

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 22 – Culture and the Self)

Can we adapt to different cultural worlds and still stay true to our true self? In this episode, Joseph Shaules and Ishita Ray discuss culture and the self. Research shows that how we experience the self depends on culture, and affects cognition, cognition and motivation. We reflect on the importance of the cultural self in India and the personal self in the United States. You'll learn the answer to the question: Are you typical?

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Joseph	(Hook) If a plane crashes in a faraway country that you don't know anything about, will you care?
00:00:14	Joseph	Hello, I'm Joseph Shaules and welcome to the Deep Culture podcast, where we explore culture and the science of mind. And I am here in rainy, windy Tokyo, and I'm here with my co-host Ishita Ray, but you are in Durgapur in Eastern India, right?
00:00:36	Ishita	That is right. And it's a hot scotching summer day here.
00:00:40	Joseph	Well, I'm so happy to be with you today.
00:00:44	Ishita	So the title of this episode is 'Culture and the Self'.
00:00:49	Joseph	And we got interested in this topic because we were saying that there's a fundamental dilemma to being a cultural bridge person. How do you move between different cultural worlds without losing your sense of self? On the one hand, you need to be adaptable. You need to fit in, but you have to find a way to be true to yourself.
00:01:13	Ishita	And this is a fascinating topic for me personally, because I grew up in India with a question of who you are and how you fit into society are really intertwined.
00:01:26	Joseph	Well, when you grew up in Bengal speaking, Bengali, but you also speak Hindi and English and French, uh, but when you are with other Indians, you are seen as Bengali, or how does that work?
00:01:39	Ishita	Well, yes, I am Bengali and I grew up in a Hindu family, although we don't really practice it very actively. And of course I am an Indian citizen. So these are some of the cultural worlds that are part of me, and India is such a collective society to understand a person as an individual, you need to understand the communities they come from, their cultural self, so to speak.
00:02:08	Joseph	Well, that just fascinates me, this idea that we have a personal self and also a cultural self because in the US where I grew up, people are almost

		always focused on this idea of their individual self. When I ask my American students, if they are typical, for example, most of them say, oh, no, uh, they're not typical. They want to see themselves as unique individuals,
00:02:34	Ishita	But isn't it very American to think that you have to be unique?
00:02:39	Joseph	In what way? Well, absolutely, it's the country of individualism. So they often don't notice their own Americanness. Uh, for example, that this desire to be seen as unique is itself quite American.
00:02:53	Ishita	And this is the curious thing about the cultural self, isn't it, it's hard to even understand what's cultural about ourselves without these intercultural experiences. I never really felt Indian until I left India.
00:03:08	Joseph	And I never felt American until I left the US. So in this episode, we want to explore this idea of culture and the self.
00:03:19	Ishita	We'll talk about how our sense of self is shaped by culture. We'll ask the question, are you typical? And we'll explore the idea of the personal self and the cultural self.
00:03:31	Joseph	And that brings us to Part One: I am a Cat.
Part 1: I am a Cat		
00:03:50	Ishita	If we are going to talk about the culture and the self, we first have to be clear about what we mean when we use the word 'self'.
00:04:00	Joseph	So we'll start with a dictionary definition from the American Heritage dictionary. And the first two entries are: "self the total essential or particular being of a person, the individual, or the essential qualities distinguishing one person from another; individuality."
00:04:21	Ishita	So the self is what makes me, me my unique essence.
00:04:27	Joseph	I also like to think of the self as kind of the territory of the me, you know, the opposite of self is other.
00:04:35	Ishita	And this is such a common idea that it might not occur to us that the self has anything to do with culture. Some people will think, well, I am just me.
00:04:47	Joseph	But of course it does have something to do with culture because our sense of self is shaped by our cultural background. And that's not just my opinion. It's something that has been studied and can be quantified. There's a classic article about this. I'm sure we have mentioned it several times on this podcast already. Uh, it's by Marcus and Kitayama and it's called <i>Culture and the Self Implications for Cognition, Emotion and Motivation</i> .
00:05:17	Ishita	So the main idea of this article is that culture affects how we experience the self.
00:05:24	Joseph	Exactly. So let's read the first two sentences of that article: "People in different cultures have strikingly different construals of the self of others and of the interdependence of the two. These construals can influence. And in many cases determine the very nature of individual experience, including cognition, emotion, and motivation."
00:05:55	Ishita	I find the wording very interesting. It talks about different construals of

