

## 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 **Ishita Ray** 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 39 – Culture and the Unconscious Mind)

Why are we blind to culture? This episode explores culture and the unconscious mind. We learn how our understanding of culture and mind has changed over time—from a realm of powerful urges and shameful desires to a more scientific view of the autopilot of everyday life; one that has been customized by culture. And yet, culture’s influence on our minds is invisible to us. Hosted by Joseph Shaules and Ishita Ray with special thanks to Daniel Glinz.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Ishita	(Hook) We all have secret desires, feelings we hide, perhaps powerful urges that we don't understand.
00:00:16	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 here with Ishita Ray. Always a pleasure to be cohosting with you, Ishita.
00:00:28	Ishita	Hi, Joseph. I am so happy to be here with you again.
00:00:33	Joseph	So, Ishita, this episode was inspired once again by the work of Edward Hall, and in particular, his ideas about culture and the mind. So let's start off with a quote of his.
00:00:49	Ishita	<i>"Culture hides more than it reveals. And strangely enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants."</i>
00:01:00	Joseph	So what's Hall saying here? He's saying that we aren't aware of culture within ourselves, because culture operates at the level of the unconscious mind.
00:01:11	Ishita	And so when we were talking about this, we wondered, does this mean that to understand culture, we need to understand the unconscious mind? And I think that Hall would say yes.
00:01:25	Joseph	Yeah, and I agree. But Hall said this 70 years ago, and we know a lot more about the brain and cognitive function these days. So let's compare what Hall said with a quote by Shinobu Kitayama, a leading cultural psychologist.
00:01:44	Ishita	<i>"Culture cannot be understood without a deep understanding of the minds of the people who make it up. And likewise, the mind cannot be understood without reference to the sociocultural environment to which it is adapted and attuned."</i>
00:02:04	Joseph	So Kitayama is saying, yes, to understand culture, we need to understand the mind and vice versa. But you know, I find that this is

		really not easy to get my head around. How is it that the mind is cultural?
00:02:21	Ishita	Well, one starting point is Hall's idea of unconscious culture, the ways in which we take culture for granted. For example, when we say culture is like water to a fish.
00:02:37	Joseph	But what I don't get is really how all of this works. What would a cognitive psychologist say about this? Are there cultural patterns in the brain?
00:02:48	Ishita	And so in this episode, we are going to explore the topic of culture and the mind, and in particular, the idea of the unconscious mind.
00:02:59	Joseph	And what we'll see is that our understanding of the so-called unconscious mind has really changed in the last 100 years, starting with a pretty simple idea of dark passions and shameful urges to a view of the unconscious mind as a very complex set of processes that operate as a kind of autopilot of everyday life.
00:03:24	Ishita	And we will see that this autopilot, these perceptual processes, are shaped by our cultural background and that our unconscious autopilot doesn't function well in foreign environments.
00:03:39	Joseph	A bit of a warning: this episode, we're going to get pretty geeky. But hey, that's why we call this the Deep Culture podcast.
00:03:49	Ishita	And that brings us to part one, Freud's unconscious.
Part One – Freud's Unconscious		
	Ishita	So Joseph, first of all, some of these words that we have been using are easy to get mixed up. For example, conscious and unconscious. In everyday speech, if you talk about being conscious, it means that you are awake, you are aware of the world, whereas if you are unconscious, you are asleep or you black out or you've lost consciousness.
00:04:39	Joseph	But the word consciousness is also used to mean something like awareness. We talk about raising one's consciousness.
00:04:48	Ishita	Yes, and you hear that in certain Indian thought traditions as well. The idea that having a higher form of consciousness brings us closer to oneness or the divine.
00:05:02	Joseph	But that's not really what we are talking about here. In this episode, we're talking about an empirical attempt to understand how hidden parts of the mind work.
00:05:14	Ishita	And the starting point for this more scientific attempt to understand the mind, and especially the unconscious mind, is the work of Sigmund Freud, who was active at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.
00:05:31	Joseph	He argued that often we are at the mercy of hidden forces within us, that we aren't in control of our own mind.
00:05:39	Ishita	And Freud's ideas were rather radical in his time because there is a long tradition in Western thought to see reason as central to who we are as humans.

