

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 19 – Why do we think differently?)
Does culture influence the way people think? Are cognitive processes the same everywhere in the world? In this episode, Yvonne Van der Pol and Joseph Shaules dive deep into the topic of culture and cognition. They discuss the groundbreaking research of Richard Nisbett, who argues that culture shapes our mental processes—and thus our experience of the world—in many ways. They talk about cows, chickens and grass . . . and the student who changed his professor’s understanding of mind by saying that for the Chinese the world is a circle whereas for an American it’s a straight line!

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Joseph	(Hook) He shows subjects a picture with a chicken on the left side and some grass on the right. And below that there is a drawing of a cow. Now subjects are asked to choose where the cow belongs - together with the chicken or together with the grass?
00:00:26	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 very happy to be joined today by my co-host Yvonne van der Pol. How are you doing Yvonne?
00:00:40	Yvonne	I'm fine. Wonderful to be here with you, Joseph. And how are you today?
00:00:45	Joseph	I'm doing fine. I'm still in California. I have not returned yet to Tokyo and you are in the Netherlands.
00:00:52	Yvonne	I'm in the Netherlands. And at the very moment that Russia has invaded Ukraine, as we all know, and it's so tremendous to see all the suffering and the aggression and what's going on.
00:01:05	Joseph	And our thoughts go out to everyone that is affected by this terrible conflict.
00:01:10	Yvonne	And at the same time, we're here in the Deep Culture podcast. And the title of today's episode is “Why do we think differently?” And we're going to tackle a very big topic. We will be talking about cognition and culture, or more specifically about: “Is cognition influenced by culture?”
00:01:25	Joseph	Now that is a big question! And another way to ask this question is: “Do people's minds work in the same way, everywhere in the world?”
00:01:40	Yvonne	And it's easy to imagine that because everybody is born with basically the same type of human brain, that mental processes of people all over the world are going to be basically the same. But is that really true?
00:01:54	Joseph	Well, after all people in different countries obviously speak different languages, they have different customs and beliefs.

00:02:02	Yvonne	So, the question is whether our cultural difference is not just customs, how people act, but also whether it affects cognition, the workings of the brain, our mental processes.
00:02:14	Joseph	We should probably define some terminology. So when we're using the word brain, we're referring to the physical organ - like this bowl of fatty tapioca in your skull. And cognition refers to the workings of the brain, the networks of neurons that are firing. And it's those cognitive processes, which produce the thoughts and the feelings that we have and the images in our head, our experience of the world.
00:02:45	Yvonne	And this brings us to the question: "Does culture impact cognition, the way our minds work?"
00:02:51	Joseph	And the short answer is yes, cognitive function is shaped by our social environment. And really this is not so surprising. Think of how it is with language, for example. Our native language becomes a natural part of our mental functioning as we grow up. So it's not odd that our environment might shape our mind in some important ways.
00:03:14	Yvonne	And this is fascinating to me because it's only been in recent years, that specialists have been able to really research this question in detail. One reason is of course, because of technology such as brain imaging, that allows us to learn about brain function in real time.
00:03:33	Joseph	So research is giving us some answers to this question, but still cognition is complex. So we can't expect any simple answers, but this is the deep culture podcast. So we are going to dive in and swim around in these ideas.
00:03:52	Yvonne	And in particular today, we'll talk about the pioneering research of psychologist, Richard Nisbett. And we will talk about how one of his students changed Nisbett's mind about how the mind works.
00:04:05	Joseph	And that brings us to part one: The Professor and the Student.
Part 1: The Professor and the Student		
00:04:20	Joseph	This episode was inspired by a number of conversations that you and I have had about the work of Richard Nisbett.
00:04:30	Yvonne	Indeed Richard Nisbett is the author of " <i>The Geography of Thought</i> " and with the intriguing subtitle " <i>How Asians and Westerners think differently... and Why</i> ". And it's a book that has been of a big influence on both of us, Joseph!
00:04:45	Joseph	I'll just say that when I first read <i>the Geography of Thought</i> , it really shifted how I think about culture and the mind. And fundamentally, Nisbett has shown that cognitive function is shaped by culture in profound ways.
00:05:01	Yvonne	Oh yes, and I was intrigued by many small, yet very interesting findings. For instance, in the chapter <i>is the world made up of nouns or verbs?</i> he mentions findings such as, for instance Western parents seem obsessed, pointing out objects to their children, naming them and telling them about their attributes. And it goes like this: " <i>That's a car. See the car? You like it? It's got nice wheels.</i> " And in contrast, while observing Asian

