00:45	Joseph	So, Ishita, the title of this episode is cultural misunderstanding. And it was inspired by a question that we've both heard before.
00:00:56	Ishita	Right. Sometimes people say, I'm going to visit India or France or wherever and I don't want to do something wrong. So what do I need to know?
00:01:08	Joseph	And I get this. You don't want to make a faux pas, literally a false step. You don't want to accidentally do something you shouldn't do. You know, in Japan, I once tried to pass someone food from my chopsticks to their chopsticks. And that's a no-no because after someone is cremated, people pass the bones of the deceased from chopsticks to chopsticks.
00:01:31	Ishita	When I went to France, I was told that I am supposed to look people in the eye when clinking glasses. And that's not typical in India. So it was good for me to know.

00:01:43	Joseph	The problem is there are actually very few cultural rules that always apply.
00:01:49	Ishita	And in a way, that's good news. It means that cultural faux pas often can be avoided. You know, throw in a few cultural tips, sprinkle some do's and don'ts.
00:02:01	Joseph	But this episode is about a deeper challenge. We will talk about the difference between a cultural faux pas and cultural misunderstanding.
00:02:12	Ishita	And cultural misunderstanding is much deeper than just rules. It happens when we misinterpret things and jump to wrong conclusions.
00:02:24	Joseph	And from the cognitive perspective, we have a blind spot which prevents us from seeing the cultural meanings behind people's actions. And we'll see how cultural misunderstanding often feels right even when we're wrong.
00:02:39	Ishita	And that brings us to Part One, The do's and don'ts dilemma.
Part One – The do's and don'ts dilemma		
00:02:56	Joseph	So, Ishita, I think many people feel that it shouldn't be that hard to avoid cultural misunderstanding.
00:03:04	Ishita	And we've talked about this before in Episode 11 - <i>Beyond do's and don'ts</i> , where Yvonne talks about the do's and don'ts dilemma. Let's listen back.
00:03:17	Yvonne	Well, we're going to talk about the do's and don'ts dilemma. It's something that many intercultural trainers might experience. It happens to many of us. It's a request for a training that focuses on cultural etiquettes or do's and don'ts. And then a client for instance, comes to me and says, well my team is going to be working in Tanzania so I would like to give them a training. Just the basics. You know, what they need to hit the ground running.
00:03:55	Joseph	So companies think that with a short training people will be able to hit the ground running in a foreign country. And the question is how much does learning these do's and don'ts really help us?
00:04:11	Ishita	Well, we need to make a distinction between breaking some etiquette rule, what we are calling a faux pas, and the idea of cultural misunderstanding, which is when people have different understandings of the same situation.
00:04:26	Joseph	So let's dig into that difference, but let's have some fun with that. Let's think about the cultural rules that we hear about.

		For example, people say, “Oh, in country x you should remember to do y because of z”. And I’ll start. Here’s one I’ve heard of. “Don’t use your left hand to eat, point or give something to someone.” I’ve heard that about middle eastern countries, Muslim societies, about India, lots of places.
00:05:02	Ishita	It’s certainly true for India. And the reason typically is that the left hand is considered dirty or impure. It is associated with using the toilet.
00:05:16	Joseph	Well that does seem like important information. But will making that mistake lead to deep misunderstanding? I’m not so sure.
00:05:27	Ishita	Okay, here’s another one. “Use both hands to give business cards.” And this is the most popular of all do’s and don’ts I have heard about Japan and I guess it’s a sign of respect for the other person’s status.
00:05:43	Joseph	Right. So you don’t stick someone’s business card into your back pocket. And that does tell us something about Japanese culture but that doesn’t make it easy to apply in other situations.  Okay, here’s another one: “Don’t touch children on the head.”
00:06:05	Ishita	Oh, I don’t know this one. Where did you hear that about?
00:06:10	Joseph	Well, I was told that about Thailand. I was told that the head is sacred and so shouldn’t be touched. But I don’t really know what that tells me about Thai culture.
00:06:23	Ishita	Alright, me next: “Leave around a 20% tip for the waitstaff.”  I have heard that about the United States and there is tipping in India too, but there’s no fixed amount. And I understand that in the US the amount is really important.
00:06:43	Joseph	I think that’s right. And if you leave no tip at all it can be seen as pretty rude.
00:06:49	Ishita	But again, I don’t know what that says about American society or values in general. And I don’t know how it helps me in other situations.
00:07:02	Joseph	Well, there is an etiquette rule that I did find very helpful when I was learning French. I was told: “Greet store clerks when you enter”, and it did help me pay attention to the importance of politeness, of ‘politesse’.
00:07:22	Ishita	‘Politesse’ is a big deal in France and there are a lot of subtle ins and outs to it.

