

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 50 – Expanding Your Circle of Empathy)

How do we learn to look at the world from a new cultural perspective? In this episode Joseph Shaules and Ishita Ray argue that expanding our circle of empathy is more difficult than it might seem. Empathizing across cultures is effortful and can make us question our values and identity. Listen as Sanne Bosma, Emre Seven, Liu Liu and Torhild Liane Haarr Skårnes share stories of their empathic adventures.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:01	Ishita	(Hook) At my grandmother's house, I had to think, "Wait, which side of the kitchen is the pure side? Can I touch the water filter after I have touched the refrigerator?" Or, when I visited a temple with a friend, they would say, "Hey, don't turn your back to the gods!"
00:00:33	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 with Ishita Ray. How are you doing, Ishita?
00:00:44	Ishita	Hi, Joseph. I'm doing great, and I'm thrilled to be recording another episode.
00:00:49	Joseph	And speaking of another episode, let's start with a big congratulations to the podcast team. This is episode 50. We are five seasons in and still growing strong.
00:01:02	Ishita	And a big shout out to our listeners. It feels like not so long ago when I was in my room in Durgapur, India, listening to the first episode, and it really resonated with me. And here we are recording the 50th one. What a journey.
00:01:19	Joseph	So, Ishita, in this episode, we're going to talk about expanding our circle of empathy.
00:01:26	Ishita	We want to explore the challenges of looking at things from the perspective of the other.
00:01:33	Joseph	And this subject came up because of a game that you and I sometimes play where we have to guess the cultural logic of some

		experience that one of us had. And you told me about taking a flight with a colleague of yours in India. Can you tell that story?
00:01:51	Ishita	Well, we were getting ready to take off. I put my laptop bag under the seat in front of me, and my colleague reacted to that. She was clearly uncomfortable. She said, "You will put your bag there?"
00:02:06	Joseph	And so you asked me to guess why was she uncomfortable? What was the cultural logic involved? And I had absolutely no idea!
00:02:18	Ishita	So in India, the world is often divided into sacred and profane. Feet are profane, whereas my bag had my laptop, maybe books, things that are pure. And so the two should be kept apart.
00:02:33	Joseph	And so I do get that explanation. But what strikes me is how hard it is for me really, to imagine how that felt for your colleague.
00:02:43	Ishita	And that's because you don't share the feeling of things being pure and impure in the way that many Indians do. It's just not part of how you experience the world.
00:02:56	Joseph	And so that got us thinking about how difficult cultural empathy can be. It's often not easy to see things from other cultural perspectives.
00:03:07	Ishita	And so in today's episode, we explore the challenges of learning to see the world as other people see it. In short, how do we expand our circle of empathy?
00:03:20	Joseph	We'll talk about the deep evolutionary roots of empathy. We'll see that empathy is motivated. It can be turned on and off. It is effortful because it can challenge our sense of self and it's collective. The society we live in shapes our empathic responses.
00:03:39	Ishita	And that brings us to part 1, Motivated Empathy.
PART 1 – Motivated Empathy		
00:03:59	Joseph	So we said we're going to talk about the challenges of expanding our circle of empathy, but let's break that down a little bit. First of all, what is empathy?
00:04:10	Ishita	The Cambridge Online Dictionary says that empathy is: "The ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation." And this is different from feeling sorry for someone, sympathizing. Empathy involves looking at things through the other person's eyes.

00:04:39	Joseph	And this idea of the circle of empathy that has been explored by the social thinker, Jeremy Rifkin. He talks of a society's need to expand our concern for others beyond the traditional boundaries of family or tribe or country, to cultivate connection with humankind more broadly. And he calls that expanding our circle of empathy.
00:05:04	Ishita	And we hear a lot about empathy in the intercultural field as an ideal to strive for. The idea that we can connect to people everywhere by recognizing that human beings share so much and so we can feel for each other. And of course, we'd all like to say that we are always empathetic, but that's simply not possible.
00:05:30	Joseph	And this is something that podcast team member Sanne Bosma has noticed in herself. Let's take a listen.
00:05:40	Sanne	I have felt the limitations of empathy in everyday life. For example, if there is a colleague I dislike. Perhaps I feel they have disrespected me, or they have strong opinions but don't allow for other perspectives. That makes it hard for me to empathize with them. And yet, if we talk about something we have in common, like caring for our children, I notice a rather immediate shift. I become more positive and empathetic in that moment. Many things influence our ability to empathize. Empathy is not something you have or you don't have. It is a process, and it changes from situation to situation and even from moment to moment.
00:06:41	Ishita	I love Sanne's honesty. She doesn't always empathize, and of course, none of us does.
00:06:49	Joseph	And that's because, from the psychological perspective, empathy is a reaction to people and situations. As researchers might say, it's motivated. It can get turned on, so to speak, or turned off.
00:07:02	Ishita	And you and Yvonne talked about this in episode 8 - Empathy Across Cultures. Let's listen back.
00:07:12	Joseph	So empathy isn't just a simple reaction; our unconscious mind is actively anticipating and regulating empathy and responding to our positive or negative feelings towards that particular situation.
00:07:27	Yvonne	It makes a lot of sense and it happens in split seconds. And it's amazing. You select whether you're going to show empathy or not

