

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 **Yvonne van der Pol** 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 9 – Bias is not Bias

In this episode, Joseph Shaules and Yvonne van der Pol talk about cognitive biases – the “natural” mental shortcuts that make us jump to conclusions, misjudge, favor the familiar, be ethnocentric, and more. Cultural bridge people need to understand cognitive biases because they are so often triggered in intercultural situations. You will hear a story about a bicycle from Yvonne, and we even discuss the *bhavacakra*—The Buddhist Wheel of Life. It reminds us that waking up to the biases within us is an important step towards deeper intercultural understanding.

Time	Speaker	
00:00	Joseph	(...) Although, we are not saying natural biases are good. I mean, getting sick sometimes is natural, but we try to avoid it. So, saying that it is natural. It is not the same as saying that it is good (...).
00:15		Piano sounds
00:28	Joseph	Hello! I'm Joseph Shaules. Welcome to the deep culture podcast, where we explore culture and the science of mind. This is a podcast for people who move between different cultural worlds. We talk about intercultural experiences, and we dig into the science and the psychology of culture and mind. And I am here today with Yvonne Van der Pol as usual. How are you doing today, Yvonne?
00:59	Yvonne	Hi, Joseph. Nice to be here. I am doing great. It is lovely and sunny weather here in the Netherlands.
01:05	Joseph	Here in Tokyo. I had a perfect spring day. There were cherry blossoms. You have seen my street lined with these cherry blossom trees, and they were fluttering. The petals were fluttering down . . . it was like the perfect image of Japan.
01:23	Yvonne	Oh wow! it seems like a fairy tale. I remember your street, but not with these beautiful pink trees. Fantastic!
01:32	Joseph	Also on my balcony, we have three tulips. So maybe there is a tiny bit of the Netherlands there.
01:39	Yvonne	Yeah, that is fun. Yeah. I have them in my garden too.
01:42	Joseph	So, Yvonne, what are we talking about today?
01:46	Yvonne	Well, well, let us talk about bias.
01:50	Joseph	Bias! This is a powerful word. Uh, the word itself sounds bad.

01:58	Yvonne	Yeah. It sounds like a criticism or even an accusation. And of course, to say someone is biased, it sounds like they are not seeing things clearly. Or they have some negative attitudes or prejudice.
02:11	Joseph	And we hear people talking about bias these days in discussions about prejudice, discussions about discrimination, inequality, injustice...
02:21	Yvonne	...which we are going to ask you to think about the word bias in a new way.
02:28	Joseph	Yes. We are going to be talking about cognitive bias or we could say cognitive biases. And this is the many ways that our mind naturally takes shortcuts and judges things inaccurately or jumps to wrong conclusions.
02:44	Yvonne	You say naturally?
02:47	Joseph	Yes. Naturally, because from the perspective of cognitive science, in terms of mental functioning bias is natural. It is the default setting. It is just the way that our minds work.
02:58	Yvonne	Okay. So, that means that bias... is not bias.
03:00	Joseph	Well, right. Bias is natural. So, it is normal, it is unavoidable to have cognitive biases. So, in that sense, bias is not bias. Bias is normal.
03:13.	Yvonne	Okay. Well, and we are going to talk about them today in this podcast, because cultural bridge people need to know about them. They are super important in foreign situations or when dealing with cultural difference.
03:27	Joseph	So, we are going to dig into this bias topic with three questions. What is bias? Why are they important across cultures? and what can brain and mind science tell us about them?
03:41	Yvonne	So that brings us to part one: Bias - What is that?
03:45		Sound of piano
03:58	Joseph	Bias: the action of supporting or opposing a particular person or thing in an unfair way. So that is a dictionary definition of bias.
04:09	Yvonne	Yeah. So, when we hear the word bias, we often think about prejudice. Perhaps it is a bit more accurate to say that prejudice is a particular kind of bias. In fact, there are many different types of bias.
04:22	Joseph	Right, and sometimes for example, we hear the word implicit bias, which is one type of bias, and it refers to unconscious, negative attitudes about a certain category of person, for example. So, we can be prejudiced without recognizing it.
04:39	Yvonne	And there are a lot of questions about how to overcome prejudice.
04:44	Joseph	And because of that, understanding bias is really important. But when we are talking about bias in intercultural situations, we are not talking about prejudice exactly. We are talking about natural biases