00:07:32	Joseph	So yes, these cultural rules can be helpful because if I don't greet a store clerk in France it might give the impression that im unfriendly or rude.
00:07:42	Ishita	And that would be a misunderstanding when two people witness the same thing but give it different meanings.
00:07:51	Joseph	So let's get back to what Yvonne was saying about the company that wanted its employees to hit the ground running in Tanzania. Knowing some cultural etiquette is good, but imagine arriving in Tanzania for the first time. There will be so many things you won't know, so many things to adjust.
00:08:09	Ishita	True, and that does lead to misunderstanding. Which brings us to Part Two - You just don't understand.
Part Two: You just don't understand		
00:08:31	Joseph	Ishita, in part one we looked at some do's and don'ts that help people avoid cultural faux pas. But cultural misunderstanding is different from cultural faux pas.
00:08:44	Ishita	One reason is that cultural misunderstanding often starts small but can turn into something bigger, which is something that team member Emre Seven has seen firsthand.
00:09:00	Emre	<p>As a Turk who grew up in a Muslim community, the expression 'inshallah', which literally means 'if God wills', was a daily and ordinary word for me. Leaving the office, you might say to your colleague: "See you tomorrow", and they will answer: "Inshallah."</p> <p>Or beginning a new project you might hear: "Construction will be finished by the end of June, inshallah."</p> <p>But as a person who has hosted many visitors to my country, I have seen this small phrase create deep misunderstanding. In Islam, there is a belief that the future is known only by God. Accepting God's will is an act of faith. But I have seen a look of shock on the face of non-Muslim visitors when, for example, the guest makes a request for a critical meeting or stresses a critical deadline and our Turkish colleagues answer: "inshallah".</p> <p>The contrasting cultural logics are quite deep. On the one hand, valuing predictability assumes that we are in control of our destiny. Thus the schedule is, so to speak, sacred, while 'inshallah' emphasizes humility and flexibility. And that's important when dealing with an uncertain world.</p>

00:10:42	Ishita	So 'inshallah' is a single word and it's not hard to translate. But in Muslim communities, it's not simply an expression, it's part of everyday interaction, life in the neighborhood of society overall, where religion is an organizing principle of life.
00:11:02	Joseph	And for many Americans or western Europeans, it's not polite to even bring up religion. So how does a Dutch person or German or American feel when they hear their colleagues say: "If God wills", when talking about an important deadline? How can they make sense of that?
00:11:23	Ishita	And 'inshala' reflects cultural logics and emphasis on flexibility and humility in an uncertain world.
00:11:32	Joseph	On the other hand, for many Europeans and Americans, the schedule is, so to speak, sacred. Predictability is valued, and this in turn relates to the idea that we, you and me, are in charge of our lives.
00:11:49	Ishita	So one small word can be just the tip of the iceberg. And this also helps explain why small things can lead to deep misunderstanding. As team member Liu Liu recounts.
00:12:08	Liu Liu	<p>I have seen how small things can hint at deep cultural difference. There was an international conference to be held in Amman, Jordan with a female Dutch manager in charge of organizing it.</p> <p>She asked an administrator, a Jordanian woman, to take care of booking the venue at a local hotel. The administrator paid a visit to the hotel and made the arrangements. When she came back, the Dutch manager asked her many detailed questions about the hotel and its facilities, down to the number of toilets. The administrator was annoyed. She felt distrusted personally and guessed that her Dutch boss must have a very low opinion of her country.</p> <p>Later she told me, of course, the hotel will have all these things. From a high context relational Jordanian perspective much goes without saying. A professional takes care of details so the boss does have to trust is key.</p> <p>From the low context, task-based perspective, a professional makes sure all the boxes are ticked. Transparency is key. It's not hard to imagine that the Dutch manager was also annoyed.</p> <p>It's deeply unfortunate how seemingly small things can start us off on the wrong foot and they send us in the wrong direction.</p>
00:14:14	Ishita	So in this case, a small incident asking detailed questions about an event venue sets off a bigger misunderstanding.

