

## 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 11 – **Beyond Dos and Don'ts**)

Description: People often want to learn cultural Dos and Don'ts when going abroad—such as: “In Japan, present your business card with both hands.” But rules like this often don't get you very far. Culture is much more complex than any set of etiquette rules. How should we respond to such requests? Why are simplistic questions or stereotypical statements about culture so common? In this episode, Yvonne van der Pol and Joseph Shaules explore this Dos and Don'ts dilemma from the brain-mind perspective. We ask: What's the difference between surface and deep levels of cultural understanding? How can we go beyond Dos and Don'ts?

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Joseph	Do people in Switzerland whistle?
00:00:02	Yvonne	Whistle? You mean... (laughter, Joseph whistles to demonstrate...) Why did you ask that?
00:00:10		Piano sounds
00:00:20	Joseph	Hello, this is Joseph Shaules. Welcome to the deep culture podcast, where we explore culture and the science of mind. I am here in Tokyo where the weather is heating up. And I am speaking today with Yvonne Van der Pol. How are you, Yvonne?
00:00:37	Yvonne	Hi, Joseph. Wonderful to be here again. I am fine. And the weather is not only heating up on your sides also here in the Netherlands where I am based. It is quite warm today.
00:00:49	Joseph	Well, I have had a busy week, but I am looking forward to this chance to hang out with you and talk about things. So, what is our topic for today, Yvonne?
00:00:59	Yvonne	Well, we are going to talk about the do's and don'ts dilemma
00:01:03	Joseph	The Do's and don'ts dilemma. So, what is the do's and don'ts dilemma?
00:01:08	Yvonne	Well, it is something that many intercultural trainers might experience. It happens to many of us. It is the request for a training that focuses on cultural etiquettes or do's and don'ts. And then clients, for instance, comes to me and says, well, my team is going to be working in Tanzania. So, I would like to give them a training, just the basics, you know, what they need to hit the ground running.
00:01:36	Joseph	So, this is dilemma, right? Because for someone who is going to be working in Tanzania who doesn't have experience with that, just learning some tips or tricks will not really help them that much.
00:01:49	Yvonne	The fact that they recognize that they need preparation is good,

		but it is very superficial. And so did the dilemma is: "How do I tell the customer that what they are asking for is quite superficial and might not help them actually".
00:02:06	Joseph	Also, the request itself has assumptions that you don't agree with. In this case, the request kind of assumes that knowing some cultural etiquette is all you really need.
00:02:17	Yvonne	Yes. And as a cultural bridge person, you know that is not true, but the question itself takes me in a direction that I don't want to go.
00:02:26	Joseph	And it is a dilemma because the person asking may be sincerely trying to do the right thing. Um, but simply have simplistic ideas.
00:02:35	Yvonne	So, the do's and don'ts dilemma is actually quite profound. We also found this problem in everyday life when someone says something rather naive about cultural difference. So, in the end, the do's and don'ts dilemma is about this question: "How do you go from a more surface understanding of culture to a deeper understanding?" And that brings us to Part 1 - Do they whistle in Switzerland? Joseph. No. Okay.
00:03:02		Piano sounds
00:03:13	Yvonne	Before we get into anything theoretical, we should give some more examples of the do's and don'ts dilemma, Joseph!
00:03:19	Joseph	OK, good idea. Um, of course this dilemma, isn't just for intercultural trainers talking about cultural etiquette. You can have this dilemma, anytime someone is talking about culture in a simplistic way.
00:03:36	Yvonne	Okay. And do you have an example?
00:03:38	Joseph	When I was about 18, I remember that I became friends with a Swiss guy. I was living in San Diego at the time, and he was visiting. And I remember once asking him: "Do people in Switzerland whistle?"
00:03:54	Yvonne	Whistle? Do you mean... (Joseph laughs and whistles to demonstrate). Why did you ask that?
00:04:02	Joseph	I was thinking, well, this guy is pretty serious. Maybe Swiss people are, are pretty serious. You know, he should loosen up a little bit. And somehow, I thought that whistling is something that easygoing people do. So, I guessed that if he told me that people in Switzerland don't whistle, that I could confirm that Swiss people are serious... (laughs)
00:04:26	Yvonne	This is interesting how it worked! It is an impossible question.
00:04:32	Joseph	He just, he just shook his head and looked at me like I was crazy.
00:04:36	Yvonne	Oh, wow. Understandable. You meant well, but you had a really naive understanding of cultural difference. Do you have any other examples?
00:04:46	Joseph	Someone once said to me: "Hey Joseph, you've been to a lot of foreign places, and I have been thinking about doing some foreign travel. So, I was wondering, where is good?"