		the self. So a self isn't just something that we have, it's construed, meaning that we construct it and this structure of the self is influenced by culture.
00:06:16	Joseph	And so they go on to explain that these different ways of experiencing the self also reflect other cultural differences, uh, in cognition, our mental processes, our experience of emotion, and also motivation.
00:06:32	Ishita	I think that can be hard to make sense of because the way we experience the self seems so personal and private, how could that possibly be shaped by culture.
00:06:55	Joseph	And it's really interesting that when we were discussing this with the podcast team, I asked everyone, when do you feel most yourself? In what situation do you feel that you are really being yourself? And this is a question that I use in my teaching.
00:07:10	Ishita	And it was fascinating because on the podcast team, Daniel who grew up in Switzerland and Zeina, who grew up in Lebanon had quite different answers. Let me first quote from what Daniel wrote: "In my case, I would say it is, for example, when I am performing on a stage, my usual stages are classrooms. I also feel fully myself when moving hiking, skiing, dancing, for example."
00:07:45	Joseph	And in response to this, Zeina said: "It is not the doing, which makes me feel fully myself. Rather the being with certain people, those people are my husband and friends from different stages in my life. Those closest to things I have lived through and experienced." And that difference between Daniel's answer and Zeina's answer that reflects what my students say too. My American students will often say that they're being themselves when they're doing something they like, for example, listening to their favorite music or doing their favorite sport. My Japanese or east Asian students, they more often talk about feeling themselves when they're with people they feel close to, probably the most common answer I get is when I'm with my friends or when I'm with my family. The idea is that when they're with the people they care about, then they can really express themselves freely.
00:08:52	Ishita	I think that I relate more to what your Asian students say. My spontaneous response to that question was that I feel most myself when I'm in a familiar environment or with people I feel close to.
00:09:06	Joseph	And all of this agrees with what the Markus and Kitayama article says. They say in effect that these differences in how we experience the self depend on the culture that we were raised in.
00:09:18	Ishita	So people raised in more individualist societies tend to experience what they call an "independent construal of self". The feeling that the self is separate from others and has unique qualities that sets it apart. And they contrast that with an "interdependent construal of self", when we experience the self more in relation to others.

00:09:44	Joseph	And this is something that I will admit, It took me a long time to get a feeling for in Japan, but there is a kind of built in assumption that people are in things together. For example, a man may refer to his wife as mother, and she may call him father. Even if the children aren't there, you know, in, in this moment, you're not so much a separate person as you are a relationship. And so I'm wondering if in India, as in Japan, people use titles and honorifics in this way.
00:10:16	Ishita	Yes they do. In Bengali, for example, it's rare to call someone only by their first name. You always need to add an honorific that reflects your relationship with them. For example, when I address the grocery store owner, I add a <i>da</i> after his name, which literally means 'elder brother'. People don't just use the word I for themselves. We often say we or they...
00:10:47	Joseph	Well, it's interesting in Japanese, even the word for self ' <i>Jibun</i> ' implies that people are interrelated. It's made up of two characters <i>Ji</i> , which is self and <i>bun</i> , which is portion. So the mental image is like each of us is one part of a larger whole.
00:11:04	Ishita	Like a slice of pie!
00:11:06	Joseph	Exactly. And, and not only that, the word you use for I depends on who you are and who you're talking to. There are more polite forms of I like <i>watashi</i> , there are more masculine forms like, <i>ore</i> or <i>boku</i> . There are more feminine forms like <i>atashi</i> . One of the most famous books in Japanese literature is by Natsume Soseki and it's called " <i>Wagahai ha neko de aru</i> ", which is translated into English as "I am a Cat", but that just doesn't capture the atmosphere because the word for I in the title is <i>wagahai</i> , which is, it's a rather old-fashioned form of I that's used by high status males.
00:11:51	Ishita	So the cat is referring to itself with this high status form.
00:11:57	Joseph	And that's exactly what makes it amusing. It's as though the cat is looking down its nose at, we lowly humans by referring to himself as <i>wagahai</i> , like the honorable I, am a cat. And in fact, that's what the book is about. A, a cat who finds humans so inferior because of their folly.
00:12:26	Ishita	So having different words for I is a reflection of a more interdependent sense of self. We are who we are, not as unique individuals, but in relation to others. In some dialects of Hindi, the first person singular form <i>mai</i> is completely non-existent in everyday speech. It's only the first person plural <i>hum</i> , which means we is used to talk about oneself.
00:12:53	Joseph	And that is so different from Americans. We are constantly talking about ourselves and we have all these words that reflect how important the self is like their self-esteem or self-worth, self-confidence believing in yourself, self actualization, following your dream, being your true self. And when I was looking into this, I found this article, uh, on the Psychology Today website, which was talking about self-esteem and it said: "Confidence in one's value as a human being is a precious psychological resource and generally a highly positive factor in life."