		<p>parents playing with their toddlers, they engage in twice as many social routines of teaching politeness norms: “Here, it is: vroom, vroom; while there it is: I’ll give it to you, now you give this to me. Yes. Thank you.”</p> <p>American children are learning that the world is mostly a place with objects, while Asian children learn that the world is mostly about relationships. Okay, well, sorry. I get carried away now, but maybe you should give some background first.</p>
00:06:06	Joseph	<p>Well, I will say that this is something I have noticed living in Japan, that the way that parents play with children is very different, but what does this all mean? And what does it have to do with cognition? Let’s first talk a little bit about Richard Nisbett. He is an American social psychologist. He’s a distinguished professor of social psychology at the University of Michigan. And <i>the Geography of Thought</i> was a pioneering book that argues that culture affects the way that our mind works in many ways. And that those differences can be measured scientifically.</p>
00:06:51	Yvonne	<p>Well, what I didn’t know, until we were preparing for this podcast, was that in fact that his work was very influential a long time before <i>The Geography of Thought</i>.</p>
00:07:02	Joseph	<p>Yes. He published a groundbreaking article back in 1977, called: <i>Telling more than we know: Verbal reports on mental processes</i>. And that was in a psychology journal.</p>
00:07:14	Yvonne	<p>And the basic argument he made is that: we don’t really know why we do what we do, because the processes that guide our lives, the choices we make, why we like certain things, are not accessible to the conscious mind.</p>
00:07:31	Joseph	<p>In other words, you can ask people why they married a particular person or bought that product. But even if they come up with an answer to explain it, they don’t really have access to the mental processes that are behind their actions.</p>
00:07:46	Yvonne	<p>And an important point that article made was that we cannot know how our unconscious mind works by introspection, by reflection or analyzing our dreams or noticing the thoughts in our head.</p>
00:07:59	Joseph	<p>And this was a very different view compared to the past. Sigmund Freud for example, believed that by analyzing dreams, we could uncover the secrets of our unconscious mind. And this article was proposing a completely different way of thinking about these deeper parts of our mind. And these days, this is often talked about using the term dual processing models of cognition, and that emphasizes that the unconscious mind operates often independently of conscious thought.</p>
00:08:32	Yvonne	<p>And if you listen to this podcast, you know, we often talk about the deep structure of the mind. And we have said that, our unconscious mind is like an intuitive autopilot. It guides our everyday behavior without us realizing it. So what we’re really trying to understand today is: how culture shapes the functioning of this intuitive autopilot.</p>

00:08:56	Joseph	And just to give a bit of background for me personally, the first time that I read about this idea of the mental autopilot was in a book called <i>Strangers to Ourselves</i> . Now that book really expanded my horizons. And I started to think that understanding the intuitive mind was really important for intercultural education. But what I didn't know then though, was that the author of <i>Strangers to Ourselves</i> is Timothy Wilson. And he was the co-author together with Richard Nisbett of that landmark 1977 paper.
00:09:36	Yvonne	Okay. So let me get this straight. In 1977 Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson published a groundbreaking academic paper about unconscious cognition, and years later, each of them wrote different books that influence your thinking.
00:09:55	Joseph	Exactly. Basically after Nisbett had these critical insights about unconscious cognition, he started researching ways in which culture affects how our mind works.
00:10:07	Yvonne	As I understand it at first, Nisbett was simply assuming that his findings about the unconscious mind apply to people all over the world. And in the intro of the book, he says that he was, and here's the quote: " <i>I was a lifelong Universalist concerning the nature of human thought. I believe that all human groups perceive and reason in the same way.</i> "
00:10:31	Joseph	But as the story goes, one day he was talking to a brilliant Chinese PhD student who later became a colleague. Uh, his name was Kaiping Peng, and Kaiping Peng commented to Nisbett "Well, you see life as a line. And I see it as a circle."
00:10:49	Yvonne	He was saying that the minds of Chinese and American somehow work differently, and this really intrigued Nisbett and got him interested in cultural differences in cognition.
00:11:00	Joseph	And of course, Kaiping Peng was doing highly demanding academic work in the United States. I imagined he had had to learn English and adapt himself to life with Americans. And he must've felt some deep differences in how Chinese and Americans think or how they look at the world.
00:11:18	Yvonne	And what impresses me is that Nisbett was able to get really powerful insights or at least powerful curiosity from that simple statement.
00:11:28	Joseph	And they didn't just speculate about these things. You know, Nisbett wanted to test this idea empirically.
00:11:35	Yvonne	This must have been so difficult. Imagine having this idea to Chinese people and Americans, they have differences in their thinking processes, but how can it be researched? Can it be measured? They had to make up the approach from scratch.
00:11:50	Joseph	And so that initial spark eventually led to the research that Nisbett wrote about in <i>The Geography of Thought</i> . And in that book, he argued that indeed our cultural background does influence our thinking processes.
00:12:04	Yvonne	So that raises the question, what did he find?