		and whether you're going to reach out or not. And we make judgments.
00:07:39/49	Joseph	Well, this is just what Sanne was describing. Empathy is turned off by negative feelings. She doesn't like her colleague. But it can be turned on again - she has something in common with her colleague.
00:08:01	Ishita	And that's because the evolutionary purpose of empathy is to connect us and to protect us. It creates a bond between like minds and sets us apart from the other.
00:08:16	Joseph	In evolutionary terms, empathy is a form of directed altruism. Basically, caring for others based on their need or pain. And this mechanism is phylogenetically ancient. In other words, it evolved long ago. We share it with mammals and birds.
00:08:36	Ishita	Here's a quote from the primatologist Frans de Waal explaining this: <i>"Perception of the emotional state of another, automatically activates shared representations, causing a matching emotional state in the observer. With increasing cognition, state matching evolved into more complex forms, including concern for the other and perspective taking. Empathy induced altruism derives its strength from the emotional stake it offers the self in the other's welfare."</i>
00:09:16	Joseph	So, empathy is a form of state-matching between two organisms, which De Waal says evolved into a more complex mechanism in humans involving both caring about the other and also perspective taking, looking at things from the other's point of view.
00:09:34	Ishita	And in humans, this state-matching is very selective. We are, after all, social primates, loyal to our ingroup and suspicious of the out-group.
00:09:47	Joseph	It's a kind of social glue that holds communities together and also it helps us compete against other communities.
00:09:56	Ishita	And Sanne is very perceptive to recognize this in her everyday life. But if empathy can be hard with a colleague we don't like, then how much more difficult can it be with people we don't understand at all, or worse, who do things we find offensive.
00:10:17	Joseph	And this brings us back to something else that De Waal said. One aspect of empathy is caring about others, but the other is

		perspective taking, knowing how someone else looks at a situation. And that involves sharing another's mental world.
00:10:34	Ishita	And that is precisely what's difficult across cultures.
00:10:39	Joseph	Exactly. That's why I was unable to guess why your colleague was bothered by you putting your bag by your feet. I couldn't enter into her mental world, her cultural world.
00:10:52	Ishita	And the idealistic view of empathy that we hear in the intercultural field doesn't always take that into account.
00:11:01	Joseph	Because yes, it is natural for humans to empathize, to feel for each other, but it's also natural not to empathize.
00:11:11	Ishita	But let's not get carried away with our pessimism, because people can and do learn new cultural perspectives. We do bond with people who are very different from ourselves. But it takes effort.
00:11:27	Joseph	And that brings us to part 2, Effortful Empathy.
PART 2 – Effortful Empathy		
	Joseph	So related to empathy, another idea that you hear in intercultural education is that we need so-called openness. For example, the Pyramid Model of Intercultural Competence refers to openness as a requisite attitude. In other words, you can't develop intercultural competence without it.
00:12:05	Ishita	And one problem with this idea is that it is not psychologically realistic. Just as empathy is not so simple, openness isn't either.
00:12:17	Joseph	Well, let's start with the obvious. Our degree of openness is not something we have conscious control over. Even if we value openness, you can't simply decide to be open. As with empathy, openness is a reaction to a situation. It's not a tool which you can take out anytime you need it.
00:12:39	Ishita	Psychologists understand openness to new experiences to be a trait. An inner quality that is relatively stable throughout one's lifetime.
00:12:51	Joseph	And this has been studied extensively. It's one of the so-called big five personality traits that are said to be found in every culture.