00:14:26	Joseph	Right? The Jordanian administrator wasn't just confused or puzzled by the Dutch manager's questions. She felt distrusted personally. That's quite a strong feeling. And she concluded that her boss had a low opinion of her country.
00:14:43	Ishita	And this is an important lesson about cultural misunderstanding. Someone says or does something and we have all kinds of strong reactions and judgments.
00:14:54	Joseph	And this is tragic, really. You have two reasonable people, each misreading the other and each feeling that they are right.
00:15:05	Ishita	And what triggers those reactions is a cultural blind spot, a gap between the action and the meaning.
00:15:14	Joseph	And this is not easy to overcome because the cultural patterns which shape our thinking, which influence our actions, are often not obvious to us.
00:15:26	Ishita	Liu Liu talked about the high context relational perspective in Jordan. A strong emphasis on relationships. You understand a lot with a few words because you have so much shared information.
00:15:42	Joseph	Whereas the Dutch perspective is low context and task based. You spell things out, you say exactly what you mean. You think of work as a series of tasks, rather than a network of relationships.
00:15:57	Ishita	So that can really create a cultural blind spot. Probably neither the Jordanian nor the Dutch woman realized that the source of their friction was cultural.
00:16:09	Joseph	And this happens not just when we are in some faraway foreign country. And we learn about this from our podcast team member, Sanne, who is from the Netherlands, and her partner Armèn, who is from Armenia.
00:16:24	Ishita	Sanne and Armèn have been together for more than 20 years. Armèn came to the Netherlands from Armenia when he was a child. They met in school and they have a family together.
00:16:37	Joseph	When they got together, they discovered deep cultural difference that was not always easy to deal with, but they both learned and adapted.
00:16:51	Sanne	With my Armenian partner, I learned that saying we will go to a certain venue two days from now does not mean we have made an agreement which is still valid on that particular day. The first few times this happened, I would be offended since according to me, we've made an

		<p>agreement and by saying it is fine that he wants to do something else, he's just being disrespectful to me. I went on to think that this means he does not appreciate me nor value me as his equal or even dominating. In turn, my partner would not really understand me, since he felt it was all flexible and how can you make an agreement set in stone if you do not know what will happen in the future?</p>
00:17:42	Joseph	So Sanne feels that Armèn doesn't stick to his commitments.
00:17:48	Ishita	We asked Armèn about this and he responded with a story from his childhood.
00:17:56	Armèn	<p>Actually what it's all about is the concept of time, and I will try to explain how I have learned it when I was a child. This example I want to give is the appointments that we made as children or as adults with each other in my community.</p> <p>I was living in a village nearby a big city, and it was a very informal community and we looked out after each other. So for example, when I made an appointment with my friends to go to his house, to study or to play, then I will make an appointment. So, when I start traveling to the place of my friends, during your walking to the house of your friends and you meet an acquaintance or a family or a friend, especially when it's an elderly one, and the person will stop and ask you something, then you are not allowed to say, I'm sorry, I have no time, I will have to go to my friend's house because I have an appointment. Well, when I do that, first of all the person will hit me. My parents will hit me when I come home. And it was not. It's not okay.</p> <p>I start 09:00 walking, I want to be there at 9:30 and I was on time. But if that person starts asking me some things and they will always ask you: "How are you? How is school? Are you okay? How are your parents?", and it goes on to the 7th generation, asking how they are. You must be respectful and stay on your place. And you have to ask also them: "How are you? What can I help you with?" And when at the time they have groceries with them or something, then you have to help them bring them to their house, so the plans can change. So I will be there at 11:00 and it's okay, it's still on time. And I have helped people.</p>
00:20:15	Ishita	Wow! Coming from India, I can totally relate to this story. How can you stick to a rigid schedule when the world around you is so uncertain? We talked about this in episode 15 - Rubber time or I slaves to the clock.