00:12:08	Joseph	And that brings us to part two: The Chicken and the Grass.
Part 2: The Chicken and the Grass		
00:12:21	Yvonne	The question we're talking about today: "Does culture influence cognition?" may sound rather technical, but it's also philosophical question about human nature.
00:12:31	Joseph	Yes, that's true. You know, if you visit a foreign country, you, you see that people, they eat different foods or they have different customs, or maybe they have different religious beliefs or different ways to be polite. But what does that really mean? How different are people really?
00:12:46	Yvonne	It's easy to assume that people are simply acting a certain way because that's how they learn it. And that idea treats culture mostly as a kind of imitation - you're following social rules and learn traditions. And if you think that way, then cultural difference might seem mostly on the surface and that deep down, people are all basically the same.
00:13:10	Joseph	And of course, you often hear people say things like that. Now Nisbett understood the philosophical implications of his research. And in the introduction to <i>The Geography of Thought</i> , he says, quote: "If people really do differ profoundly in their systems of thought their worldviews and cognitive processes, then differences in people's attitudes and beliefs, and even in their values and preferences might not be a matter merely of different inputs and teachings, but rather an inevitable consequence of using different tools to understand the world."
00:13:52	Yvonne	And I think he means that if culture affects our mental processes at a deep level, then our cultural background really does shape our experience of the world in profound ways.
00:14:04	Joseph	And through his research, he found that there were important differences. And as time went on this idea, that our brain function is shaped by our environment, it was expanded on by other researchers and it has gained acceptance much more broadly today.
00:14:21	Yvonne	Yeah. And this brings us back to what Kaiping Peng referred to that Chinese people and Americans perceive the world differently. And the question is, what are those differences? How do they affect us in our view of the world?
00:14:36	Joseph	Well, these are tough questions to answer in just a few words.
00:14:40	Yvonne	One reason for that is that, cultural difference can be found at different levels of analysis. And in other words, they may be found in patterns of brain activation, but also in how people behave in everyday life, but also in very big scale patterns of history and civilization. And the technical term for that is to say that these patterns are fractal.
00:15:04	Joseph	Yes, they are fractal meaning that they appear at different levels of abstraction. So let's take a concrete example that Nisbett introduces in his book based on research he did. In one experiment, for example, he shows subjects a picture with a chicken on the left side and some grass on the right. And below that there is a drawing of a cow. Now subjects

		are asked to choose where the cow belongs? Together with the chicken or together with the grass?
00:15:37	Yvonne	Okay. So, what would you, dear listener, say to this? Does the cow belong together with a chicken or an image of a patch of grass?
00:15:55	Joseph	The remarkable thing that Nisbett found, was that there was a difference in what people answered depending on their cultural background.
00:16:04	Yvonne	And Nisbett found that Chinese subjects more often associated the cow with grass, whereas Americans more often associated the cow with chickens, but why should that be?
00:16:16	Joseph	Well, I have to say, I have repeated this experiment informally many times with students of mine, many of which come from China, Korea and Japan on the one hand, and the United States and Western Europe and the UK on the other.
00:16:31	Yvonne	And where are your results the same?
00:16:33	Joseph	They were my Asian students more often chose the grass. Whereas my Western students often have a tendency to choose the chicken. Now, not everyone, of course. There is plenty of variation, but the overall pattern is clear.
00:16:48	Yvonne	And if you ask them, why, what do they say?
00:16:51	Joseph	Well, my Asian students will say that cows eat grass and therefore naturally, you should group the cow where it belongs together with the grass. It's almost as though they're imagining a scene in their mind of a cow munching on grass.
00:17:04	Yvonne	And what about your Western students?
00:17:07	Joseph	Those who choose the chickens will tell me that chickens and cows are both animals and therefore it's natural that they should be grouped together.
00:17:16	Yvonne	So that reflects what Nisbett says. He argues that the reason for this difference is that cognitively speaking, Asians tend to look at the world more in terms of context and relationship. They see the world more holistically.
00:17:31	Joseph	So, when my students are grouping the cow with the grass, their mind is kind of naturally turning to the relationship between the cow and the grass and the larger scene or context in which the cow and grass are together like imagining that scene.
00:17:48	Yvonne	And the Westerners on the other hand, when they say that the cow goes together with the chicken are instead perceiving the cow as an object that belongs in a particular category. Cows are animals and chickens are animals. And Nisbett argues that this sort of categorization and also subject object thinking is very common among Westerners. And he argues that this pattern relates to cultural differences in society. And also throughout history.
00:18:19	Joseph	Western societies are more individualistic than East Asian societies broadly speaking. And this reflects the tendency to look at the world in

