

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 37 – Tagore, Empathy and the Other)

Whether in the schoolyard or on the battlefield, dividing the world into “us” vs. “them” comes naturally to humans. In this episode, Joseph Shaules and Ishita Ray explore “otherness” through stories and brain-mind science. Ishita shares her father’s experience as an “other”—and the wisdom he passed on to her. We learn about the inspiring vision of Rabindranath Tagore, and find that research into empathy provides hints at how we can look beyond . . . and look into . . . the differences that divide us.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Ishita	(Hook) My father describes himself as a traveler of the mind and even quotes Tagore, “ <i>Mono mor megher shongi, ure chole dikdiganter paane nishimo shunye...</i> ” which means, “My mind is a companion of the clouds that floats towards the far horizons, into the endless void...”
00:00:33	Joseph	Hello, this is Joseph Shaules and welcome to the Deep Culture podcast, where we explore the science and psychology of culture and the mind. And I am here with Ishita Ray. How are you doing, Ishita?
00:00:48	Ishita	Hi Joseph. I'm doing great, and I am so happy to be here for season 4 of the podcast. So, the title of this episode is <i>Tagore Empathy and the Other</i> .
00:01:00	Joseph	And when we talk about the other, we mean this feeling of otherness, this tendency to experience the world as “us” versus “them”.
00:01:11	Ishita	And we all know this feeling in everyday life, like when we root for our favorite sports team, or when we are proud of our hometown, or even just talking about the HR people versus the salespeople.
00:01:26	Joseph	But this tendency of dividing into us versus them also sets us apart – “Oh, you are a foreigner”, “Oh, you're a non-believer”, “You're from that neighborhood”, “You are one of those people” ...
00:01:41	Ishita	And of course, cultural difference also creates otherness, like when your foreign colleague once again is late for the meeting and you say, “Well, you know, people from that country are never on time”.
00:01:56	Joseph	So, in this episode, we'll talk about this “wall of otherness”.
00:02:01	Ishita	And we will see that Otherness is not just some abstraction. It creates powerful barriers to understanding.
00:02:10	Joseph	We feel otherness in the body as a reaction to what is experienced as foreign or different. So we'll explore otherness through personal stories.

		Ishita will talk about first running into the wall of otherness as a child growing up in India.
00:02:27	Ishita	And we will look at a fundamental question: how can we move beyond this wall of otherness? I will share some lessons about otherness that I learned from my father and the inspiration that he had from the educator and social reformer Rabindranath Tagore.
00:02:46	Joseph	We'll talk about two ways of overcoming the wall of Otherness by looking beyond difference, focusing on what we share, or by looking into difference, trying to understand what separates us.
00:02:59	Ishita	And we'll also touch upon the science of otherness, how it relates to our evolutionary past as social primates. We look at research into empathy, the ability to look at things from another person's perspective. And that brings us to Part one - The Playground.
Part One – The Playground		
00:03:33	Joseph	Our story starts in a playground on a day some years ago when you Ishita, discovered for the first time that you were being seen as an Other. And it's on the school campus where you grew up, where your father was a teacher. And you spoke about this experience in episode 30. So, let's listen back.
00:04:02	Ishita	I was seven years old, playing in the schoolyard with my friends when I first heard it exclaimed that my family was from a certain caste. It caught me off guard. I had never heard it discussed at home. Why did others put me in a category that I didn't even know existed? It was deeply disturbing. I was angry.
00:04:40	Joseph	So, you heard for the first time that your family was of a certain caste. Help us understand why you were angry.
00:04:49	Ishita	Well, I was being labelled, put into a category. I was not Ishita. Suddenly I became one of “those people”.
00:04:59	Joseph	And what does it mean to be the other in India?
00:05:01	Ishita	In India, there are so many social divisions, different cultural communities, speaking different languages, practicing different religions, regional variation, and then the caste system, where certain communities are seen as more or less worthy, not to mention expectations for men and women.
00:05:25	Joseph	So, these are differences that divide people into us and them?
00:05:31	Ishita	Exactly. And it isn't just that your unique qualities aren't recognized. You are labeled, and that defines you like a box you are expected to stay in.
00:05:44	Joseph	And so what barriers does that create?
00:05:47	Ishita	Otherness can create enormous barriers in India. A simple example - I was refused apartments in New Delhi because I was a woman living alone and an outsider, from a community in Bengal. And if you are from a rural community and from a less privileged background, it could cost you in so many ways - loss of work opportunities, where you can live. And even if you manage to overcome some of those barriers, say