00:13:01	Ishita	Openness is associated with an interest in novel experiences like travel. The experience of emotion and sensation. And people who score high on openness tend to be politically liberal.
00:13:18	Joseph	Well, I will say that all of that sounds like a description of many of the intercultural educators that I know and I would include us in this. So if we tell learners that they need to be open, we may simply be asking them to be more like us.
00:13:37	Ishita	So, we need a more realistic understanding of openness and empathy. Because the reality is that empathy across cultures is effortful. And that's something that the newest member of the podcast team, Lia, knows from having moved from Norway to the Philippines.
00:14:03	Lia	<p>There's a definition of empathy that I like. It is actively listening to someone else's story and believing them, even if it doesn't match our own experiences. This may sound simple, but it often takes great effort.</p> <p>The cultural distance from Norway to the Philippines can be quite large. I discovered this living in Manila and learning Tagalog. I wanted to make the language a part of me. I knew this would require connecting the language to my thoughts and my feelings, and building relationships.</p> <p>To do this, I started sharing stories that meant something to me, even those that I normally don't share. This could be challenging. I remember trying to say that I was bothered when I only knew the word for 'angry'. It's a vulnerable feeling to expose yourself in this way.</p> <p>Reaching out like this has connected me and expanded my world. I have come to love subtle and indirect communication. And I have come to appreciate the flexible approach to time in the Philippines. Being an hour late to meet a friend is often still perfectly acceptable. All this has given me new stories to tell.</p>
00:15:26	Joseph	Wow. I really like how Lia talks about empathy in terms of new stories.
00:15:34	Ishita	What strikes me is that for Lia, learning Tagalog was just the starting point for developing empathy.

00:15:41	Joseph	Well, and it is a long way from Norway to the Philippines, not just geographically, but culturally and linguistically.
00:15:50	Ishita	We sometimes talk about linguistic or cultural distance between two languages or cultural communities, the amount of difference between the two. For example, Norwegian is a North Germanic language. Tagalog is an Austronesian language. The same family as Malay and Japanese. And I'm guessing that Lia did not study Tagalog in school. She had to learn from scratch later on.
00:16:21	Joseph	And the Philippines is a much more enmeshed, interdependent society than Norway. Family is very important. Being emotionally expressive is important. Religion is important.
00:16:34	Ishita	Right, according to the World Values Survey, more than 80% of Filipinos say that God is very important in their life, whereas the figure is less than 10% for Norway.
00:16:49	Joseph	And all of this is to say that for Lia, living in Manila in a Tagalog speaking community is, in so many ways really being in a different world.
00:17:01	Ishita	It's psychologically challenging to change oneself in that situation. She talks about feeling vulnerable, exposed. And this process changed Lia in a very embodied way.
00:17:16	Joseph	And the point of all this is that gaining cultural empathy is not an intellectual exercise. As we were saying, it's enormously effortful.
00:17:26	Ishita	And it's effortful because it can challenge our values, our way of looking at things, even our sense of self. And this is something that podcast team member Emre Seven also experienced.
00:17:46	Emre	From the time I was a child, I felt attracted to the world of English and wanted to experience life beyond Turkish borders. So, I was thrilled when I got the chance to work and travel in the United States when I was 20. Despite my enthusiasm, it wasn't easy to expand my circle of empathy. I found Americans who were completely ignorant of my country. When I said I was from Turkey, one said: "There's a country with the same name as the bird?" People were very assertive. They seemed selfishly individualistic. They didn't respect authority. They were obsessed by the clock and

		<p>on and on. All of this violated my view of the world and my sense of self. But it also opened me up to the fact that my truths are not true everywhere. There are different normals, and all of which have value.</p> <p>Accepting this did not take away my discomfort, but it made it more bearable. I even started to enjoy it.</p> <p>Reaching this point took a willingness to stop and think, to let my intuitive mind speak freely without criticism and judgment, so that my conscious mind could learn from this dialogue.</p>
00:19:22	Ishita	Emre says that his experience in the US violated his view of the world and his sense of self. That's quite a statement.
00:19:33	Joseph	Yes, he was deeply bothered by the differences he found, how little people understood him. But, even understanding that this was cultural, that this was simply a new normal, that didn't make it easy.
00:19:48	Ishita	Emre was confronted with the fact that his sense of self is cultural, deeply shaped by the society he grew up in.
00:19:58	Joseph	And that brings us to part 3, Collective Empathy
		PART 3 – Collective Empathy
	Joseph	So, we have been talking about empathy as a personal challenge, a stretching of the individual mind, but it's also a collective challenge.
00:20:28	Ishita	And we say that because the cultural logics we grow up with can make it hard to conceive of the world in a different way.
00:20:39	Joseph	And that is something that podcast team member Liu Liu has been giving some thought to. Let's take a listen.
00:20:47	Liu Liu	<p>I see empathy as closely linked with belief systems. For example, cultures around the world have greater empathy towards the weak, but that depends on many factors.</p> <p>In India, in the Hindu belief system, they see the lowest in the society as people who have done bad in the previous life, according to the karma. Therefore, it is their fate in this life and this can limit the level of empathy towards them. In China there's something similar, a belief that the poor are not hardworking enough. There is even a saying “<i>Jiùjǐ bù jiù qióng</i>” which means: help to give to the emergency, but don't help to give it to the poor.</p>