		and these are kind of mental shortcuts that take us to wrong conclusions.
05:08	Yvonne	Hm. And that is a strange term, actually, “natural biases”. But in fact, the human mind is naturally biased. We are unavoidably biased. It is part of how our mind works.
05:22	Joseph	Although we are not saying natural biases are good. I mean, getting sick sometimes is natural, but we try to avoid it. So, saying that it is natural is not the same as saying that it is good.
05:34	Yvonne	No, of course. But to avoid them, we need to understand them. So we are going to look a bit more deeply at these natural biases.
05:42	Joseph	And from the brain mind science perspective, in particular cognitive psychology, you would call these biases “cognitive biases”.
05:52	Yvonne	Oh, here is the Wikipedia definition for cognitive bias: “A cognitive bias is a systematic pattern of deviation from the norm or rationality in judgment. Individuals create their own subjective reality from their perception of the input. Thus, cognitive biases may sometimes lead to inaccurate judgment.”
06:16	Joseph	Wow! That sounds complicated. I like one part of that was “systematic patterns of deviation from the norm”. It makes me feel smart just to say it!
06:30	Yvonne	Yeah, well and I also liked the part about “individuals create their own subjective reality”.
06:37	Joseph	Oh, that is deep. That sounds like part psychology and part philosophy. I make my own reality.
06:45	Yvonne	Well, let us not go too far into outer space, but let us see what this means into everyday, in everyday life.
06:50	Joseph	Okay. Let us see what this means in everyday life. And that brings us to part two: Bias and the Bicycle.
07:00		Sound of piano
07:09	Yvonne	Oh, Joseph, let me tell you a story. When I rode my bike years ago and it is related to bias actually. You're..., you're into it?
07:18	Joseph	I am into it. So, this is your, this is your bicycle bias story.
07:21	Yvonne	Yeah. I had a yellow bike riding through the cities of The Hague on a very rainy day. Um, you know, the streets were not only wet, but also extremely slippery. So, all of a sudden, I got caught in a tram track and... Bang!
07:38	Joseph	So, this is like, the wheel of... the wheel of the bicycle got stuck in the tram track and... so that makes you like bike fall over to the side.
07:47	Yvonne	Yeah. Usually I can get my balance, but that time it was just too slippery. So, Bang! There I found myself, well, actually I fell hard, and I found myself there, sort of..., well..., half sitting or laying on the

		<p>sidewalk and, you know, being a bit dizzy and I'm thinking: Well, did I break something? Sort of realizing this... What happened? and, you know, finding myself back, I heard this wonderful, tender, friendly voice saying: "How are you? Are you okay? And please take your time". And, you know, so nice! And then, at the moment I opened my eyes, I was like, Oh! I was struck by a huge tattoo! And there was like some mismatch I did not think of. Or, I did not have the image of the person being so caring, also having this ton of tattoos. And there was this huge one, that was an eye, and it was on the top of his Adam's apple staring at me! I still remember the details. It is amazing. Yeah, no, it happened in a split second. It is amazing. Our responses... I realized that our responses to the world are so much influenced by previous experience. And, you know, I apparently had never received any positive messages about people having tattoos. Um, so, I suppose right there on that spot, that sidewalk...</p>
09:18		Sound of piano
09:28	Joseph	<p>And, so, this reaction that you had was based on previous experience, and it was a reaction in the moment, and these are the kinds of biases that brain and mind sciences are teaching us about. They are teaching us that as humans, we are constantly constructing a view of the world and reacting to that, based on our past experience. Our brain is a kind of predictive machine that is constantly anticipating, evaluating, judging, wanting this. I don't want that.</p>
10:03	Yvonne	<p>Yeah. Let us admit, you know, we are all full of judgments and evaluation, that is what we do the whole day, trying to get this, trying to avoid that. Those are our biases! And, you know, it is overly clear that our eyes are not cameras, or our ears are not just microphones.</p>
10:21	Joseph	<p>Right. Our perceptions are not simply recording what is going on around us. We are always reacting, based on our intuitive mind: The psychologist, Jonathan Haidt talks about the intuitive mind, like our beloved elephant, which carries us along while we go along for the ride. And our conscious mind is just justifying the path that it chooses. And so, in this case, you know, your intuitive elephant had this reaction to the tattoos.</p>
10:55	Yvonne	Oh, on my yellow bike, (laughs). Can you imagine?
11:02	Joseph	<p>So, in this case, though, you were in a familiar environment, and you experienced bias based on your previous experience, but that raises a question for people who are crossing borders or in foreign</p>