		through education, you can still face rejection or hostility from colleagues, neighbors, the local shopkeeper...
00:06:29	Joseph	But on the playground with your friends, you weren't aware of these barriers yet?
00:06:35	Ishita	No, which is why it was so shocking to me. This person was my friend, and suddenly that label came between us.
00:06:45	Joseph	Well, this sounds like a very delicate moment, so let's listen back to hear what happened next.
00:06:57	Ishita	When I got home from school, my father was in the kitchen, cooking. I blurted out what my schoolmates had said. I looked straight into his eyes, "Is that true?" He paused, turned off the stove, took me to the living room, sat down with me. "Are you any different than you were this morning?" "No", I said. "Did the words your friends use change you?" "No." "So, you see", he said, looking into my eyes, "these words that people use to talk about you, they have nothing to do with who you are." I now know that my father sought to inoculate me in some small way from a toxic process of othering.
00:08:05	Joseph	Wow! "These words have nothing to do with who you are". Can I say, Ishita, that I'm impressed by how your father handled this situation?
00:08:16	Ishita	Well, it was not the first time my father had faced these questions. He had experienced being the Other. He came from a small village, was educated in a local language. He was an excellent student, so he gained admission to a reputed college in the big city. But his English was weak, and on the first day of class, he showed up in shorts. He did not even own a pair of long pants.
00:08:45	Joseph	But he did achieve a lot. He went to graduate school, he taught himself English and became an educator himself.
00:08:53	Ishita	He found himself in a place with students from all social backgrounds, teachers from all over India, and even foreigners, since this was a Jesuit school. And he had to make sense of all this difference and find his place.
00:09:10	Joseph	I guess he did find a way to fit in. And he knew what to say to you on that day. Did that help you?
00:09:18	Ishita	For my seven-year-old self, it was a big reassurance. It opened a door of understanding. He was telling me that the labels my schoolmates were using were just words, and those words did not have to define me.
00:09:35	Joseph	But was his attitude typical for the time?
00:09:38	Ishita	No, it wasn't. So I wanted to better understand his story, so I asked him about it. And we spoke both in Bengali and English.
00:09:49	Joseph	So, tell us what you've learned.

