

## 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 42 – Culture and the Unconscious Mind)

In this episode, Joseph Shaules and Ishita Ray explore cultural intuitions—the ability to “read the air” and interpret our environment. Research into intuitions—the feeling of knowing—helps us understand why developing new cultural intuitions is so challenging. We discuss the feel-good fallacy—the idea that having the right attitude is not enough to avoid cultural misunderstanding. Ishita recounts the “body shock” she experienced in France the first time she experienced a bise . . . a kiss on the cheek, and Yvonne van der Pol and Emre Seven share stories of the dilemmas they faced because of mismatched cultural intuitions.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Joseph and Ishita	(Hook) - And that's not something you do in India?  - Absolutely not. With a man. My superior, someone I had just met, I was in a state of body shock.
00:00:21	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. Hello, Ishita. How are you doing today?
00:00:33	Ishita	Hi, Joseph. I'm doing great. I'm happy to co-host this episode with you. So, Joseph, in this episode, we are going to talk about a mental function that we use every day, but that we are barely aware of. And the technical term for this is social cognition, which refers to the unconscious ability to interpret our social environment.
00:00:59	Joseph	And on this podcast, we refer to it as cultural intuitions. And it's a kind of social radar, an unconscious knowledge that we use to navigate everyday life.
00:01:11	Ishita	For example, you know how to make small talk with the supermarket cashier, or you notice that your boss is in a bad mood and so decide not to ask her for a raise.
00:01:23	Joseph	And the key point is that the ability to do this is unconscious. We somehow know how to do those things, but it's not something we can easily explain.
00:01:34	Ishita	And that's why this is called cultural intuition, because this is intuitive knowledge, things that we know without knowing how we know.
00:01:44	Joseph	Interestingly, there's a common expression in Japanese to refer to cultural intuition, <i>kuuki wo yomu</i> , which literally means reading the air. And that's the ability to read one's surroundings, to have a sense of

		what's expected in a given situation.
00:02:03	Ishita	And we are interested in this because when you are in a foreign environment, it's hard to read the air. So imagine asking your foreign boss for a raise or making small talk with the supermarket cashier in a foreign country, in a foreign language. It's easy to feel stupid or lost.
00:02:25	Joseph	And it creates misunderstanding if you misread the air or if you can't figure out why people do what they do.
00:02:32	Ishita	For example, when I was first living in France, it felt so rude that people seemed to openly disagree with each other.
00:02:42	Joseph	Or me in Japan, I remember these long periods of silence where no one said anything, and I was thinking, what's going on?
00:02:49	Ishita	And this is a reminder. Cultural learning requires us to live through these moments of confusion, of being overwhelmed, of feeling stupid. And somehow, we adjust our inner compass. What felt strange starts to feel normal.
00:03:09	Joseph	And so that's why this episode will focus on intuition, the feeling of knowing, and the process of getting new cultural intuitions, what we sometimes call deep learning.
00:03:22	Ishita	But there's also one other reason we chose this topic - because many people, including professional intercultural educators, simply misunderstand the basic nature of cultural intuitions.
00:03:37	Joseph	Yes, and this relates to what we call the feel-good fallacy, the mistaken idea that having a positive attitude is enough to overcome cultural difference.
00:03:48	Ishita	So in this episode, we are going to dig into this rather geeky topic of cultural intuitions. We learn how intuition guides our everyday lives and how it can trip us up in foreign settings when things simply feel wrong.
00:04:06	Joseph	And that brings us to part one, The Feeling of Knowing
Part One – The Feeling of Knowing		
	Joseph	So before we can talk about cultural intuitions, we need to be clear about what we mean by intuition. So let's start with a definition.
00:04:30	Ishita	According to the Cambridge online dictionary, intuition is “an ability to understand or know something immediately based on your feelings rather than facts.”
00:04:42	Joseph	So most simply, intuition is the feeling of knowing something without knowing how you know. For example, you might say, “Well, to be a good parent, you need to learn to trust your intuition.”
00:04:54	Ishita	Or people say, “I have a gut feeling about that person”, or “You just have to trust your instinct”, or “I just know!”
00:05:05	Joseph	And from the brain and mind perspective, intuition is simply a form of pattern recognition. We navigate the world based on the knowledge that comes from our previous experience. When we've experienced a situation before, we have a feeling for what to expect and how to do things.