00:13:38	Ishita	Wow. So feeling good about yourself is a precious psychological resource.
00:13:51	Joseph	In India, how would it be if you start talking about the importance of feeling good about yourself?
00:13:57	Ishita	I would seem so full of myself. It seems like there's even sometimes a glorification of the self. I remember reading poetry by Walt Whitman in Leaves of Grass. He talks about the song of myself. He says, "I celebrate myself and sing myself."
00:14:17	Joseph	That is very American.
00:14:20	Ishita	But if we say that culture is the part of the self, then what's the relationship between who we are individually - our personal self - and the parts of us that are cultural - our cultural self.
00:14:34	Joseph	And that brings us to part two. Are you typical?
Part 2: Are you typical?		
00:14:34	Joseph	You know, one thing that might be confusing about this topic is that we have been using this word self, but people also use the word identity when talking about these things.
00:15:02	Ishita	Of course, people use these words in different ways, but I think there are some important distinctions to be made. We can say that from the constructivist perspective, we create our sense of self and our worldview based on our experiences, things that we know personally are more real to us.
00:15:22	Joseph	To make this point to my students, I sometimes ask them if a plane crashes in a faraway country that you don't know anything about, will you care?
00:15:33	Ishita	That's a tough question. What do they answer?
00:15:36	Joseph	Well, usually about half say, yes, they would care. And half say no. And the students who say that they would care, they say to their classmates, you know, you should care about this. But the classmates who said that they wouldn't care, they say, but do you really care?
00:15:59	Ishita	So we might say we care, but a plane crash in a faraway country just doesn't feel as real.
00:16:06	Joseph	And sometimes a Japanese student will even say to me, well, if there's a Japanese person on the plane, then I will care more.
00:16:15	Ishita	Which just goes to show that the things that are more familiar to us are more part of our self. So that's what we mean when we talk about the self as a kind of psychological territory.
00:16:28	Joseph	When I use the word identity, on the other hand, I think of that as a kind of label that we use to define or to describe ourselves. So when I say I'm an American, I'm labeling myself and we often claim a particular identity. When we say, you know, I'm a sports fan or I'm gay, or I'm a musician.
00:16:50	Ishita	Sometimes though people label us in ways that we don't really like.
00:16:56	Joseph	Yes. In Japan, for example, people often simply see me as a foreigner, no matter how long I've lived in Japan or how well integrated I am.