00:09:59	Ishita	The story of my father, Uday, begins in Jara, a small village in West Bengal, India, where he grew up more than 70 years ago. This was a village with less than 5,000 people. No electricity or water supply systems. One high school for boys, no school for girls yet. Agriculture was at the center of the village ecosystem. Here in Jara, every aspect of daily life was defined by the social category you belonged to. Where you lived, which place of worship you went to, in whose house you could eat a meal, whether you touched others feet or they touched yours. Your position as the other was clearly defined. There was no escaping otherness.
00:11:12	Joseph	Ishita, I grew up in California, so, these kinds of distinctions are not familiar to me. But for your father, were they simply a natural part of everyday life?
00:11:23	Ishita	Yes, growing up in the village, he had been taught that these different religions and castes and languages divide us. They were barriers that cannot be crossed, and that there is a stability, a purity to everyone knowing their place.
00:11:42	Joseph	And yet your father was different...
00:11:45	Ishita	Yes. He is a sensitive and a thoughtful man, and at some deep level, these divisions did not make sense to him. But to question these deeply entrenched attitudes is not easy. But he found help - from a Sanskrit scholar, a Catholic priest from Belgium, and of course, Rabindranath Tagore.
00:12:11	Joseph	And that brings us to part two: The Village and the Visionaries
Part 2: The Village and the Visionaries		
	Joseph	So, Ishita, in Jara, where your father grew up, what is it that didn't make sense to him?
00:12:35	Ishita	Well, he saw, for example, that the cousin he played with could not step inside the family temple anymore because she married someone from a different community. And another example, the mother of one of my father's classmates worked as a cook in the home of a different classmate. But she could not eat the food she cooked or use the same utensils.
00:13:02	Joseph	So let's see if I understand. She could work in the home as a cook. She could handle the pots and pans and the utensils for cooking, but she couldn't eat the food that she prepared for the family or even use a spoon or a cup that the family used?
00:13:18	Ishita	Exactly.
00:13:24		(Background soundtrack – Ishita's father)
00:13:37	Ishita	My father was a dreamy child. Sometimes oblivious to these distinctions. But there are harsh moral judgments if you do not respect these barriers, you become a different kind of other, a troublemaker that questioned. And the family worried about my father.
00:13:57	Joseph	Well, that does sound like a lot of pressure.

00:14:01	Ishita	Well, my father did find guidance. For example, when he was young, a priest from a different village, a Sanskrit scholar, told him that the caste system in Hindu society was originally based on profession. In other words, what you did for a living determined your caste, and therefore, no one was supposed to be born into a caste. He saw that human beings were not naturally worthy or unworthy. He could see everyone as having dignity.
00:14:38	Joseph	And then he left the village. He moved ahead in life. He went to college...
00:14:49	Ishita	And once again, he talks about an educator in college - this time a Catholic priest from Belgium who pointed out that even the next-door neighbor in his village could be as deeply different from him as someone from Belgium or any other foreign country.
00:15:10	Joseph	And how did that help him?
00:15:13	Ishita	It helped him understand these feelings he had growing up, that these barriers didn't make sense.
00:15:20	Joseph	And how was that?
00:15:22	Ishita	First of all, his teacher was telling him that difference was everywhere. In a sense, his neighbor could be as "other" as a foreigner. And then different did not mean less pure or less worthy as he had been taught to see in his village. So, he was learning to look beyond difference. And this was an eye opener for him. In fact, he understood that in a classroom, as an educator, one had to look beyond difference.
00:15:56	Joseph	And this was the lesson that he taught you after the incident in the playground, to look beyond labels and see the person.
00:16:05	Ishita	Exactly.
00:16:08		(Background soundtrack – conversation between Ishita and her father)
00:16:35	Joseph	And of course, this idea that we all share a common humanity, that we must look beyond difference, this is one of the great truths of many religious and philosophical traditions.
00:16:49	Ishita	We find it in the Christian ideal: "Do unto others as you would have them do to you". And in monotheistic religions, there is this idea that we are all children of the same God.
00:17:03	Joseph	And in Buddhism, the idea that we are all subject to the laws of karma. Also in the humanist traditions of the Renaissance, the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, and even up to today, with the UN's Declaration of Universal Human Rights.
00:17:19	Ishita	And my father is someone who thinks deeply, who asks big questions. And he found inspiration in the Bengali artist, philosopher, and educator Rabindranath Tagore.
00:17:34	Joseph	We have spoken about Tagore before on this podcast. So, let's listen back to part of episode 24 where we introduced him.
00:17:52	Ishita	Well, my father and mother are both educators. My father is really a humanist. He has this broad perspective in the tradition of Rabindranath Tagore.
00:18:05	Joseph	So just remind our listeners who Rabindranath Tagore was.