00:05:24	Ishita	And we are going to get a bit technical here, but we rely on intuitive knowledge in at least three different realms. First, our intuitive sense of the physical world.
00:05:37	Joseph	So if I throw something into the air, you have the feeling that naturally it will fall down. And that's something that even very young children have.
00:05:46	Ishita	Next is our intuitive understanding of people and mind.
00:05:51	Joseph	And this involves reading the air like we've been saying, but also simply having a feeling for people's intentions or what kind of person they are. We are constantly making intuitive judgments about people. I mean, after all, that's why we gossip.
00:06:08	Ishita	And finally, there's intuitive knowledge related to skills or internalized bodies of knowledge. If you play music, you get a feel for the instrument. If you are an expert financial advisor, you get a feeling for the markets. If you fish for trout, you get a feeling for where the fish are hiding.
00:06:41	Joseph	And once you start listing these things, we realize that we are constantly relying on intuitive knowledge. Often, we are living on autopilot, living life by feel.
00:06:53	Ishita	<p>And to get a sense for this, here's a quote from <i>Language, Culture, and the Embodied Mind</i>, which describes the role of intuition in everyday life.</p> <p><i>“Our knowledge that we are hungry, thirsty or cold is intuitive, as is the fear we experience when under threat. Our intuitive knowledge is sometimes experienced in terms of urges, desire, motivations, nervousness, disgust and trepidation. We feel an urge to get up and go to the cupboard for a snack, a desire for the latest tech gadget, motivation to get good grades, nervousness when being approached by a group of rowdy youth, and trepidation when we walk into a room full of strangers.</i></p> <p><i>We simply know when a sentence in our native language is grammatical. We somehow read the faces of our friends and intuit their state of mind. We have a feel for how much salt to add to our scrambled eggs. We have a sense for how to be polite when disagreeing with our father-in-law.”</i></p>
00:08:06	Joseph	And all of this is a reminder that intuition is embodied. It's very different from abstract knowledge that we can recall or explain. For example, an urge to do something is intuitive. We know we want to do it, but we can't always explain why. And of course, that's why being in a foreign environment can be so overwhelming. There are so many times when our intuitive knowledge falls short.
00:08:43	Ishita	Yes, I remember landing in France and not being ready the first time someone gave me a “bise”, a kiss on the cheek.
00:08:54	Joseph	And so what happened?
00:08:56	Ishita	I arrived by bus to the small town in France. Montlucon, my supervisor, was waiting for me at the station.

00:09:06	Joseph	And this was a male supervisor?
00:09:08	Ishita	Yes. I spotted him as I got off. As I approached him, I confidently put my right hand forward for a handshake. He took my hand all right, but then kept coming closer. And I wondered what was going on. And he gave me a “bise”, first on my right cheek and then on my left.
00:09:31	Joseph	And that's not something you do in India?
00:09:34	Ishita	Absolutely not. With a man, my superior, someone I had just met. I was in a state of body shock.
00:09:42	Joseph	But you were familiar with the “bise” before going to France, weren't you?
00:09:47	Ishita	Of course I was. I had seen it before, like in movies. It had always seemed very French to me.
00:09:56	Joseph	So you knew about it already, but it still caught you off guard.
00:10:01	Ishita	And that's the thing. In that moment when he approached me, my body was not expecting it. I hadn't experienced how the bise would feel in everyday life.
00:10:13	Joseph	And this was uncomfortable...
00:10:15	Ishita	It was! My whole life in India, I never had a stranger, a man, bring their bodies so close to me, deep into my personal space. I mean, his cheek touched my cheek. And even if I thought about the possibility beforehand, it would still have felt too close.
00:10:37	Joseph	And this is a huge challenge in intercultural settings, isn't it? We feel cultural difference in our body. But then what next? Did you get used to the “bise”?
00:10:48	Ishita	Yes, I did. But it was not just a question of getting over the discomfort. I had to get an intuitive understanding of the bise. When do you give a “bise”? When do you not? Do you do it with children? In your workplace? And how does it fit into other things that French people do? How do you show politeness...how you are supposed to say “bonjour” when you enter a store or even to a stranger on the street? The “bise” is just a small part of a much more complex whole of how people get along.
00:11:25	Joseph	And this reminds us that cultural intuitions are deeply felt, but they reflect complex cultural patterns, and that's why it's not easy to learn new ones.
00:11:37	Joseph	And that brings us to part two: It feels wrong!
Part 2: It feels wrong!		
00:11:56	Joseph	Ishita, when we talk about cultural customs like bowing in Japan or kissing on the cheek in France, it can give the impression that adjusting to a foreign place is simply about getting new habits.
00:12:09	Ishita	But it's not, because those habits are often connected to our cultural values, which are deeply intuitive.
00:12:19	Joseph	And this is something that podcast team member Yvonne Van der Pol experienced...

