

Episode 4: Culture from the brain-mind-science perspective

Time	Speaker	
00:08	Joseph	Hello, I'm Joseph Shaules. Welcome to the Deep Culture Podcast, where we dig into the science and the psychology of culture and mind. Hello, Yvonne. How are you doing today?
00:22	Yvonne	Hi, Joseph. I'm doing fine. How are you?
00:25	Joseph	Good. I understand, in the Netherlands, the pandemic is getting worse.
00:31	Yvonne	It has been getting worse over the last month. But actually, we are in partial lockdown again, and so are many surrounding countries in Europe.
00:41	Joseph	Yeah, I heard that Italy is in very strict lockdown. The United States has over 100,000 infections a day, which is really horrible. Of course, I'm in Japan, where we are holding steady at about 500 per day. So, this thing just goes on and on and on, doesn't it?
01:00	Yvonne	Yeah, and I feel that people get..., they are losing their perspective. "When is this going to be over?" People are thinking about Christmas and being alone in their homes. Because in homes, you cannot invite more than two people anymore. And so, kind of loneliness during the winter comes over the country, the psychology of the nation.
01:23	Joseph	Yeah, we need to find ways to connect and to stay connected.
01:28	Yvonne	We do.
01:44	Joseph	So, in today's episode, we're going to be talking about culture from the brain-mind perspective. What does that mean?
01:55	Yvonne	Yeah, what does it mean? Well, culture, you know, it's not about customs only. It's not about dos and don'ts. It's a very deep part, actually, of who we are. And, it shapes us in how we think, and even the structure of the brain is influenced by culture. Sometimes, this is also called Deep Culture.
02:16	Joseph	Yeah, and Yvonne, you and I always get excited about the science that is helping us understand this cultural side of the

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		mind and the brain. So, we're going to share our excitement a little bit today.
02:34	Yvonne	Yeah, and it's for anybody who is living and working in a foreign country, growing up between cultural worlds. And, you need to learn about it. And, if you are working as intercultural trainer or teaching intercultural communication, you should definitely learn about the brain-mind sciences.
03:05	Yvonne	So, why should interculturalists learn about brain and mind sciences?
03:10	Joseph	The reason to learn about culture, brain and mind is not to become more knowledgeable. It's to become more insightful. And, the difference between knowledge and insight is at the core of this approach to intercultural understanding.
03:35	Joseph	Knowledge is remembering facts or manipulating concepts. Insight is a form of pattern recognition. It's seeing connections that other people don't see, or seeing connections that you didn't see before. So, to help others gain intercultural understanding, we have to do more than give knowledge, facts, rules, concepts. We need to help other people recognize patterns and make connections that they weren't making before.
04:04	Joseph	And, that's not an easy task. But, one way to go about it is to focus on what's going on in the mind of someone who is having an intercultural experience. And, the sciences of brain, mind and culture can help us understand the architecture of the mind. This can help us make sense of intercultural experiences in a new way. So, making sense of things in a new way, that's insight.
04:46	Yvonne	When we are talking about traveling or living in a foreign country, what do you mean by "insight?"
04:54	Joseph	Well, you know this expression, "A-ha" moment, feeling of, like "Ah, I got it!" I mean, that's insight. Like, I remember, when I

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		had been in Japan about two years, I had trouble understanding this particular word called <i>nakama</i> . I heard a group of people talking, and one of them said, “Oh, <i>nakama ni irete-yo</i> ,” which means, “put me in the <i>nakama</i> .” And, I asked them, “Well, what does <i>nakama</i> mean?” and this person says, “Well, hmm, that’s difficult. It’s kind of like friend.”
05:28	Joseph	But, I knew a different word for friend. And so, anyway, I looked it up in a dictionary. And so, this is the dictionary definition if you look it up in a Japanese-English dictionary. This is the definition of <i>nakama</i> : I’m just reading from a dictionary now, “company, fellow, colleague, associate, comrade, mate, group, circle of friends, partner.” That’s...
05:56	Yvonne	OK.
05:59	Joseph	Those are the translations for the word, <i>nakama</i> . And, if you, and there are two characters, two Japanese characters that make up this word, <i>naka</i> and <i>ma</i> . And, if you look up <i>naka</i> , it means, it’ll say, go-between or relationship. So, the same character that means go-between also means relationship. And the <i>ma</i> , <i>nakama</i> , this <i>ma</i> literally translates as interval or space.
06:30	Joseph	So, <i>nakama</i> is what? Go-between, interval, relationship or space? What is it? So, I just had no idea, from looking at this dictionary definition, what the feeling of this word is. But, I remember, after having lived in Japan for about two years, I was at a party with a group of students that I had been teaching, who really got along very well. And, we were at a party together, and there was this great atmosphere of trust and openness, and everybody was talking to each other, different ages.
07:06	Joseph	And, I had this flash, “Ah, this feeling is <i>nakama</i> . This feeling that I’m experiencing now is <i>nakama</i> .” You know, I come from a very individualist society, where everyone is concerned about “being me,” you know. But, Japan is a place where the feeling