00:18:11	Ishita	Well, he was a Bengali writer and poet, the first non-Westerner to win a Nobel Prize in literature. But he was much more - an educator, social reformer, a philosopher, an artist. He was a world renowned intellectual, and yet he was very much a Bengali. He fully embraced his cultural roots.
00:18:44	Joseph	Rooted in Bengal but traveling the world. This must have appealed to your father.
00:18:51	Ishita	Absolutely. My father is a proud Bengali.
00:18:55	Joseph	Well, Tagore's journey was certainly remarkable.
00:18:58	Ishita	It was incredible. He was born in 1861 in Calcutta, into an affluent, educated Bengali family. At 16, he created a sensation by writing poems in the classic literary style. He was a writer and a musician deeply rooted in Bengali artistic traditions.
00:19:22	Joseph	But he was also an internationalist. He traveled the world. He met with world leaders. I read debates he had with Albert Einstein about the nature of truth.
00:19:34	Ishita	And of course, he was an educator and even founded a university, Visva Bharati. And let's keep in mind that Tagore accomplished all this in the late 19 th and early 20 th century - a time when the idea that a, shall we say, brown person from the subcontinent could be a world class artist and intellectual, was radical.
00:19:56	Joseph	And so in all of this, what did your father relate to?
00:20:01	Ishita	Well, my father did not have a chance to visit many different countries but describes himself as a traveler of the mind and even quotes Tagore: " <i>Mono mor megher shongi, ure chole dikdiganter paane nihshimo shunye...</i> " which means, "My mind is a companion of the clouds that floats towards the far horizons, into the endless void...". I think my father found in Tagore's journey an echo of his own life, of moving from a deeply divided world to becoming an educator.
00:20:44	Joseph	And has Tagore been a big influence on you?
00:20:48	Ishita	Well, in some ways, yes. Tagore spoke of a common humanity. For example, as a child I danced to <i>Chandalika</i> , which is sometimes translated as 'The Untouchable', a Tagore play in which the protagonist, a woman, was from a less-privileged background, but it emphasized her individual dignity. But in the end, this wasn't enough for me.
00:21:18	Joseph	Well, in what ways?
00:21:20	Ishita	Well, my journey was in some ways the inverse of my father's. I was taught that we must look beyond difference, that we should focus on what we share. But I started to feel that this can only take us so far. When I was refused an apartment because I was a single woman, a Bengali, in that situation, looking beyond difference would not get me a place to live. And living in France I needed to understand and adjust to the difference that I found. Working in a multinational company I saw tremendous misunderstanding and mistrust due to cultural differences.
00:22:01	Joseph	So this is a difference between you and your father?

00:22:06	Ishita	Well, as an educator in an environment full of division, my father needed to look beyond difference. For me, I could not look past the difference I found. I had to look into it. And that's not always easy.
00:22:22	Joseph	And that brings us to Part 3: Monkeys that Think
Part 3: Monkeys that Think		
	Joseph	So, Ishita let's dig into the question what is otherness from the brain mind perspective, and how does that relate to the stories we have been telling about looking beyond difference, and looking into difference?
00:22:50	Ishita	Well, the starting point from the brain mind perspective is to understand that otherness is an experience. It's something you feel, a subjective sense that "Oh, you are different from me."
00:23:05	Joseph	And identifying you as different can trigger a natural tendency to categorize – "Oh, I see. You are one of those."
00:23:12	Ishita	So there are two elements. Otherness is triggered by a perception of difference and then categorizing that difference.
00:23:22	Joseph	And with that categorization comes a set of implicit assumptions, an image, so to speak, that we have about that category.
00:23:30	Ishita	Yes. When I say India, for example, non-Indians may get mental images of crowded trains, gurus, cows on the road. And this is an important inflection point. If my mind is flooded with associations, I may stop seeing you as an individual and see you only as a category, one of "those" which can be dehumanizing, discriminatory.
00:24:02	Joseph	And if the otherness is felt on both sides, if we both say "Oh, you're one of those", then the wall of otherness gets bigger and hard to bridge.
00:24:11	Ishita	And it can be institutionalized. The largest walls of otherness exist in places where communities are in close contact. Naturally, when one group benefits from this arrangement, they may seek to perpetuate it.
00:24:30	Joseph	So, let's summarize here - otherness has a psychological aspect, the experience of otherness and a social aspect, the collective societal impact of communities that perceive another community as the other.
00:24:53	Ishita	And these things should not be surprising. From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, otherness is normal. It's a fundamental feature of our experience as social primates.
00:25:05	Joseph	By which we mean that humans are at some basic level monkeys that think. We live in groups, and we easily treat outgroup individuals as a threat. Chimpanzees, for example, are often affectionate and playful with members of their own group, but band together and raid other chimpanzee territories and they will kill chimps from rival groups.
00:25:31	Ishita	And even in humans, the experience of otherness can trigger a threat response activating the autonomous nervous system, sometimes called the fight or flight response, also called hyperarousal.
00:25:46	Joseph	Which, research has shown is associated with paying attention to negative stimuli and the perception of ambiguous situations as negative, and negative thoughts that are closely related to a strong emotional response.