00:12:27	Yvonne	<p>I sometimes felt stupid as a student in the United States. Why? Because I didn't speak up.</p> <p>Growing up in the Netherlands, the value of modesty was ingrained in me from a young age. I would never volunteer to do something because I thought I was good at it. My logic was that others had to see a talent in me and then decide that I could do a certain task. It was not up to me to show off or tell others of my abilities. But that's not how things worked in the United States. In fact, on one occasion I didn't get a certain role in a musical because I modestly let that question pass by. And the truth is, I would have loved to do that role.</p> <p>Eventually I did learn to speak up more, but even today I don't really relate to this culture of trying to show off your excellence.</p>
00:13:44	Ishita	<p>I am fascinated by this connection between cultural values and the intuitions we feel in the body. If we talk about American values, we use abstract words like individualism or achievement culture. But Yvonne was experiencing these things intuitively.</p>
00:14:04	Joseph	<p>For Yvonne, it simply didn't feel right to quote-unquote show off. And was this the case for you in France as well?</p>
00:14:13	Ishita	<p>Absolutely. A "bise" was normal in France but felt invasive to me. To adjust to my life there, I had to learn a new way of feeling.</p>
00:14:25	Joseph	<p>I love the way you put that, to learn a new way of feeling. Because this describes perfectly the process of getting new cultural intuitions.</p>
00:14:36	Ishita	<p>Yes, and this can create big challenges. First of all, people act in ways which don't feel right, and we face a dilemma. Do we go against our feelings to get along with others, or do we insist on doing things in the way that feels right to us?</p>
00:14:56	Joseph	<p>And this is the dilemma that Emre Seven faced, also in the US.</p>
00:15:02	Emre	<p>My cultural intuitions tripped me up during a job interview for a sales associate position in the United States.</p> <p>Most of the applicants were from the US and other western or so-called WEIRD countries. I'm from Türkiye, one of the few non-WEIRDs. In the interview, we were asked to talk about ourselves, namely our strengths and our accomplishments. That felt uncomfortable because in Türkiye, talking about your own accomplishments can make you look like a showoff, or even arrogant. During the interview, I said, I would prefer that someone who knows me speak about these things, not me.</p> <p>The interviewer was very surprised. Even I felt a bit irritated by my response. The other candidates were quite comfortable, though, speaking about their accomplishments without any problem.</p> <p>I kind of felt awkward, if not stupid. And I wondered, is something wrong with me or with them?</p>
00:16:28	Ishita	<p>I find the parallels with Yvonne's story fascinating.</p>
00:16:31	Joseph	<p>And like with Yvonne, it simply didn't feel right to talk about his own accomplishments. He says it makes you look like a showoff, or even arrogant.</p>