		terms of distinct objects and categories. In Asian societies, there's more emphasis on collectivism, which emphasizes the interrelationship between people and looks at society more as an organic whole, not simply a collection of individuals.
00:18:43	Yvonne	And Nisbett introduces many other examples of these larger cultural patterns. Doesn't he?
00:18:50	Joseph	Yes, such as traditional Chinese medicine, which tends to look at the body as a balance of energies, with sickness seen as a form of imbalance versus Western medicine, which often treats the body as a collection of parts or functions, which have to be targeted for treatment.
00:19:07	Yvonne	So he is saying that patterns in our minds are a reflection of patterns found in the larger society.
00:19:14	Joseph	And he even traces these patterns throughout history. For example, East Asian societies have been deeply influenced by Confucian thinking, which concerns itself with creating a healthy society through virtuous relationships. And similarly, Taoist thinking, which is associated with the symbol of the yin and the yang, sees the world as all interrelated.
00:19:38	Yvonne	Yes. And what he does, he contrasts this with Western philosophy and the kinds of categorization and subject / object thinking, that was developed by the Greeks
00:19:58	Joseph	Wow. And that is getting to be a very big scale, but let's get back to Nisbett and this simple experiment with the cow, the chicken and the grass. So, he was using this as a way to test this much larger hypothesis that cultural patterns found in the minds of an individual are a reflection of patterns found out in the world at this much larger scale.
00:20:27	Yvonne	And that was an important insight for me personally. And in fact, I would even say that his work caused me to fundamentally rethink my profession. And in particular, there is this quote from <i>The Geography of Thought</i> , well, listen: "My research has led me to the conviction that two utterly different approaches to the world have maintained themselves for thousands of years. These approaches include profoundly different social relations, views about the nature of the worlds and characteristic thought processes. And each of these orientations, the Western and the Eastern is a self-reinforcing homeostatic system. The social practices promote the worldviews. The world views dictate the appropriate thought processes, and the thought processes both justify the worldview and support the social practices."
00:21:32	Joseph	So he's saying here that cultural differences in cognition are not just inside our heads. They are inseparable from our world view and way of doing things in society. And we should say that his research was dividing this Western and Eastern, but of course it's understood that there are many, many other cultural communities and plenty of opportunity for researching other things than simply this Western and Eastern divide. But that was the starting point for his research.

00:22:07	Yvonne	And so I guess this was what Kaiping Peng had understood when he talked to Richard Nisbett, that seeing the world as a circle, a more holistic view rather than a line of more categorical one.
00:22:21	Joseph	Well, for me personally, the fact that together, they were able to come to this insight about cultural difference and that then Nisbett learned to measure these differences, empirically, is really impressive.
00:22:35	Yvonne	Well, you know, I think we should pause for a second here because I can easily imagine at least few of our listeners being a bit skeptical about this.
00:22:45	Joseph	Well, I can imagine some people thinking, wait a second, uh, cows, chickens and grass, this sounds like such an oversimplification, or this sounds like stereotypical thinking.
00:22:56	Yvonne	But Nisbett wasn't trying to put people from different countries in simplistic categories. What he was doing was trying to identify cognitive patterns that varied across populations.
00:23:09	Joseph	And the research that Nisbett has been doing has been followed up on by many other researchers, such as cognitive neuroscientists and cultural neuroscientists and their research is supporting and expanding on Nisbett's findings.
00:23:26	Yvonne	And that brings us to part three: Think of your Mother.
Part 3: Think of your mother		
00:23:39	Joseph	You know, when we were planning our podcast, we typically use part three to talk about the most technical or theoretical content.
00:23:49	Yvonne	Well, so far we gave this one simple example of Nisbett's research, but <i>The Geography of Thought</i> introduces a wide range of research and discusses many cognitive differences. Shall we flood our listeners with some information?
00:24:05	Joseph	Sure. They're good to deep culture swimmers. So let's read from page 44 where Nisbett lists cultural differences in cognition that he anticipates finding. For example, he talks about patterns of attention and perception, objects versus relationships, basic assumptions about the composition of the world, beliefs about the controllability of the environment, tacit assumptions about stability versus change, preferred patterns of explanation for events, habits of organizing the world, use of formal logical rules and application of dialectical approaches.
00:24:53	Yvonne	And that's a mouthful. And many of these things actually operate in the background. They form a foundation for how we process our experience in the world, of the world. And for example, the first item on that list is patterns of attention and perception.
00:25:11	Joseph	So I think that the cow, chicken and grass experiment is an example of that: Westerners seem to be more focused on categories and objects. Whereas east Asians focus attention more on relationships and context.
00:25:25	Yvonne	It's important to stress to our listeners that this research is not trying to make statements about all Chinese people or all Americans. It's more