00:26:04	Ishita	Put simply, when interacting with someone we perceive as the other, we can easily feel suspicious, jump to negative conclusions, and have strong emotional reactions.
00:26:16	Joseph	Of course, experiences with difference don't always provoke a powerful threat response. But there are other more subtle negative responses to otherness.
00:26:26	Ishita	One of them that has been widely studied is implicit associations, and this refers to unconscious emotional responses to stimuli based on previous experiences.
00:26:39	Joseph	So, let's say if I was bitten by a dog when I was walking in front of a neighbor's house, then I will have a tendency to avoid that house even if the dog is not around. That means that an individual may have an unconscious negative association but not be aware of it. In fact, they may believe themselves to be completely neutral.
00:27:00	Ishita	There is a lot of debate about how much implicit associations actually affect behavior, but we can say that we are affected by the negative things we hear about the other. So, if you grow up hearing that Elbonians are dishonest, then when you actually meet an Elbonian, you may mistrust that person without being fully conscious of it.
00:27:33	Joseph	And implicit bias is just one element of the experience of otherness. Another relates to the in-group bias, sometimes called in-group favoritism, which is the tendency to view those who are more similar to yourself more favorably.
00:27:48	Ishita	And this is so common that we may not even notice it. For example, when the new kid in school is treated with suspicion or when we are happy that an athlete from our country wins an Olympic medal.
00:28:01	Joseph	So Ishita how does all this relate to your experience in India?
00:28:06	Ishita	First of all, in my experience negative attitudes are largely unconscious and unquestioned. If you grow up learning that certain people are less pure, less worthy than you, you may vaguely want to avoid them, to not enter their home. Their living space will somehow feel distasteful. If I know that I am not welcome in that temple or your home, then I will have no desire to go there.
00:28:36	Joseph	Some of what you described sounds extreme to me, but in fact I grew up in California and it's routine in some places to talk about that neighborhood as a quote unquote "bad neighborhood". A place you wouldn't think of moving to even if you know nothing about it.
00:28:52	Ishita	That's a good point. Every society to some degree or another categorizes others and each of us in our own ways categorizes the people that we meet. All this talk of otherness is rather discouraging, but as we have said, unlike chimpanzees, humans can and do collaborate with people in outgroups. So, let's talk about the human capacity to reach beyond this wall of otherness.