00:04:49	Yvonne	Wow. Where is, where is good?
00:05:00	Joseph	Where is good, where... like “there is our country, and then there are foreign places. And if I am going to go to one of those foreign places, where is a good to go?”
00:05:09	Yvonne	What did you say?
00:05:11	Joseph	There is a very simple mental category that this person is using. It is, you know, home or here and then foreign. So, Yvonne, do you have any examples?
00:05:22	Yvonne	Well, the most frequently asked question to me is: “Is everyone in Amsterdam, smoking marijuana?” (Both laughing). That is quite a negative assumption built in there.
00:05:35	Joseph	It also occurs to me that you get very difficult questions. When you come back from a trip, for example, someone will say: “Oh, so how was China?” Like as though you can answer about China or about the Chinese experience in a sentence or something.
00:05:53	Yvonne	So, the point we need to ask is why do some people have such simple or stereotypical attitudes about cultural difference?
00:06:01	Joseph	And this is something that we have talked about on this podcast before, in particular in the bias is not bias episode. In that episode, we talked about how the human mind is biased by nature.
00:06:16	Yvonne	Yes. We naturally jump to conclusions. We take mental shortcuts, we simplify complex problems and we are biased in favor of those that are similar to us. And we easily overlook diversity in outgroups.
00:06:32	Joseph	So, in that sense, having stereotypical or simplistic attitudes towards cultural differences is natural. Of course, the fact that it is natural doesn't mean that it is good, but we shouldn't be surprised. I mean, if anything, having an intercultural perspective is unnatural. It is not kind of the default setting of the human mind.
00:06:55	Yvonne	We need to be able to explain the difference between a shallow or surface cultural understanding, and deeper cultural understanding.
00:07:03	Joseph	Well, one thing that helped me with that was the idea of differentiation. So, people who have very limited experience with cultural differences have very simple categories in their mind that they are using to differentiate
00:07:21	Yvonne	Going back to the Netherlands, again, if you've never been there and only have an image of windmills, tulips, wooden shoes, marijuana... But that is the image that will come to mind when you hear about Holland or the Netherlands. They cannot really differentiate much, because they have so little experience. They don't know even where to put it on the Europe map. Your mental categories to think about a country are simplistic.
00:07:47	Joseph	Just like my question about whistling in Switzerland. And we have all had the experience of asking naive questions because we don't

		know something about a topic.
00:07:58	Yvonne	Right. So, that is the case. And it reminds us that the do's and don'ts dilemma is natural. It is often a reflection of a shallow level of cultural understanding. The question then becomes: "What is the difference between surface and deep understanding?"
00:08:13	Joseph	And that brings us to Part 2: More than kissing, bowing and shaking hands.
00:08:20		Piano sounds
00:08:28	Yvonne	The title of Part 2 is: Don't just kiss, bow and shake hands. Joseph, we need to explain that title. Don't you think?
00:08:36	Joseph	I think so. It may sound familiar to some of you, there is a very well-known or pretty well-known book that is called " <i>Kiss, Bow or Shake Hands - how to do business in 60 countries</i> ". It is a guide to cultural customs around the world. And of course, the title refers to the different customs for greetings in Japan, you bow in the US you shake hands, in France you might kiss on the cheek.
00:09:01	Yvonne	Well, actually I don't have a copy of that book, but I know it has cultural tips and tricks, things to remember if you're going to be doing business in a foreign country.
00:09:11	Joseph	It is really well done, but culture and cultural difference cannot be explained with information or by giving rules.
00:09:24	Yvonne	Okay. But maybe some other listeners are thinking, well, what is wrong with cultural tips and tricks? We need to know that stuff, right.
00:09:33	Joseph	Well, certainly if you are going to a foreign country, you want to know some basic courtesies, you know, you should know that in some countries the left hand is considered unclean, or if you are visiting Thailand, you should avoid sitting with your feet pointing at the altar of a temple. Yes. It is good to know those things.
00:09:53	Yvonne	So, do's and don'ts can be useful, but talking about culture in terms of rules, in terms of behavior that you should or should not do? You won't to get very far!
00:10:05	Joseph	Well, for example, one common piece of advice that people going to Japan get is: "Well in Japan, present your business card with both hands".
00:10:16	Yvonne	I have heard that often. Is that a good advice Joseph?
00:10:20	Joseph	Well, it is good advice as far as it goes, but it actually doesn't go very far. First of all, it is only useful to you in situations where you exchange business cards, and visitors to Japan spend only 0.000007/8% of their time exchanging business cards.
00:10:44	Yvonne	That's an interesting percentage. Where does it come from?
00:10:49	Joseph	I made it up. It is the "Joseph made it up Institute", but what the point is, the point is that we spend very little time in Japan, exchanging business cards. And so, this kind of advice doesn't actually help you in most situations. So, the deeper problem is that this rule about how to act, doesn't tell you the deeper meaning behind business card etiquette.