00:20:33	Joseph	Well, what I love is that he says he left at 09:00, he's supposed to arrive at 9:30 but actually, he arrives at 11:00. But he is still on time because he has helped people, he has done what he needed to do.
00:20:50	Ishita	But this flexibility is precisely what bothers Sanne. She feels it was disrespectful. He doesn't appreciate her, doesn't value her as an equal. Because in Dutch society being equal is important, scheduling is important, being on time is important.
00:21:10	Joseph	And that's why cultural misunderstanding can cut so deep. It's not just about today's appointment.
00:21:19	Ishita	And that brings us to Part 3: When wrong feels right
Part 3: When wrong feels right		
00:21:37	Joseph	So we talked about cultural blind spots, such as the Jordanian administrator thinking that her Dutch boss was being disrespectful for asking so many questions. But probably the Dutch manager didn't intend that at all.
00:21:53	Ishita	So let's look at the psychology behind cultural blind spots. Well see that cultural difference triggers what we call a cognitive cascade, a chain reaction of mental processes
00:22:08	Joseph	First, the cognitive cascade is triggered by cultural difference when something isn't typical, when there's an anomaly. In this case, the administrator noticed that her boss was asking very detailed questions.
00:22:24	Ishita	And this creates cognitive dissonance, a kind of what's going on here reaction. And this happens in an embodied way in our gut. It bothered the administrator. It didn't feel good.
00:22:39	Joseph	And so to resolve this cognitive dissonance, we create an interpretive schema. We categorize the experience. We connect it to our understanding of the world. In this case, the Jordanian manager decided that her boss was being disrespectful.
00:22:57	Ishita	And once we have drawn our conclusion, we feel that now we understand what happened. For the administrator, her Dutch boss was disrespectful. That's her interpretation. But it feels like a fact.
00:23:16	Joseph	And this chain of reactions and judgments happens in an instant. So we don't notice that our judgments can feel right even if we are wrong.



00:23:28	Ishita	And there's something else to keep in mind. This cognitive cascade can be in spite of the best of intentions with people we know well, people we like, because when we react, we react.
00:23:43	Joseph	And we can hear this when Armèn and Sanne talk about communication styles.
00:23:51	Sanne	Another example with my partner and his family is about something very small yet meaningful. How do you ask someone to get something for you, such as the remote or a plate? In the beginning of the relationship I was quite shocked by the way I would be asked to get something in Dutch. It was like: "Get me the remote", "bring me a plate". In Dutch, this is often seen as very rude since there is no 'would you please', or 'could you please' added. And it would be a question rather than a statement. Again, it felt very disrespectful to me.
00:24:36	Ishita	So even if Sanne thinks that this difference is cultural, she still reacts. And how can she make sense of why Armèn is doing this? If he is not trying to be disrespectful, then what?
00:24:50	Joseph	So let's hear about this from Armèn's point of view.
00:24:56	Armèn	In Armenia, we use actually two ways of style. The formal and the informal style of communication. The formal style of communication, it's most mostly done when you meet people for the first time, or in a formal setting, or with your teacher. Then you always are very polite. "Thank you.", "Can I", "May I". etc.  But when the relationship evolves, when you are friends or family, or you are husband and wife, then the communication style changes in an informal way. You are much more direct in Armenia, you don't use words, names, you just ask the people because you know them and they can also use the same way to communicate with you. And you don't be offended. And it's very trustful, very lovable, very easy. You just ask what you want. Yeah, that's trust.
00:26:10	Ishita	I can totally relate to Armèn's feeling about this. When I am with family and friends, we are less polite, less formal. The idea is that we are close so we can say what we think. Like Armèn said, it's a sign of trust.
00:26:27	Joseph	So that's the cultural blind spot. Two different ways of experiencing the same thing.
00:26:34	Ishita	And this is where the cognitive cascade comes in. We can hear it when Sanne talks a bit more about her reaction to being spoken to in this way.