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		of togetherness is really important. And, I don't know whether people at that party would have agreed with me that that was precisely what <i>nakama</i> was.
07:37	Joseph	But, this feeling of insidership, of being on the inside of this group was. I had this "A-ha" moment. And, you know, so when we're in a foreign country, we have foreign experiences, I think a lot of people have these "A-ha" moments. Does everybody have "A-ha" moments, do you think?
08:02	Yvonne	Oh, and I like your story. I love it actually, especially this moment of flash, and I think many people have that. Although maybe not everybody sees it as a flash that is meaningful or deeply meaningful. But, sometimes they can recall it back even years later, you know. One memory I have is, thinking back of the time I lived in the city of Hague and having these neighbors with the Moroccan background and Turkish background.
08:31	Yvonne	Especially with the ladies, we had great connections, but it was only in the moment that I left that house, it was a rental house at the time, and they approached me differently. That was interesting to notice myself as well, like, "What's happening here?" But, they actually asked me a favor if, their children were about to be married, they could have my house. So, it was very personal. And I was like, I felt the sense of,
09:01	Yvonne	But, this is like, you know, there's this corporation, this housing corporation that deals with this kind of issues. It's not me. So, I felt my inner task orientation, although I still felt very much connected to them as my dear neighbors. Of course, you can know cognitively about relationship orientation and task orientation. At that time, my task orientation in this sense.
09:30	Joseph	I think those "A-ha" moments are the most powerful ones. When we recognize something in ourselves that we didn't recognize before because we're experiencing a new normal. Something that's normal for us is not normal in this situation or

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		vice versa.
09:47	Yvonne	Exactly. Talking about these stories and storytelling, but how can we mingle this, or combine this also with science? What can the two learn from each other, or enforce each other?
10:04	Joseph	Yes. So, it's easy to tell these stories, but, you know, today, we are talking about science. So, how can science help us understand these "A-ha" moments, with these things that are going on our minds?
10:32	Yvonne	Well, let's start first with the empirical foundation of our work. Actually, there is a huge amount of literature out there. When I visited Tokyo, I entered Joseph's office, and I saw this enormous bookshelf with all those titles, and just looked at it, you know. It's amazing how many fields, and these are also overlapping fields, inform our work. And, Joseph, could you shed a light on all this terminology actually that has been used?
11:03	Joseph	Yes. So, there are a number of overlapping fields when we're talking about brain, mind and culture sciences. And, they include cultural neuroscience, cognitive neuroscience, cultural psychology, cognitive psychology, social psychology, neurolinguistics. And, there is no clear separation between these different fields.
11:31	Joseph	But, they are all contributing insights that I think are very useful for interculturalists. And, I would be quite direct. I spent a number of years in the field of intercultural communication, feeling like there was nothing new, like there were no new approaches and very little new theory. And, what I started to discover was that the interesting work was being done in other fields.
11:59	Joseph	And, there was fascinating work. And, once I started looking into that, the more I looked, the more I found. So, some of the things that I found were these different areas that were helping us to answer a number of basic questions.

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12:29	Yvonne	So, one of these basic questions is: How are our brains shaped by culture, and vice versa? How is culture shaping our brains, if so? And maybe, Joseph, you can explain a bit about this question.
12:43	Joseph	Well, you know, some people have the idea that we all have the same biology; therefore, everywhere in the world, everyone's brain is going to be the same. It's not that simple. Our brain and our cognitive processes are shaped by the environment. And, understanding the interrelation between nature and nurture, and how cognitive, how cognition develops is one of the areas of neuroscience and cultural neuroscience.
13:18	Yvonne	Yean, and another main question is: How does our unconscious mind work? And, many of you might be familiar with the work of Nobel Prize winner, scholar, Daniel Kahneman. His book has this excellent title, "Thinking, Fast and Slow." And, that means a lot, doesn't it, Joseph?
13:40	Joseph	Yes, you know, we're familiar with the iceberg metaphor that culture is largely unconscious. But, what is the structure of the unconscious mind is that there is an enormous amount of new research in this area, and Daniel Kahneman was applying that to economics. And, what we're doing is applying that to intercultural questions. Particularly, here is a dual process theory of mind, looking at differences between more conscious and unconscious forms of cognition.
14:29	Yvonne	Talking about cognition and unconscious cognition, how does culture influence our perception and cognition? There is also relation between culture and cognition. And, some of you might know the work of Richard Nisbett, for instance, "The Geography of Thought." I was very much struck by his work. It already starts with the title, "How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why," especially those last two words. And, because there was much to say about cognition.