00:17:07	Ishita	So one obvious lesson is that we have to be careful about how we label people.
00:17:21	Joseph	So that's identity, but let's get back to this idea of the self...
00:17:56	Ishita	Earlier, we were talking about how people who are raised in more collective societies, experience the self as more connected to others. But that doesn't mean that people in more individualist societies do not have a cultural self.
	Joseph	Everyone has a cultural self, and what I mean is that everyone is shaped by the cultural patterns that they grew up with. Even if we don't notice those patterns.
	Ishita	Right, for example, in India, like in a lot of places, many people identify with particular cultural communities, but even in more individualist societies like Australia, people still look at the world from an Australian point of view. Their experience of the world is still shaped by growing up in Australia. And being a unique individual is not at all contrary to having a cultural self.
00:18:25	Joseph	But it's easy to get that mixed up. You know, some people seem to think that sharing in a culture means that everyone acts the same. So if you talk about cultural patterns, they immediately bring up an exception. I've heard conversations like: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - So how was Japan? What are Japanese people like? - Well, you know, they're rather quiet. - Well, I know a Japanese who isn't quiet at all. - Well, well of course, but you know, in general... - No, but that's just a stereotype. Everyone is a unique individual. - Well, of course they are. But you know, often people don't speak up.
00:19:03	Ishita	I think this kind of confusion comes from the idea that culture is about how we act. So people may think if someone is less typical, that means that they aren't sharing the culture.
00:19:16	Joseph	But that's not what it means. There's no contradiction between being unique and sharing in a cultural community. In fact, understanding how things work in a community, kind of knowing the rules of the game, it's precisely that which lets us express our individual self.
00:19:42	Ishita	I've had the experience where I've met someone from a country I knew very little about. And it was impossible to know if how they're acting is being typical or it's being a unique part of who they are.
00:19:59	Joseph	And I guess another way to say this is that we are all typical and we are all unique.
00:20:06	Ishita	If you get along with people in society, it means that you are typical. You are interacting in a way that people understand, even if you decide to do something unconventional, you know that it's unconventional.

00:20:21	Joseph	And it's the same with language when you don't speak a language well, it's hard to express yourself in a unique way. You really have to master the system to play with it. And it's the people who grow up in a society that have mastered the kind of cultural rules of the game. They know what's expected and they can choose how to play the game.
00:20:44	Ishita	This can also help us understand why living in a collectivist society does not mean you are less of an individual. In fact, when you are around people you know well in a close community, people can really appreciate your uniqueness.
00:21:01	Joseph	You know, I think the irony is that if you're part of a close community, you don't need to constantly talk about how unique you are because people can see it just by interacting with you.
00:21:12	Ishita	In the end, no matter what society we live in, all of us are functioning at those two levels. We understand cultural expectations and that lets us navigate in our own unique ways.
00:21:27	Joseph	So this kind of answers the question that we started out with of how to be yourself as a cultural bridge person, because the more deeply we understand different cultural worlds, the easier it is to navigate them in your own way.
00:21:45	Ishita	And that brings us to Part Three: Researching the Self.
Part 3: Researching the Self		
00:22:01	Ishita	At the beginning of the episode, we said that it's possible to measure cultural differences in how we experience the self. And we referenced this groundbreaking article by Markus and Kitayama. But to understand what was so remarkable about it, I think we need to back up and look at what came before it. Most traditionally anthropologists were the ones that studied cultural differences. They would go to some isolated cultural community and study how people lived. On this podcast, we often talk about Edward Hall. He was an anthropologist, but he wasn't interested in that kind of research. He wanted to understand interactions between cultural communities. He wanted to find ways to compare them. For a long time, you studied cultural difference by making comparisons. Geert Hofstede for example, famously compared IBM employees in 40 different countries by giving them questionnaires about work preferences. He talked a lot about individualism and collectivism.
00:23:16	Joseph	And this approach looks at culture in terms of shared behaviors. It tries to measure cultural difference by seeing how culture influences behavior. And this really turned into a dominant paradigm.
00:23:30	Ishita	And this is where Markus and Kitayama come in. Their article was published in 1991. And this was a time when new technologies were just starting to be developed that allowed us to cognitive processes in new ways. For example, fMRI technology allowed us to measure what areas of the brain are activated in real time.
00:23:56	Joseph	Their article provided the framework for doing that kind of research. So