00:26:48	Sanne	When it happened, you have your immediate response, which for me, it was a negative feeling. It was kind of like a physical feeling as well, like punched in the stomach kind of thing, because it felt so deep. And then what I was doing immediately, was trying to come up with reasons for why this was happening. So I was explaining it for myself, and then I made all of these links: "Well, if it's disrespectful, then it means he doesn't see me as equal, etcetera, etcetera." So, yeah, I filled it in myself.
00:27:28	Ishita	Wow! She said it felt like being punched in the stomach. That's literally feeling cultural misunderstanding in the gut.
00:27:38	Joseph	And that triggers a really powerful cognitive dissonance. These thoughts and explanations come to mind as we try to make sense of it. As Sanne said, I was explaining it for myself.
00:27:53	Ishita	And we create these explanations because we can't read the cultural patterns. And that can be true even when you know that the difference is cultural, even with someone you care about? Maybe especially with someone you care about.
00:28:11	Joseph	So what do we do? We can never completely avoid misunderstanding, but it helps to recognize that the difference is cultural, because then we can try to fill in our cultural blind spot.
00:28:25	Ishita	But even then, it doesn't automatically change our reactions or teach us to function in some new way.
00:28:33	Joseph	Well, Sanne and Armèn have been together for 20 years, and they talk openly about cultural differences and try to work through them. But it's still not easy, as Sanne explains when talking about differences in communication styles.
00:28:51	Sanne/Armèn	Sanne: To be really honest, this is something I've not really gotten used to. There are still many moments that indeed I am asked in this direct way to do something, and it just hits me immediately. First of all, it's not common to do this. It has this other meaning where you're ordering someone around, where someone is placed above you. But we're supposed to be equals, we're in a relationship. So when it happens, I know where it's coming from because we talked about it. I asked and I understand. So I know cognitively that this is not the meaning, but I still have the physical reaction. I still have it because it really hurts. Yeah.  Armèn: Sometimes I really see it in your eyes.

00:29:56	Ishita	In intercultural relationships, you often have to make this ongoing effort to bridge these gaps, to not judge too quickly, to try to understand the differences behind these feelings. And it's not easy.
00:30:12	Joseph	Armèn's use of direct language can be a sign of closeness. And for Sanne, saying please and thank you can also be a sign of closeness.
00:30:22	Ishita	And Sanne and Armèn have children, the shared purpose of raising a family. But how do they turn these differences into something positive?
00:30:35	Joseph	And they talked about how they do this with their children, especially about different time logics.
00:30:43	Sanne	<p>So, when I make an agreement with the children “tomorrow we will go to a playground”, for example, I will take them to the playground, because I said so.</p> <p>You can tell them you'll go to a playground, but on the day, “no, we're not going to the playground”. So we'll have the children crying, but he's explaining: “Yes, but, you know, things can happen, and because of this reason, we can't go to the playground.” And then they calm down and then they understand.</p> <p>But I would hesitate to do that because I'm thinking, yeah, but I promised, and I really like to.</p>
00:31:18	Armèn	So sometimes when they don't expect to go to the playground, I will take them to the playground. We have nothing to do, the weather is fine, and it's not raining. It's very special day, so let's go! It's actually the perfect time to go to the playground: spontaneous. And also, sometimes beautiful things happen.
00:31:47	Ishita	I love how both Armèn and Sanne are deeply cultural. Sanne does care about staying on schedule, and Armèn does value the flexibility and spontaneity he grew up with.
00:32:00	Joseph	So we can fill in our cultural blind spots. We can learn new cultural patterns to look at things from different perspectives, but it's not easy.
00:32:11	Ishita	And one of the keys to doing that is empathy, learning to look at things from another person's perspective, from another cultural perspective. And Sanne and Armèn are really an inspiration, building intercultural understanding one playground date at a time.

00:32:37	Joseph	And I think that's a good place to wrap up this episode. We should say here that we are presenting a pretty simple version of the psychology of cultural misunderstanding. To dig into this more deeply, check out Episode 30 - Ethnocentrism, to learn why we are so quick to pass judgment about cultural difference. And also check out Episode 42 about cultural intuitions to learn more about the feelings of right and wrong that are behind our judgments.
00:33:05	Ishita	And Episode 33 - Stereotypes, talks about the way that our mind categorizes based on previous experiences. And we look at empathy in Episode 37 – Tagore, Empathy and the other.
00:33:21	Joseph	<p>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, this podcast is completely non-commercial, so if you like it, please give us a review on Apple Podcast or post this episode on social media. It really helps get the word out.</p> <p>A special thanks today to Liu Liu for sharing his story about counting bathrooms in Jordan, and to Emre for helping us understand 'inshallah'.</p> <p>And a very special thanks to Sanne Bosma and her partner Armèn for giving us a glimpse into the cultural richness of their relationship. Thanks also to our sound engineer Robinson Fritz, Ikumi Fritz and thanks to you Ishita, for producing this episode with me. It has been great.</p>
00:34:12	Ishita	Thank you Joseph for this wonderful conversation about cultural misunderstanding.