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15:02	Joseph	Richard Nisbett was studying unconscious cognition, and he had the question: Well, is unconscious cognition the same everywhere in the world? And, that was area of research, which created this landmark book. If you're going to start somewhere with this, this may be a good place to start, "The Geography of Thought." And, this was a kind of paradigm shift that started to help us look at cultural difference in a new way, and gave us new methodologies for learning about cultural difference.
15:39	Yvonne	We will be talking also a bit about embodiment, and embodiment of culture and mind. There is also a lot of work done on embodiment, but can you say a bit about it, Joseph?
15:52	Joseph	We think of thinking and feeling as being separate. But, in terms of cognitive process and embodied, they are not separate. Thought is embodied. It's part of the whole organism. And so, we're leaning to better understand the relationship between these different parts of the mind. As interculturalist, we know that culture is more than simply an idea. It is something that's deeply embodied in us, and in the way that we see the world, and in the way that we think, and in the way we react to the world. So, this is an important area of research that we can draw on.
16:31	Yvonne	And then, of course, we express ourselves in language, and many of us are using a second language today. And, how does language relate to cognition and culture? That's also a huge field, very interesting. Joseph recently published himself as well, the interrelationships between those fields.
16:53	Joseph	One of the really exciting areas of research is represented in this, by the work of Benjamin Bergen. He published a book, "Louder Than Words." And, the main takeaway is that language is much more than a symbolic system, and that when we use language, we're actually creating an embodied simulation of an experience. And, this is a whole new area of research trying to

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		understand how language works at the level of cognitive systems. And, lots of questions that have not been answered, but lots of really exciting research in this area.
17:46	Yvonne	I'll just continue with the next question which is: How networked are we? And actually, how are we collectively networked with other people? We are not alone in this world, you know. We are human beings and social beings.
18:03	Joseph	Yes, our brains evolved in the context of community. And, there's a whole area of neuroscience, which seeks to understand this collective element of cognitive function and the evolution of brain.
18:20	Yvonne	And, many of you are working in the field as an educator, trainer working with students or participants, or in whatever context. So, learning is another area where there's a lot of interesting work going on, and the brain, of course, is interesting. How do we learn? And, what makes learning impactful? And, how do we learn about culture?
18:46	Joseph	So, there is a whole new area of research, educational neuroscience, which tries to understand the embodied cognitive processes of learning. This has also been applied to intercultural experiences. My book, "The Intercultural Mind," was looking at the relationship between cultural learning and cognition: What are the effects of us, on our mind and our cognition?
19:15	Yvonne	And, at last but not least, bias. And, it's one of my favorites, I must say. What are our biases and blind spots?
19:26	Joseph	One of the most fascinating takeaways with this area of research is that the word "bias" isn't really suited. Bias makes it sound as though there's something wrong. In fact, bias is simply a product of the way that our brain is structured. It's structured for efficiency, for making quick decisions, for being good enough to survive. And, once we understand more about



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		the cognitive structure of bias, we can see that it's natural, doesn't mean it's good, but it's natural.
20:01	Joseph	And, there's a tremendous amount of research that's really directly related to the kind of work that intercultural educators and trainers are doing.
20:42	Yvonne	All this science sounds really interesting, but I can imagine people also saying, "Well, I'm just traveling," "I'm staying abroad for a very short period of time," or "I'm studying abroad," and "Do I really need this?"
20:56	Joseph	Well, no. But, if you are interested,
20:58	Yvonne	OK.
21:00	Joseph	Right? I mean, no, of course not. You can go to a resort, lie on the beach all day in a foreign country, and that's fine if that's what you want to do. But, I mean, you and I, Yvonne, we both agree that we have foreign experiences, not just in foreign countries, anytime we have a foreign experience, it's a chance to go deeper into our selves, to figure out what happens when we encounter the unknown. Foreign experiences are about discovering things within ourselves.
21:34	Yvonne	Yeah, and for me, it's also lifelong learning, learning about others, learning about yourself, and vice versa.
21:42	Joseph	Well, I think, on that note, Yvonne, it's about time for us to wrap up this episode. So, if you like this episode, let us know. Please subscribe to the Deep Culture Podcast, rate us, write a review on Apple Podcasts. We'd love to hear from you. You can reach us at <a href="mailto:dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org">dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org</a> , or leave a comment on our website, <a href="http://www.japanintercultural.org">www.japanintercultural.org</a> .
22:13	Joseph	This podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. Our master sound engineer and interculturalist extraordinaire is Robinson Fritz. Chriss Koyama is our production assistant and our remarkable jazz singer. Thanks to both of you. Take care,

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		Yvonne, and I look forward to seeing you next time.
22:42	Yvonne	Well, look forward to seeing you next time too. And, thanks everybody for listening to this podcast.