00:05:53	Joseph	And that's in line with René Descartes' famous phrase, " <i>Je pense, donc je suis</i> ", which is rendered in English as " <i>I think, therefore I am</i> ".
00:06:04	Ishita	So in the Western tradition, conscious thought, abstract reasoning, is seen as very important. It's what separates us from animals. So the idea that there are hidden forces in our mind that you aren't aware of was pretty radical.
00:06:25	Joseph	And of course, these days, the idea of the unconscious mind isn't shocking. In fact, many of Freud's ideas are things that we take for granted now.
00:06:37	Ishita	Like the idea that experiences in your childhood can affect you later in life, or that emotions or memories can be repressed, that your dreams can be analyzed for their deeper meaning or slips of the tongue can reveal some hidden feeling or intention.
00:06:58	Joseph	And even today, we call this a Freudian slip, like when the wait person says, "Oh, here are your bald eggs" instead of "Here are your boiled eggs" to a person who's bald.
00:07:16	Ishita	So this is one example of Freud's larger goal. He wanted to find ways to access the hidden parts of the mind, and he felt that slips of the tongue were indicative of something deeper. Here's a quote from Freud: <i>"Every time we make a slip in talking or writing, we may infer that there has been a disturbance due to mental processes lying outside our intention."</i>
00:07:48	Joseph	And the keywords here are " <i>mental processes outside our intentions</i> ". He's referring to the unconscious mind, this hidden realm of self that we cannot access directly. And so far, so good. But many of his ideas about the unconscious mind were very different from our understanding of the brain and cognitive processes that we have today.
00:08:17	Ishita	Well, Freud's training was in neurology, but like a lot of people at the time, he thought that mental illness was due to an imbalance in the energies of the nervous system.
00:08:31	Joseph	And you know this was a time when women were commonly diagnosed with "hysteria", which was supposed to be a nervous disease that women were prone to.
00:08:42	Ishita	Yes, it was considered to be a dysfunction of the uterus, which caused women to become overly emotional and unstable, feeling anxious, fainting... implying that women are inherently less stable than men, which is both unscientific and misogynistic.
00:09:05	Joseph	Absolutely. So some of Freud's ideas are completely at odds with modern views, while others are still with us.
00:09:15	Ishita	And so to make sense of all of this, we need to look a bit more closely at how he thought the unconscious mind works and how our understanding has changed since then.
00:09:28	Joseph	Which brings us to part two: Wild Horses and the Autopilot
Part 2: Wild Horses and the Autopilot		
00:09:42	Ishita	So let's look at how Freud thought of the unconscious mind.

00:09:47	Joseph	Well, in many ways, Freud's unconscious is fairly common sense. He conceived of the unconscious mind as made up of three elements - the <i>id</i> , the <i>ego</i> and the <i>superego</i> .
00:10:02	Ishita	For starters, we all have secret desires, feelings we hide, perhaps powerful urges that we don't understand.
00:10:12	Joseph	And these things Freud called the <i>id</i> .
00:10:17	Ishita	And he compares the <i>id</i> to a wild horse, things that you cannot fully keep in check. But we also have other inner forces which balance out the <i>id</i> . We have a moral sense, a voice in our head that scolds us when we do something wrong.
00:10:37	Joseph	And Freud called that the <i>superego</i> .
00:10:40	Ishita	And so there is an inner tension between the deep urges of the <i>id</i> and the moral voice of the <i>superego</i> . And there is a realistic, reasonable self that tries to mediate between the two.
00:10:56	Joseph	Which Freud called the <i>ego</i> .
00:11:00	Ishita	So Freud is saying that we have these unconscious forces within us, but that our conscious mind can manage them. And he talks about psychoanalysis as a way to bring these hidden parts of the self into the light.
00:11:17	Joseph	And you know I have the impression that many people still think of the unconscious mind more or less in this way. But there are other parts of his work that seem really 19th century to me. He seems really obsessed with sex and repressed desires.
00:11:34	Ishita	Well, his thinking does reflect attitudes from his time, but I don't think he saw it that way. He was trying to uncover universal aspects of how the mind works.
00:11:49	Joseph	So it's an odd mix. Freud's ideas are both familiar and outdated, which brings us to the story of how many of his assumptions about the unconscious are being overturned.
00:12:09	Ishita	That's a complicated story. But there was one academic article in particular that represents a kind of turning of the tide, the point at which our image of the unconscious started to change because it was better informed by science.
00:12:29	Joseph	And we've talked about this article before in episode 19. The name of the article is <i>Telling more than we know: Verbal reports on mental processes</i> . It was published in 1977 by Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson. It went on to become one of the most cited papers in psychology.
00:12:50	Ishita	It's a very ambitious article. At the time, researchers were developing new methods to investigate unconscious cognitive processes. This often involved people doing real life tasks under different conditions.
00:13:08	Joseph	For example, someone might have to rank job candidates who have similar resumes, but one speaks with a foreign accent. And researchers might find, for example, that the foreign accent caused the candidate to be ranked lower. And they would also find that the subject was not