		<p>These cultural aspects of empathy are not limited to the traditional beliefs. In the United States, I have the impression that the two political parties, the Republicans and the Democrats, empathize differently. The Republicans believe in the so-called American Dream and so may feel that elite people are examples to be admired. This can mean, on the other hand, limited empathy towards the poor. The Democrats seem almost the opposite. They believe that so-called rich people are evil and exploitative, so have very little empathy towards them, yet great sympathy for those who see as victims.</p> <p>Empathy is not just in the individual, it's rooted in the values and the beliefs in our society. And this shapes our minds and our actions in ways we might not even notice.</p>
00:22:51	Joseph	Liu Liu uses this term belief systems, and that's sometimes called deep culture, and these are the cultural logics and the unconscious assumptions that we often accept without even questioning them.
00:23:09	Ishita	Our cultural background doesn't just provide individual things to value or believe in. We grow up with a shared way of making sense of the world, which can be very different depending on the society.
00:23:25	Joseph	Well, I felt this difference spending time in Indonesia, where religion is really a kind of central organizing principle of everyday life. Everything from the call to prayer, to daily offerings, to the fact that your religion is listed on your national ID card.
00:23:47	Ishita	<p>Religion is central to life in India as well, and it doesn't depend on whether you, as an individual, are a believer or not. For example, this feeling of pure and impure is simply a feature of the world.</p> <p>So, of course my colleague will react to me putting the laptop under the seat. The feet simply are profane.</p>
00:24:16	Joseph	And that was very difficult for me to see because for someone with my background, feet are simply another part of my body.
00:24:25	Ishita	And that's not a perception that you can easily change.
00:24:31	Joseph	So, all of this reminds us that empathizing at a deep level is not easy. It means learning to experience things in a very different way. And it can mean questioning our inner values, even our moral compass.
00:24:46	Ishita	And that is also something that Lia experienced.

00:24:53	Lia	<p>There are times when I struggle to accept things which others consider normal. For example, in the Philippines, it is quite common to spank children as part of their upbringing. In Norway, however, it is illegal to spank children. Spanking is completely unacceptable. If you are known to spank your kids, you will lose credibility and respect in almost every aspect of life.</p> <p>So imagine my shock and horror when I realized the people dear to me whom I consider wise, upright, loving, and caring, spanked their children to teach them right from wrong. I even know a Filipino man who was heartbroken when his parents never physically disciplined him. He felt that his parents didn't love him at all. Not everyone thinks this way, but it's not uncommon.</p> <p>It has taken me considerable effort to accept that I can still be friends with people who have different beliefs than mine on this matter. I have learned how Filipinos and people from other cultures as well, differentiate between discipline and abuse. I also understand that in more harsh societies, discipline and respect for authority are seen as necessary for survival.</p> <p>Still, even today, if this topic comes up among Filipinos, I usually remain silent. If asked for my opinion, I explain it in relation to my cultural background. I still have an urge to assert that my view is correct.</p> <p>Expanding our circle of empathy in the face of deep difference is not easy. I have had to question my values, see things from other's perspective, and yet stay true to myself.</p>
00:26:53	Joseph	<p>So Lia needs to stay true to herself, even as she tries to build relationships with people whose view of things she sometimes simply feels is wrong.</p>
00:27:05	Ishita	<p>And what a conflict. What feels to Lia to be abuse of a child, is experienced by people she respects, people she considers wise, as an act of love for a child.</p>
00:27:21	Joseph	<p>And the value that Lia describes, that in Norway it is never okay to spank children, is of course related to cultural attitudes overall. Norway ranks high in cultural measures emphasizing nurturing, whereas the Philippines ranks high on what is sometimes called masculine values, the values towards achievement and success.</p>