		situations in unfamiliar situations. What about bias when we are in an unfamiliar environment?
11:24	Yvonne	Well, that brings us to Part 3: Take your Bias Abroad!
11:29		Sound of piano
11:45	Joseph	If you are walking down the street in a foreign country that you are just visiting for the first time, you know, you hear the sounds and you see the sights and you look around and you notice all these differences. And it is very exciting. It is very stimulating, but that is a lot of information and a lot of experience for your mind to process. So, we are particularly vulnerable to biases in foreign situations. Not just because we are tired, but because there are many things we don't understand, it can be hard to interpret things. We don't know how to make sense of things. We, we easily jump to conclusions.
12:25	Yvonne	And especially when we are under stress, we are mentally tired. You know, we are even more susceptible to bias and to make those negative judgements. And we all do it. Let us not pretend we do not.
12:38	Joseph	Right! Oh, I am Mr. International, I never..., I never make any negative judgements.
12:42	Yvonne	No, let us be honest, you know..., we all do...
12:45	Joseph	We are all ethnocentric! This just means that we judge things from our own cultural perspective based on our experience up to that point. I mean, how could it be any other way? When I came to Japan, I came with my American cultural glasses. Everything I saw was filtered through my experience as an American. So, I was in Japan having an American experience of Japan. So, we can never completely eliminate ethnocentrism because our experience is limited, but we can learn to see the world with new cultural glasses. You add new perspectives. It is like learning a foreign language. You add another dimension to how you communicate or how you see things. So, ethnocentrism is, I guess, the most important natural bias that cultural bridge people need to be aware of, but there are many other cognitive biases that we need to know about. My favourite... or one that is interesting...
14:02	Yvonne	Your favourite? Are you serious (laughs)
14:05	Joseph	One which is interesting for me, is the fundamental attribution error. And this is something that all internationalists should know about: the fundamental attribution error. It causes us to evaluate other people or the behaviour of other people as though it is caused by some essential quality, personality or character. And we tend to downplay or ignore situational factors. And that is important in a foreign situation, because we are always trying to figure out other

		<p>people's behaviour. So, I am living in Japan, and I teach a lot of non-Japanese students who come to Japan, and they take classes with Japanese students, and they will say something like “Well, you know why don't Japanese students raise their hands in class, I guess, you know, they're shy”. But, Japanese are not shy. Japanese have a reserved communication style, but in a Japanese classroom, it is not typical to raise your hand. That is situational. But the foreign students see this behaviour and they assume that this behaviour is caused by some inner quality of shyness in Japanese people. And that tendency to define things in terms of this inner quality is the fundamental attribution error. And you also hear it with someone who says “Oh, the locals were so friendly. They are so nice”. Well, what does that mean? That they are friendly. You need to pay attention to the situation. And were you a customer, were you staying at an expensive hotel? You need to judge things contextually. So that is one of the biases that I think is really interesting. Do you have a favourite?</p>
16:05	Yvonne	<p>Oh, favourite? It still sounds awkward to me, but in the context of bias, no, but where my fascination is, each and every time towards us and them, towards in-group and out-group. That is really what I found intriguing. And so there you have this tandem, which is called the in-group heterogeneity and the out-group homogeneity. So, what we do, we often perceive our in-groups - us - as more heterogeneous, um, more diverse. We are more layered. We understand it so much better. And on the other side, the out-group, uh, homogeneity effect is, that how it is called, is the perception of those out-group members as more similar to one another than to our in-group members. And what we then typically say is things as “They are all alike, we are diverse”.</p>
17:03	Joseph	<p>All right. So, when you're with a bunch of people that you feel that you share a lot with, that is the in-group, they all seem so diverse and so distinct and so unique, but when it is the other, uh, they all seem kind of the same.</p>
17:19	Yvonne	<p>Yes exactly.</p>
17:21	Joseph	<p>I think Americans are actually particularly susceptible to this idea of, you know, oh, we are all unique. Me and all my friends, we are all unique. We have this obsession with, you know, defining ourselves as unique. So, we tend not to see what is similar, and it is the others that seem to be the same.</p>