		aware that their judgment was being influenced by the accent. So to get back to Nisbett and Wilson's article, they presented detailed evidence that, first, we are unaware of our own mental processes, and secondly, that we are unaware of our unawareness.
00:13:49	Ishita	And this was a challenge for psychologists or anyone, really, that thought of the unconscious mind in the way that Freud did, as our animal nature, that is kept in check by the conscious mind.
00:14:04	Joseph	Because the picture that Nisbett and Wilson painted was quite different. They said that not only do we not have control over our unconscious mental processes, we can't even access them by, for example, reflecting on our inner states. And they gave many examples in the paper that showed this.
00:14:25	Ishita	For example, they talked about the halo effect. If someone is physically attractive, we tend to unconsciously assume they are smart. But subjects often deny that they are influenced in that way.
00:14:41	Joseph	The article showed that people simply do not know how they know things or why they do what they do, but they come up with explanations after the fact. In short, people believe they understand their mental processes when in fact they don't.
00:15:03	Ishita	And let's pause on this idea for a second. The fact that we make judgments and take action without understanding why, is very important for intercultural bridge people. And we will go into that in more detail in part three. But for the moment, let's get back to this shift away from Freud's thinking.
00:15:27	Joseph	Yes. So Nisbett and Wilson's article went against the idea of the conscious mind as the master controller. And since it was published, more research has shown us that the unconscious mind isn't so much like a wild horse. It is more like an unconscious autopilot of everyday life.
00:15:47	Ishita	One example of this new view is the way that Jonathan Evans describes the relationship between the conscious, the <i>reflective mind</i> , and the unconscious <i>intuitive mind</i> .
00:16:00	Joseph	So he says, " <i>the reflective mind only thinks it is in control. In fact, one of the major functions of the reflective mind is confabulation. In other words, we, conscious beings, make up stories to maintain the illusion that we are the chief executive who is really in control.</i> "
00:16:23	Ishita	So let's regroup. Researchers like Nisbett, Wilson, and Evans have shown that the unconscious mind is both more complex and more subtle than Freud's ideas. And so let's get geeky and take a closer look at how this unconscious autopilot manages our lives. Most fundamentally, it is in charge of our automatic biological processes, breathing, regulating body temperature, pumping blood...
00:16:58	Joseph	And there's plenty of unconscious calculation for navigating the physical world. Seeing, walking, manipulating objects with our hands. And some of these abilities, like seeing and walking, are developmentally programmed so we don't have to learn them intentionally.

00:17:18	Ishita	And of course, there are skills like cracking open an egg or driving a car that require intentional practice to learn. But once mastered, we do them automatically. And in addition to all of this, our autopilot also manages our social interactions. And the complexity is mind blowing. Specialists don't even agree on terminology. These days, instead of unconscious mind, you will find the term <i>cognitive unconscious</i> or the <i>x system</i> , but also the <i>intuitive mind</i> or <i>fast thinking</i> .
00:18:03	Joseph	And many listeners may have heard of <i>fast thinking</i> and <i>slow thinking</i> . That's the book by Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman. And we talked about Timothy Wilson, who co-published the landmark paper in 1977. He uses the term <i>adaptive unconscious</i> , which highlights the evolutionary roots of our mental structures. But, Ishita, we've been talking a lot about the unconscious mind, but we still haven't talked about culture.
00:18:35	Ishita	That is because, first of all, most people, with Edward Hall being an exception, assumed that cognitive function was the same everywhere in the world, which we now know not to be the case.
00:18:51	Joseph	And so if that 1977 article marked the era of the autopilot, we can say that the era of understanding culture, and cognition can be marked by a book published by Richard Nisbett in 2003, <i>The Geography of Thought</i> .
00:19:09	Ishita	And that brings us to Part 3: The Autopilot Abroad
Part 3: The Autopilot Abroad		
00:19:26	Joseph	People who study the mind have only more recently started to understand ways in which culture shapes how our mind works. And I think we can look at this in two ways. Let's call the first the geography of thought, and let's call the second the autopilot abroad.
00:19:45	Ishita	<i>The Geography of Thought</i> refers to a book by Richard Nisbett, the same person who co-published that groundbreaking article in 1977 with Timothy Wilson.
00:19:57	Joseph	And it brought together research which showed wide ranging cultural differences in the way the unconscious mind works.
00:20:06	Ishita	This is something we talked about in episode 19. Why do we think differently? So let's listen back to you and Yvonne in that episode...
		[Clip from Episode 19]
00:20:21	Joseph	And I'll just say that when I first read the Geography of thought, 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.
00:20:37	Yvonne	And I was intrigued by many small yet very interesting findings. And, for instance, in the chapter "Is the world made up of nouns or verbs?" There he mentions findings that, for instance, Western parents seem noun obsessed, pointing out objects to their children, naming them, and telling them about their attributes. And it goes like this: "That's a car. See the car? You like it? It's got nice wheels." And in contrast, while observing Asian parents playing with their toddlers, they