00:27:44	Ishita	The Philippines also ranks very high on power distance. Respect for authority is important. Norway, on the other hand, ranks low on power distance. It's a highly egalitarian society.
00:28:00	Joseph	So, it's not so hard to see how in Norway children are seen as vulnerable and thus never deserving of physical punishment. Whereas in the Philippines it's taken for granted that children must learn to do what they're told, and that discipline can be seen as a natural part of growing up.
00:28:19	Ishita	As Lia said, in harsh societies, those with few resources and a lot of inequality, respect for authority is necessary for survival. I see that in India, in a 'dog eat dog world', you have to be tough. So teaching children that lesson is seen as an act of love.
00:28:44	Joseph	So, clearly Lia's inner conflict is cultural. But what is cultural is also profoundly personal.
00:28:54	Ishita	And so Lia is forced to hold very different realities within herself, realities that are in opposition. That inner conflict is what makes cultural empathy so effortful.
00:29:11	Joseph	And of course, these inner conflicts exist in our private lives as well, with people we love, but who disagree with us, or in our own society when our values go against the tide.
00:29:23	Ishita	This really resonates with me. I'm not religious. I never really developed this embodied feeling of pure and profane, for example. But religion does play a big role in the world that I grew up in. It's not something that can be simply ignored.
00:29:44	Joseph	And so what does that feel like for you?
00:29:49	Ishita	For example, at my grandmother's house, I had to think: "Wait, which side of the kitchen is the pure side? Can I touch the water filter after I have touched the refrigerator?" Or, when I visited a temple with a friend, they would say: "Hey, don't turn your back to the gods."
00:30:12	Joseph	And so did that create inner tension for you?
00:30:15	Ishita	Of course it did. These are close relationships. People I have grown up with, people I love. But things that are simply normal for them may just not feel right to me.

00:30:31	Joseph	And so how is that for them?
00:30:33	Ishita	It's a conflict for them too. They just don't know how to make sense of me. And then if I don't see feet as profane, then either I am wrong or it calls into question the whole idea that the world is divided into sacred and profane.
00:30:53	Joseph	And so looking at the world differently is not just your opinion. It can mean questioning or rejecting the community that nurtures you.
00:31:03	Ishita	By choosing for yourself, you betray the community.
00:31:09	Joseph	I suppose there's an opposite dilemma for people from individualist societies. One has an individual moral compass rather than a collective one.
00:31:20	Ishita	And that's what Lia was struggling with. To agree with Filipino values felt like a betrayal of her personal values.
00:31:31	Joseph	And this is just another reminder that culture is not just in our heads, it's in our guts. It's who we are.
00:31:41	Ishita	So, let's get back to where we started, the challenge of expanding our circle of empathy. We've seen that while it's a very appealing ideal, in reality it's often not easy.
00:31:56	Joseph	And I think a lot of intercultural theorizing skips over difficult questions. For example, what about you has to change in order to expand your cultural world?
00:32:07	Ishita	And how do we reconcile these inner tensions, come to grips with conflicting values, find a sense of self with all of these cross currents pushing and pulling at us.
00:32:22	Joseph	And there are a lot of cultural bridge people wrestling with these issues every day.
00:32:30	Ishita	Well, what a gift to hear the stories of the podcast team. People who have felt the struggle of expanding their circle of empathy.
00:32:42	Joseph	And I think that's a good place to end this episode. For more on this idea of expanding the circle of empathy, check out Jeremy Rifkin's book <i>The Empathic Civilization</i> .

		<p>The quote about the evolution of empathy came from <i>Putting the altruism back into altruism. The Evolution of Empathy.</i> by Frans de Waal, in the Annual Review of Psychology. Lia's definition of empathy comes from Brené Brown's book <i>Atlas of the Heart</i>. For more on the cognitive processes of empathy and how it can be turned on and off, check out <i>Empathy, A Motivated Account</i> by Jamil Zaki.</p> <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 noncommercial, so please, give us a review on Apple Podcasts, post this episode on social media or send a link to a friend. It really helps us out.</p> <p>And a warm welcome to Lia - Torhild Liane Haarr Skårnes - the newest member of the podcast team. Thanks for your stories and we are so happy to have you on board. Thanks also to Liu Liu, Emre Seven and Sanne Bosma for their insights about empathy. And thanks to our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz and JII's administrator, Ikumi Fritz.</p> <p>And as always, thanks to you, Ishita. It has been a great pleasure producing this episode together.</p>
00:34:09	Ishita	Thank you, Joseph. Let's try to expand our circle of empathy one Deep Culture podcast episode at a time.