00:16:44	Ishita	This put Emre in a difficult spot. This was a job interview, after all. He was being evaluated, and the interviewer was irritated by his response.
00:16:55	Joseph	Well, as an American, I can imagine how the interviewer felt. "Who does this guy think he is? Refusing to answer this basic question, not being willing to speak up for himself."
00:17:08	Ishita	And worse still, Emre is probably not good at talking about his accomplishments. Even if he tries, he may not come across well by American standards.
00:17:20	Joseph	And he would be going against what feels right to him.
00:17:23	Ishita	So cultural learning can mean that what I feel is wrong, feels right to others, or what I feel is right feels wrong to them. And this is important for cultural bridge people - we want to respect diversity and learn about cultural difference, adapt to life in a foreign country. But these things just aren't simple.
00:17:47	Joseph	Not only can foreign patterns feel wrong, it can be hard to understand different cultural logics.
00:17:55	Ishita	There was a cultural logic to the interviewer's reaction to Emre. The idea of speaking up for oneself simply makes sense in an individualistic society like the US, and in a more collectivist society like Turkey, it simply makes sense that one doesn't talk too much about oneself.
00:18:17	Joseph	But that raises the question, how can we make sense of these different intuitive cultural logics, the different normal ways of feeling that we will encounter in the world.
00:18:30	Ishita	And that brings us to Part 3: Moral Intuitions
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00:18:48	Joseph	Okay, so far we have talked about our cultural intuitions, not matching a foreign situation, like with the <i>bise</i> in France for you or Emre and Yvonne's feelings about speaking up in the US. And this raises two difficult questions for cultural bridge people. First, what do we do when something foreign feels wrong? Do we have to adapt? Do we have to change our values?
00:19:17	Ishita	And this is something I faced in France. If I feel invaded by the " <i>bise</i> ", then should I simply not do it? Should Emre simply refuse to talk about his accomplishments?
00:19:29	Joseph	And the second question it raises is, how can I make sense of these different cultural intuitions?
00:19:36	Ishita	So in my case, how can I make sense of French feelings about how to greet each other, how to use personal space, French gender roles? Can I learn to feel these things in the way that French people do? Do I want to learn to feel these things in a new way? And when something feels wrong, we easily pass judgment. Emre or Yvonne could simply have concluded, well, Americans are arrogant.
00:20:05	Joseph	Unfortunately, intercultural education often doesn't take cultural intuitions into account, our need to deal with difference that touches us at such a deep level.

00:20:18	Ishita	And you and I have talked about what we call the feel-good fallacy in intercultural education, the idea that having a positive attitude is enough to overcome cultural difference.
00:20:33	Joseph	In a survey done by the Japan Intercultural Institute, for example, almost 80% of intercultural professionals agreed with the statement, "I believe that with the right attitude, cultural misunderstanding can be largely avoided." But this simply isn't true. First of all, no matter how positive or open your attitude is, there will always be things that you don't understand, and things that don't feel right. This gap will naturally create misunderstanding.
00:21:06	Ishita	In fact, misunderstanding is the starting point for cultural learning. It's how we deal with that misunderstanding that's important.
00:21:25	Joseph	And the feel-good fallacy is also reflected in statements like "Deep inside, people are all the same", because that misses the fact that our cultural intuitions, our feelings about what is normal and right, are experienced at the deepest level of self.
00:21:43	Ishita	Which brings us back to the question, what do we do when something feels wrong?
00:21:50	Joseph	And this is something we have talked about in this podcast before. Students regularly ask me, for example, do I have to adapt to everything I find in a foreign country? And the simple answer is no. Cultural learning does not mean giving up your moral or ethical compass.
00:22:11	Ishita	But we do need to ask ourselves, do I fully understand the cultural intuitions that feel wrong to me?
00:22:19	Joseph	So in France, you had to ask yourself, what are the cultural intuitions related to the "bise". What are the cultural logics at work?
00:22:30	Ishita	Exactly. And for me, I felt that in France, there was less of an assumption that men and women must be separate from each other. In India, even today, men's spaces and women's spaces are clearly divided - the women are in the kitchen and the men are at the table. In France, these divisions are not nearly as strong. So these were the kinds of things that helped me understand the cultural logics at work.
00:23:14	Joseph	Well, we've been talking about experiencing different cultural logics, but let's dive a bit deeper. Let's look at what research is telling us about these feelings of right and wrong that guide us or sometimes misguide us.
00:23:29	Ishita	And here we have to talk about the work of Jonathan Haidt. We mentioned him briefly in episode 31 when we were talking about values.
00:23:42	Joseph	He studies what is called social intuition. Research in this area tries to understand how we make moral judgments. And what we are learning is that feelings of right and wrong are based on intuitive judgments that take place out of awareness. They are not produced by the rational mind. And so what typically happens is that when something feels wrong, we seek an explanation for why it's wrong. In other words, the feeling comes first and the justification comes second.