		<i>engage in twice as many social routines of teaching politeness norms. "Here, it's wroom wroom. I'll give it to you. Now you give this to me. Yes. Thank you." American children are learning that the world is mostly placed with objects, while Asian children learn that the world is mostly about relationships."</i>
		[End of Clip from Episode 19]
00:21:41	Joseph	Let's slow down here a bit. Nisbett was interested in cultural differences in cognition. So let's think about what that means.
00:21:51	Ishita	Well, he at first believed that all human groups perceive and reason in the same way, but he found that not to be the case. So let's go back to episode 19.
		[Clip from Episode 19]
00:22:09	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 is a quote, He was a <i>"lifelong universalist concerning the nature of human thought. I believe that all human groups perceive and reason in the same way."</i>
00:22:32	Joseph	But as the story goes, one day he was talking to a brilliant Chinese PhD student who later became a colleague. 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".
00:22:50	Yvonne	He was saying that the minds of Chinese and Americans somehow work differently and this really intrigued Nisbett and got him interested in cultural differences in cognition.
00:23:01	Joseph	Let's read from page 44, where Nisbett lists cultural differences in cognition. For example, he talks about <i>"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..."</i>
		[End of Clip from Episode 19]
00:23:42	Ishita	Wow, that was quite a mouthful.
00:23:44	Joseph	True, the vocabulary is technical, but the things being researched are very everyday. Take patterns of explanation of events. For example, if someone commits a crime, is it more natural to assume that it's because of a flaw in their character or because of situational factors, like, perhaps they lost their job?
00:24:07	Ishita	And Nisbett analyzed Chinese and American newspaper articles to show that Americans tended towards the former and Chinese tended towards the latter. And this is sometimes studied using the term fundamental attribution error.
00:24:27	Joseph	And of course, this is just a tiny example from one very narrowly focused research project. But Nisbett and Peng's work drew on many sources, historical, laboratory based, and observation in the real world.