		instead of giving out questionnaires and asking about attitudes, researchers could focus on the inner workings of the brain and mind.
00:24:11	Ishita	Since then, there has been just an explosion of this kind of research carried out by for example, psychologists and even neuroscientists. In a sense, the idea that Markus and Kitayama proposed in 1991, that it's possible to measure differences in how we experience the self has turned out to be true.
00:24:33	Joseph	So basically the argument goes like this culture influences the way we experience the self and that relates to other differences. For example, the psychologist Richard Nisbett found that in cognitive processing tasks, East Asians tend to focus more on context whereas Westerners focus more on objects. Nisbett says that, whereas an Asian sees a wall, a Westerner sees a brick.
00:25:07	Ishita	So growing up in a more interdependent community means that you not only relate to other people in a particular way, but that your mind actually processes information differently. That's pretty amazing.
00:25:22	Joseph	There are differences related to some really deep parts of this self. For example, brain imaging studies have found that there are differences in how East Asians and Westerners regulate emotion.
00:25:34	Ishita	I was surprised when I learned about this, you would think that emotion is very basic to human beings and that wouldn't be affected by culture, but that's not what the research has found. In general, East Asians have more control over physiological processes of emotion.
00:25:53	Joseph	So for example, in one study, uh, they showed disturbing images to East Asians and Westerners, and the subjects were told to not show any emotion. Interestingly, both Westerners and Asians were able to control their expression of emotion, for example, to not show it on their face. But East Asians were also able to down regulate the physiological markers of emotion.
00:26:18	Ishita	So it wasn't just the expression of emotion, to oversimplify a bit, they were able to turn off their emotion in a way that Westerners couldn't.
00:26:30	Joseph	And the researchers hypothesized that this is because in Asian societies, people are more attuned to the mental and emotional states of others. And the ability to regulate emotions in that way allows people to get along better. And research has also shown that East Asians more spontaneously take the perspective of others when thinking about themselves.
00:26:53	Ishita	All of this makes sense from the perspective of the interdependent construal of self - the self is experienced more in relation to others and less as separate.
00:27:05	Joseph	And there's so much research that we simply don't have time to introduce here. For example, Westerners are more likely to make the fundamental attribution error. This means that they tend to think that people do what they do because of some inner state, whereas Asians more often assume that people do what they do because of the

		situation. Uh, there's research about motivation, decision making, interpretation of events. It goes on and on...
00:27:31	Ishita	This is a lot more than we can really digest, but it seems clear that cultural differences in how we experience itself are a lot more complex than it might seem. That's all really impressive, but it does leave me wondering a bit about what to take away from all this. What is it for you, Joseph?
00:27:53	Joseph	Well, one thing I take away from all this is, you know, I'm not crazy. After living in Japan for many years, I keep finding these subtle, but profound differences in how people experience the world and relate to each other and how they think. And I consider myself a, a pretty flexible person and I'm well adapted, but I keep bumping up into these deep cultural differences.
00:28:19	Ishita	Is that discouraging for you? Does that mean that you feel like you can't ever really adjust?
00:28:25	Joseph	No. I mean, we all have challenges adjusting to wherever we live, even if we never leave our hometown, it gives me the feeling that there's always more to explore. Being a cultural bridge person is like carrying out a nonstop experiment in the psychology of the self.
00:28:42	Ishita	Yes. And so is living in India. I am someone who doesn't always feel like I fit into the society that I grew up in, but seeing all of this deep difference makes me feel that maybe I'm not such a misfit after all. And I think that's probably a good place to stop. We've covered a lot of ground today.
00:29:03	Joseph	Yes. And just in case you want to follow up on any of these ideas, here are some of the sources that we've been referring to. We've been talking about Markus and Kitayama's 1991 article <i>Culture and the Self: Implications for Cognition, Emotion, and Motivation</i> . If you're interested in learning more about emotion, you might check out Kurata, Moser, and Kitayama - <i>Culture Shapes Electrocortical Responses during Emotion Suppression</i> . We mentioned Richard Nisbett's book, <i>The Geography of Thought</i> . For a brief introduction into the world of cultural neuroscience, checkout Shinobu Kitayama's article <i>Mapping Mindsets, the World of Cultural Neuroscience</i> . And, uh, we talked about the work of Geert Hofstede - <i>Dimensions of National Culture in 50 countries and Three Regions</i> . Also, the quote about self-esteem came from the Psychology Today website - just look for Psychology Today > Basics > Self-Esteem.
00:30:08	Joseph	The Deep Culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I am the director of JII to find out more, just do a web search for the Japan Intercultural Institute. And if you like the deep culture podcast, please recommend us on social media. And if you'd like to sign up for the JII newsletter, write us at dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org . Thanks to our podcast team Robinson Fritz, Yvonne van der Pol, Zeina Matar, Daniel Glinz. And I'd like to give a special welcome to a new member of the JII

		family Ikumi Fritz, and all the members of JII. And of course, thanks to you, Ishita for sharing this time with me.
00:30:59	Ishita	Thank you, Joseph, for spending a lovely afternoon with me.