17:39	Yvonne	It is amazing how that works. And it is in deep... in depth! It comes from the us / them and the in-group / out-group effects that we easily make. That comes also from brain mind science, of course.
17:50	Joseph	And this is also made stronger because we have a natural bias to be comforted by what is familiar and to find things that are unfamiliar to be tiring or even threatening. So, there is a lot of feeling of having to manage the unknown. We have all heard of cultural stress or culture shock when we are in an unfamiliar environment, we get tired psychologically. Uh that is what happens when our, when we are overloaded. And so, our reactions to a foreign place depend on how we feel at that moment and on our past experience...
18:32	Yvonne	Yeah. I remember for instance, when my American homestay sister came over to Europe, she was so excited. But then she got so homesick, and I felt sorry for her, you know, and the unfamiliar was really stressful for her. And in the end, she wanted to go to McDonald's. So, we visited the McDonald's in Paris, and later on in Porto, in Portugal, and later on in Salamanca, in Spain. And then, after all, that was about 10 days time, then it was over. Then we could eat paella and all those things.
19:09	Joseph	So, this was like the McDonald's tour of Europe for your American homestay sister?
19:13	Yvonne	Yes, it was for me.
19:15	Joseph	But after 10 days, she started to feel more at ease.
19:19	Yvonne	Yeah, exactly.
19:21	Joseph	Well, I, I mean, I will admit, I ate at McDonald's in Hong Kong when I was traveling there years ago, and I remember feeling a little bit guilty about this. I was thinking, you know, here I am in this exotic place, what seemed to be exotic at that time. But I just had this, that was like this gravitational pull that was pulling me towards the familiar. It just felt so comforting to have the familiar. And so, it is natural. This is a natural reaction. A culture shock is natural. It is simply an overload of our ability to process and digest our experiences. And the thing that is striking is how these reactions are so typical and so common. And these are not the only ones, cognitive psychologists, they study all kinds of different biases. And that raises the question of like, well, how many biases are there? What are they?
20:27	Yvonne	What are they? Well, that actually brings us to Part 4: The Wheel of Bias.
20:30		Sound of piano

20:46	Yvonne	There are so many biases that have been studied. For instance, when you search on Wikipedia on cognitive bias codex, you will find this list of 188 cognitive biases, grouped into categories. It is an amazing visual, that gives a great overview, and it is actually in the shape of a wheel. That is why we call it the wheel of bias.
21:10	Joseph	Right. And I really recommend, definitely take a look at the cognitive bias codex. It has all of this information about all of these different biases, and it arranges them in a way that makes sense, based on the limitations of our mental processing. So, for example, one of our limitations is a limited ability to remember. So, what should we remember? So, we have a tendency to edit and reinforce memories afterwards, and we have a tendency to discard specifics and form generalities, which is for example, prejudice and stereotyping and implicit stereotypes. Those are ways in which we are discarding specifics and forming generalities, uh, because we cannot remember everything. And another limitation we have is there is just too much information in the world. And so, for example, we tend to notice flaws in others more easily than when we, then we notice flaws in ourselves, and we are drawn to details that confirm our own beliefs. And we notice when something has changed. And this happens when we are in a foreign country, right? We notice all this stuff that has changed. Uh, so that is all related to too much information, which is really common, uh, in intercultural situations, of course, and then there is not enough meaning in our environment, sometimes we need to make judgements based on limited information. So, you know, we imagine things and people that we are familiar with, uh, as better and, and we simplify numbers to make them easier to think about. And we think that we know what other people are thinking, and these are all biases related to meaning, and we need to act fast in the face of uncertainty. So, we tend to favour the immediate things that are right in front of us. And we tend to complete things that we have already invested time and energy in. And so, in order to be confident that we can make an impact, uh, we want to feel that what we are doing is important and all of these things are related to the need to act fast. So, definitely check out this cognitive bias. I have just given you all this information, but if you look at the cognitive bias codex, so you will see these 188 different ones. It is really an amazing visual.
23:57	Yvonne	I think it is so amazing. It is almost overwhelming. And it also raises the question, why does our mind work that way?