00:24:42	Ishita	Well, when I see this, what impresses me is that these differences are very subtle, but they are also very powerful because they relate to everyday life in concrete ways, and we simply aren't aware of them.
00:25:01	Joseph	Yeah, when I try to make sense of this research, I'm amazed at how things are interrelated in surprising ways. For example, the tendency to experience the self as independent from others, as Americans and Western Europeans often do, is also associated with noticing objects more than context. The idea that an American sees a brick where the Chinese person sees a wall.
00:25:31	Ishita	And of course, there's a lot more to this than we can talk about here. So definitely go back to episode 19 if you want more detail.
00:25:41	Joseph	So Nisbett's work has really helped us understand the unconscious in a new way, not only as an autopilot, but one that is customized by the environment that we grow up in.
00:25:52	Ishita	And for me, this is where the idea of the autopilot really becomes meaningful, because when we are in a foreign environment, our autopilot does not function well.
00:26:05	Joseph	Yes, and let's take culture shock as an example. This feeling of disorientation or stress when spending time in a foreign environment, and it's due to the fact that our autopilot is overloaded.
00:26:22	Ishita	It's easy for the unconscious mind to get tripped up abroad. And we'll demonstrate that using a list of cognitive functions from the book <i>Thinking Fast and Slow</i> by Daniel Kahneman.
00:26:37	Joseph	We've taken some quotes which illustrate how system one, fast thinking and system two, slow thinking function in foreign environments.
00:26:48	Ishita	<i>System one generates impressions, feelings and inclinations. When endorsed by system two, these become beliefs, attitudes and intentions.</i>
00:27:02	Joseph	So this means that our reactions and our impressions of our new environment are produced through unconscious processes. And we have to be careful not to jump to wrong conclusions.
00:27:16	Ishita	<i>System one operates automatically and quickly, with little or no effort and no sense of voluntary control.</i>
00:27:24	Joseph	Meaning that we rely on our autopilot more than we might expect. And we can be surprised when system one has difficulty functioning, like because of culture shock.
00:27:37	Ishita	<i>System one can be programmed by system two to mobilize attention when a particular unfamiliar pattern is detected.</i>
00:27:47	Joseph	So, in unfamiliar situations, such as foreign encounters, we may only be able to recognize the patterns that we're used to. We may only see what we want to or expect to see. We may fall back on preconceived notions.
00:28:05	Ishita	<i>System one executes skilled responses and generates skilled intuitions after adequate training.</i>
00:28:15	Joseph	So, learning to function in a new environment involves unconscious learning. Things like figuring out how to interpret what people say and do.



00:28:27	Ishita	<i>System one creates a coherent pattern of activated ideas in associative memory.</i>
00:28:34	Joseph	A coherent pattern of activated ideas. This means we have to learn new ways of interpreting situations. We need to put on new cultural glasses.
00:28:49	Ishita	<i>System one links a sense of cognitive ease to illusions of truth, pleasant feelings, and reduced vigilance</i>
00:28:59	Joseph	So, this reminds us that we have a tendency to be biased against the unfamiliar, and that novelty can be tiring.
00:29:09	Ishita	<i>System one infers and invents causes and intentions.</i>
00:29:15	Joseph	Because it's hard to interpret behavior in foreign settings, we can easily jump to unjustified conclusions and interpretations, but not realize it.
00:29:28	Ishita	<i>System one neglects ambiguity and suppresses doubt.</i>
00:29:33	Joseph	So, if we have preconceived notions or strong first impressions, we can easily find things that confirm our biases. For example: "Oh, just as I thought. The people here are dishonest."
00:29:48	Ishita	<i>System one represents sets by norms and prototypes.</i>
00:29:54	Joseph	We often rely on stereotypical thinking when interpreting foreign behavior.
00:30:09	Ishita	So that's quite a list, and it's hard to keep it all straight. But that's also kind of the point. Our unconscious autopilot is highly complex, but it functions so smoothly that we don't even notice, which is another reason why it is so hard to see the cultural elements of our own mind.
00:30:35	Joseph	And this brings us back to the Hall quote at the beginning of the episode. "Culture hides most effectively from its own participants". And now we can start to see why this is the case.
00:30:49	Ishita	And personally, I think that understanding the workings of our autopilot is really important for cultural bridge people. We need more than fish metaphors, because understanding how our mind works does help us navigate our foreign experiences better.
00:31:09	Joseph	I totally agree, and perhaps that's a good place to bring this episode to a close today. Today, we referenced a number of sources. First of all, the work of Edward Hall. The quote was taken from <i>The Silent Language</i> . Also, the quote by Kitayama at the beginning of the episode was from the <i>Handbook of Cultural Psychology</i> . We mentioned <i>Telling more than we can know: Verbal reports on mental processes</i> by Richard Nisbett and Timothy Wilson. We referred to the work of Jonathan Evans. You can check out his book <i>Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious</i> , and not to forget, <i>The Geography of Thought</i> , also by Richard Nisbett and <i>Thinking Fast and Slow</i> by Daniel Kahneman. 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. If you liked this episode, please spread the word on social media, subscribe, leave a comment on Apple Podcasts or write us at <a href="mailto:dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org">dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org</a> . Thanks to our sound engineer Robinson Fritz, everyone on the podcast team, especially Daniel Glinz,

		whose ideas were a big inspiration for this episode. Thanks Daniel. Also, Yvonne Van der Pol, Zeina Matar, Emre Seven, Ikumi Fritz and everyone at JII. And of course, thanks to you, Ishita for sharing this time with me.
00:32:42	Ishita	Thank you, Joseph. I had fun being geeky.