00:29:31	Joseph	And here I think that the research largely supports the insights of you and your father. There is more than one way to overcome the wall of otherness, but they involve different cognitive functions.
00:29:45	Ishita	And here we are drawing on research into empathy, in particular the work of Jamil Zaki, which we have also talked about way back in episode 8.
00:29:57	Joseph	So let's first review a bit. Empathy refers to the ability to look at a situation from the perspective of someone else. So empathy can help us overcome otherness.
00:30:09	Ishita	So one key question is what triggers empathy? And it turns out that empathy is closely related to the approach and avoidance circuits of the brain. We want to move towards certain things and away from others.
00:30:23	Joseph	And an avoidance response discourages empathy. We are less likely to empathize with someone we don't like, for example. On the other hand, if we have a positive feeling about someone, we are more likely to empathize.
00:30:40	Ishita	And this has obvious implications for overcoming otherness. We should encourage positive interactions. And on the other hand, if we have negative associations with a particular group, it will inhibit empathy. For example, when I read Tagore stories in which a less privileged person is a sympathetic character, I will have positive feelings about them and that makes me more likely to empathize with anyone in that situation.
00:31:12	Joseph	So, part of overcoming the wall of otherness relates simply to having positive feelings about the quote unquote "other". But for better or worse, simply having positive feelings is often not enough.
00:31:25	Ishita	And that is because there are two interrelated forms of empathy. One, which Zaki calls ' <i>experience sharing</i> ', and the other which he refers to as ' <i>Mentalizing</i> '.
00:31:36	Joseph	Experience sharing means feeling what someone else is feeling. So, imagine you're traveling in a foreign country, you don't speak the language, but in the marketplace one of the sellers gives you a big smile, you smile back and you have a warm feeling of connection. That's experience sharing - an emotional connection based on a shared experience.
00:32:01	Ishita	And I think that often when people tell us that we should look beyond difference, they are encouraging us to connect in this way, to have a positive shared experience and hopefully create a feeling of common humanity.
00:32:16	Joseph	But Zaki also talks about another more difficult form of empathy, which is mentalizing. That's the ability to understand another person's thoughts and intentions, the mental space they inhabit. And that requires looking into the difference between us.
00:32:34	Ishita	And I think this is where my father and I differed. He wanted to look beyond difference to treat his students and colleagues with equal good feeling and had to share in the experience of learning. For me, however,

		that wasn't enough. I had to dive into the different worlds that I experienced.
00:32:56	Joseph	So, looking beyond difference, trying to share positive feelings and looking into difference, diving into the world as seen by others, each of these strategies is based in a different element of cognition and mind.
00:33:11	Ishita	And of course, bridge people seek to do both of those things. And I think that's true of my father and Tagore as well. For example, Tagore talks not only of shared humanity, but also the importance of understanding difference: <i>"Let what seems a barrier become a path, and let us unite, not in spite of our differences, but through them. For differences can never be wiped away, and life would be so much the poorer without them. Let all human races keep their own personalities and yet come together, not in a uniformity that is dead, but in a unity that is living."</i>
00:34:08	Joseph	<i>"...Not in spite of our differences, but through them..."</i> - So, he recognized that difference can be a barrier, but understanding difference can also bring us together.
00:34:21	Ishita	And it feels to me that these ideas can be passed from person to person in a sort of chain of empathy.
00:34:29	Joseph	Yes, that's a beautiful thought. From a Hindu priest in Jara to your father, from him to you, and now from you to all our listeners...
00:34:40	Ishita	Well, and I think this is a good place to wrap up today's episode.
00:34:47	Joseph	In this episode we discussed the work of Jamil Zaki. Check out his article <i>Empathy: A Motivated Account</i> . If you want to learn more about Tagore and India more generally, including inequality, check out <i>'The Argumentative Indian'</i> by Amartya Sen. There is a chapter <i>'Tagore and his India'</i> . The Deep Culture Podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I'm the director of JII. Check out JII's <i>Brain, Mind and Culture Masterclass</i> . It's a blended learning course and online community of cultural bridge people. If you liked today's episode, please share it on social media and you can reach us at dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org . Thanks to our sound engineer Robinson Fritz, the whole podcast team Yvonne Van der Pol, Zeina Matar, Emre Seven, Daniel Glinz, Ikumi Fritz and everyone at JII. And of course, thanks to you, Ishita for sharing this time with me.
00:35:39	Ishita	Thank you, Joseph. It was wonderful to spend this time with you.