24:06	Joseph	Yeah. And, you know, I guess in one sense, it is obvious that our, our minds are limited, but in fact, it is a product of our evolutionary psychology. You know, a bias is really just a systematic tendency to produce a particular outcome. So, we are biased towards something. So, when we say a casino, for example, is biased in favour of the house. We mean that the rules are set up so that they have a tendency to win. So human biases are a bias towards behaviour, which results in the survival of the species that our mind has evolved to work in the way that it does, because that is what has allowed us to survive.
24:57	Yvonne	Yeah. Okay. Well, after having said all of this, about the roots of bias, um, about the origin of bias, can we get rid of bias by studying them?
25:09	Joseph	Well, no, of course not.
25:16	Yvonne	No, (laughs) I am afraid not!
25:17	Joseph	I mean, it is just, it is just the way that we are as human beings.
25:21	Yvonne	Exactly
25:23	Joseph	I mean, bias is bias is not the problem. The ignorance of our biases is the problem. If we don't recognize our biased nature, we fool ourselves. And we, you know, we accept the illusion that our view of the world is the right one. And we, you know, we look for validation, we want to feel important. We want to be right. And we reject the things that don't make us feel good. Uh, we hate being wrong. So yeah, it is hard to change all that.
25:54		Chime of bells
26:06	Yvonne	Listening to you... and when you say all this, it reminds me of another wheel actually. And then that in essence deals with bias and it is the <i>bhavacakra</i> and it comes from Buddhism, it is the Buddhist wheel of life. It is famous visualization usually painted on bowls or as, as an image on canvas, you know it?
26:26	Joseph	I have seen depictions, um, and it is in a circle and there are animals, but I don't really know what the significance is.
26:34	Yvonne	Yeah, and there are many circles. This is a very intriguing wheel of life. That is what it is all about. But when you look at the core and, in the hub of the wheel, there are three animals and what you see is a pig, a snake and a rooster, and they are biting each other's tails. And what they represent is the three poisons, and these poisons are ignorance, aversion and attachment.
27:02	Joseph	Okay. So, ignorance, aversion, and attachment. So, I am..., I am looking at one now and I see that the snake and the rooster are shown as coming out of the mouth of the pig.

27:17	Yvonne	Yeah. It is depicted sometimes in various ways, but that is also what has been said. It indicates that aversion and attachments arise from ignorance, and the snake and the rooster are also shown as grasping the tail of the pig, indicating that they in turn, promote greater ignorance.
27:36	Joseph	So it is, self-reinforcing so ignorance leads to aversion and attachment, and that leads to more ignorance and that leads to more aversion and attachment.
27:47	Yvonne	Yeah. So, if you don't interfere, and that is the loop you are into, and it all relates back to ignorance and, uh, we feel aversion towards others and the unknown, and we see attachments to our own in-group and the familiar and ignorance is the basis of all of this. It is the lack of knowing the world for what it is actually. So that is what it is. Do we really see what is here? How do we actually see? That is what is often said, um, and trying to make our own concerns, the centre of everything,
28:21	Joseph	Right? So, it is in fact, trying to make us the centre of everything that drives this, this whole dynamic, and, you know, that is with unconscious bias or the kinds of biases that cultural bridge people need. It is it, there is a very similar thing. It is recognizing that our understanding is limited is this kind of superpower of being a cultural bridge person, because when you have foreign experiences, what you discover is your ignorance. And so, in that sense, knowledge..., knowledge of bias does not solve anything. Knowledge of our ignorance does not solve anything, but it does open our eyes to learning. And that is what we want from our intercultural experiences. We want them to enrich us and..., and help us grow. But to do that, we have to recognize our own biases and our own ignorance.
29:25	Yvonne	Yeah, exactly. And then just to add on to that, let us not forget about compassion, uh, also a key teaching of Buddhism and many religious and philosophical traditions, and you and I have already been talking about empathy. So, it is all related here.
29:41	Joseph	It is all related, isn't it? Because when we, when we are keeping ourselves at the centre of everything, it is harder to feel compassion and because compassion is reaching out to others. So, wow! Yvonne, we have really covered a lot of territory today...
30:00	Yvonne	All of a sudden, we are here not only one wheel, but also two wheels...

30:05	Joseph	Right. We start with the..., you know, cognitive psychology and 188 cognitive biases. The codex and we end up with ignorance and pigs and snakes and roosters. Uh, it has been a wonderful conversation with you today, Yvonne, but I think it is about time for us to end.
30:26	Yvonne	This was wonderful. Yes, let us wrap up indeed.
30:34		Piano sounds
30:36	Joseph	So, the deep culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan and your cultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I am the director of JII. If you're interested in culture and the mind, check out JII's, brain, mind, and culture masterclass, Yvonne and I are facilitating that. And it is a blended learning course, it is an online community, full of cultural bridge people from all over the world. And we'd learned about a brain mind and culture to find out more, just do a web search for the Japan intercultural Institute and Yvonne, we are going to be starting a new round in May looking forward to that.
31:25	Yvonne	Exactly.
		If you liked today's episode, we would really love to hear from you. Leave a comment on Apple podcasts or write us at DC podcasts @ Japan, intercultural.org. We would like to thank our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz, and everyone at JII. And thanks to you Yvonne for sharing this time with me.
31:47	Yvonne	Well thank you. And thank you everybody for listening
31:50	Joseph	..., and we will see you again, next time.
31:52		Piano sounds
32:52		End of podcast