00:24:17	Ishita	But if we can be aware of our cultural intuitions and not get carried away by judgments, then perhaps we can start to recognize the hidden cultural patterns underneath. And Haidt's work helps here, too. He explains that moral intuitions are both universal and cultural. He talks about the universal categories of moral feeling: Care, fairness, loyalty, liberty, authority, and purity.
00:24:52	Joseph	And these moral intuitions are part of our evolutionary past as social primates, for example, our feelings about purity are related to the disgust we feel when we see something that is rotten. It evolved to keep us away from pathogens. Our care response evolved based on our need to care for children and others in our community that may be weak or need help.
00:25:20	Ishita	But although these moral foundations are universal, they are also shaped by culture. One society may put a heavy emphasis on loyalty, whereas another emphasizes liberty.
00:25:34	Joseph	Of course, there's much more to Haidt's work than this. But at the very least, we can say that a basic understanding of moral intuitions and how they can vary culturally is important for cultural bridge people.
00:25:57	Ishita	So Jonathan Haidt's work is one way to make sense of different cultural intuitions. But there are others.
00:26:06	Joseph	Because cultural intuitions are based in a form of pattern recognition, anything that can help us make sense of cultural patterns can be of help. In other words, talking about your achievements is part of a larger set of cultural patterns. Identifying those patterns is important.
00:26:26	Ishita	And there are different ways to do this. For example, some people find the cultural dimensions of Geert Hofstede helpful in making sense of cultural patterns.
00:26:39	Joseph	And personally, I really like the work of Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampton Turner. They're the authors of <i>Riding the Waves of Culture</i> , and they use dilemma theory to explore the hidden assumptions behind cultural values.
00:26:53	Ishita	In fact, I learned a lot by reading French literature at a library in Kolkata. I have heard people say that they learnt about the United States from watching the television show FRIENDS.
00:27:07	Joseph	But of course, we don't have to go to a foreign country to make cultural observations. We can find cultural patterns in our own society.
00:27:16	Ishita	That's certainly true in India, where we bump into cultural difference every day. I remember visiting my family's ancestral village when I was 17, and I thought, wow, this is just a different world. I grew up on a school campus with people from all over India, and then I spent time in this small village where people were thinking about, is this pure or not pure, you can touch someone or not touch someone, you can eat this here, but not that there. These things just did not make sense to me.
00:27:56	Joseph	So I guess anytime we find things that are normal to others but not normal to us, we can look for cultural lessons.



00:28:05	Ishita	Well, we have certainly covered a lot of cultural lessons here, and what I take from all this is that learning to read the air in new ways is a very deep process. It's something that requires learning new ways of feeling.
00:28:22	Joseph	And that's not easy. But it's also true that deep challenges bring deep rewards, which I think is a good place to end this episode.
00:31:09	Joseph	<p>For more about moral intuitions, check out Jonathan Haidt's book <i>The Righteous Mind</i>.</p> <p>The Deep Culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. This podcast is noncommercial. If you want to support the work we do, why not become a member of the Japan Intercultural Institute? It will let you take part in our regular learning circle or join JII's <i>Brain, Mind, and Culture Masterclass</i>. To find out more, just do a web search for the Japan Intercultural Institute.</p> <p>Thanks to Emre Seven and Yvonne Van der Pol for sharing their cultural intuition stories, and to our other team members, Daniel Glinz, Zeina Matar, Liu Liu, Ikumi Fritz, and our sound engineer Robinson Fritz, and everyone at JII. And thanks to you, Ishita, for sharing this time with me.</p>
00:29:35	Ishita	Thank you, Joseph. It was great sharing this time with you.