		complex than that. It helps identify patterns that can help us make sense of what people do and how societies work.
00:25:44	Joseph	I think we should also mention that Nisbett's work is just one part of this picture. There's an enormous body of research from other specialists like cultural neuroscientists who do brain imaging and look for different patterns of activation between cultural groups.
00:25:59	Yvonne	And I think that in the past, we talked about a study, which showed that when Chinese participants think about their mothers, their brain lights up as though they are thinking about themselves. Whereas when Americans think of their mothers, their brain lights up as though they are thinking of a stranger.
00:26:24	Joseph	And when I talked to my students about this research, my Chinese students are sometimes kind of amused at the idea of thinking about your mother as a stranger. Like, you know, don't you feel close to your mother? Yet my American students have the opposite reaction like, well, of course my mother is a different person from me.
00:26:43	Yvonne	Interesting. And then this also shows that cultural differences in cognition are part of how we make sense of the world, how we solve problems, how we experience our identity, how we relate to other people, a lot of things.
00:26:58	Joseph	What we're learning about cultural differences is impressive. For example, cultural neuroscientists are trying to understand the differences in neural activity that underlies all of this. One review of neuro imaging studies concludes that there is <i>"Strong evidence that the neural mechanisms that underlie cognition might be shaped by a person's socio-cultural context."</i>
00:27:27	Yvonne	Okay. And that's another way of saying that the community and the society that we grow up in shapes our mental functioning in many ways.
00:27:36	Joseph	And that's related to plasticity, an idea that we've talked about in the past: the brain adapts and grows in response to the demands placed on it. Taxi drivers in London, for example, showed an enlarged hippocampus, a part of the brain associated with memory because of the challenge of learning London streets.
00:27:58	Yvonne	But just to be sure we don't get carried away here. It's also true that not all specialists agree on the significance of these findings and brain scans such as FMRI testing have been criticized because it's possible to over-interpret the results.
00:28:16	Joseph	So this brings us back to one of the central ideas of this podcast, which is that culture is a lot more than customs and etiquette. It's a deep part of who we are and how our mind works.
00:28:32	Yvonne	And because of that, understanding cultural differences hurts, it's a life challenge actually. And studying it empirically is not easy. It's complex, and we shouldn't expect easy answers.
00:28:44	Joseph	And it's a reminder that our foreign experiences have a lot to teach us.

00:28:50	Yvonne	And on a rather inspiring note, I also think it's time for us to wrap up. We covered a lot today, Joseph!
00:29:00	Joseph	That's so true. Um, but before we close, we should mention that we are hearing from educators and trainers who are using this podcast in their work, which makes us happy.
00:29:11	Yvonne	And don't forget that we make transcripts available on the Japan Intercultural Institute websites to make that easier. And if you happen to have ideas for future podcasts, or you would like to share with us how you're using this podcast, we really would love to hear from you. And educators or trainers who might also be interested in our Brain, Mind and Culture masterclass, information about all of that is also available on our websites.
00:29:39	Joseph	And finally, we should mention some of the work that we have been referencing today, we were talking about Nisbett and Wilson's 1977 article <i>Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes</i> , that was published in the <i>Psychological Review</i> . And of course, Richard Nisbett's book <i>The Geography of Thought</i> , as well as Wilson's book <i>Strangers to Ourselves - Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious</i> . We also referenced Han's and Northoff <i>Culture sensitive neural substrates of human cognition: A transcultural neuroimaging approach</i> , and that was found in <i>Nature Reviews, neuroscience</i> https://www.nature.com/articles/nrn2456 and finally, Maguire, Woollett and Spiers, London taxi drivers and Bus drivers, a Structural MRI, and a neuro-psychological analysis in hippocampus https://www.fil.ion.ucl.ac.uk/Maguire/Maguire2006.pdf The deep culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute and NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I'm the director of JII thanks to our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz, the podcast team, Daniel Glinz, Zeina Matar, and Ishita Ray and all the members of JII. And thanks to you Yvonne for once again, sharing this time with me, it is always so fun.
00:31:04	Yvonne	It was a pleasure and wonderful to do this together.