00:11:23	Yvonne	But what is the deeper meaning you are talking about? How would you define the difference between surface and deep cultural understanding?
00:11:32	Joseph	Well, from the brain and mind perspective, cultural understanding is a form of pattern recognition. It is the ability to understand what people say and do, know their intentions, the way they think... In Japanese, this is sometimes referred to as "reading the air". So, when you are in a familiar environment, you know what things mean, and what is expected of you.
00:11:56	Yvonne	So, if you are in a foreign environment, you are often cannot read the air. So, in the case of someone who is going to work in Tanzania, a list of do's and don'ts won't help them understand all of the subtleties they will find when interacting with the people over there.
00:12:13	Joseph	Right. People are complex. Situations are complex. Expectations are complex. Culture is complex, and all that complexity takes time to understand. And from the brain mind perspective, the ability to read a complex situation is intuitive. It comes from experience. We get a feel for what things mean. It is not conscious knowledge; it is largely unconscious knowledge. And you simply can't teach that in a half day seminar.
00:12:45	Yvonne	And that's ultimately why do's and don'ts dilemma is so hard for intercultural trainers. They understand that giving a list of etiquettes, won't take you very far. And not only that, it can give you a false sense of confidence.
00:13:00	Joseph	So, that is good. We have figured out why my naive question about whistling in Switzerland was a sign of my simplistic thinking. And we have also seen that do's and don'ts can never capture the complexity of culture, but we could go even deeper. We could ask the question: "Are there levels of intercultural understanding?"
00:13:25	Yvonne	Which brings us to Part 3: Just give me the facts!
00:13:29		Piano sounds
00:13:44	Joseph	So here is the funny thing: we have asked this very difficult sounding question: "Are there levels of intercultural understanding?"
00:13:53	Yvonne	Yes. And there are certainly lots of terms floating around like intercultural awareness, cultural intelligence...
00:14:01	Joseph	... intercultural sensitivity...
00:14:03	Yvonne	...critical awareness, intercultural reality..., you name it!
00:14:06	Joseph	...and their models such as the developmental model of intercultural sensitivity, the DMIS...
00:14:13	Yvonne	...To be honest, just thinking about all these models and words, I find all of these terms hard to tell apart.
00:14:21	Joseph	I think that the listeners of this podcast, they already understand different levels of intercultural understanding. Even if they are not familiar with any of that terminology.

00:14:33	Yvonne	I see where we are going with this, because after all we were just saying that's intercultural, understanding is intuitive. It is something we have a feel for.
00:14:37		Piano sounds
00:15:00	Joseph	Imagine you are at a party, nice atmosphere, and you are chatting with a small group of four people. And the topic of foreign travel comes up. And you talk about your plan to visit a foreign country. Let's say you're going to Elbonia.
00:15:22	Yvonne	Elbonia? It doesn't sound like a real country to me!
00:15:25	Joseph	No, it is, it is not a real country. It is from a comic strip: Dilbert. But anyway, let's imagine you're you say you're going to Elbonia and you ask these people at the party: "What do you think? I need to understand the culture of Elbonia?" And each one of them gives you a different answer.
00:15:47	Yvonne	Okay. So, and this is where the test comes in. The question for you, dear listeners, is to rank these four answers from simplest to most sophisticated.
00:15:59	Joseph	Burke says: "You need to understand the cultural do's and don'ts in Elbonia". And Junah says: "Oh, you need to learn to look at things from the Elbonian perspective". And Gilma says: "You need to get all the facts and figures about Elbonia". And Milpo says: "Well, you need to have a critical understanding of the Elbonian worldview compared to other places." So let me just give that to you again. Burke says, you need to understand the cultural do's and don'ts; Junah says you need to learn to look at things from the Elbonian perspective; Gilma says, you need to get all the facts and figures about Elbonia. And Milpo says you need to have a critical understanding of the Elbonian worldview compared to other places.
00:16:58	Yvonne	And what I found really fascinating, is that when we do this exercise with cultural bridge people, we have extremely similar answers. Number 1, the least sophisticated is Gilma: "You need to get all the facts and figures about Elbonia. Number 2, Burke. "You need to understand the cultural do's and don'ts in Elbonia" already a little bit more sophisticated. Number 3, Junah "You need to learn to look at things from the Elbonian perspective". And then number 4, the most sophisticated level is Milpo. "You need to have a critical understanding of the Elbonian worldview compared to other places".
00:17:41	Joseph	And I will bet that even if your answers were not exactly the same as this list, you understood, for example that: "You need to look at things from the Elbonian perspective" was a more sophisticated way of looking at culture or cultural difference than "You need to get the facts and figures about Elbonia".
00:18:06	Yvonne	Yet how did you know?
00:18:09	Joseph	How did you know which was sophisticated? Well, you had a feeling for it, based on what they said.

00:18:17	Yvonne	Yeah. And that means that you probably were not doing a step-by-step analysis. You were not using intercultural concepts that you learned.
00:18:26	Joseph	You were using your intuitive mind. You were using your deep cultural understanding that you have gained as a cultural bridge person. And if you try this with people who have very little international experience, you get different answers because their perceptions are different, and they are based on their more limited understanding.
00:18:49	Yvonne	Yes. So, to come back to our question, it was: "Are there different levels of intercultural understanding?" We are trying here to convince you that there are, and that you already have a feeling for that, even if you do not have a conceptual understanding.
00:19:06		Piano sounds
00:19:17	Joseph	So, what are these levels that we are talking about? I mean, there are different models that you can use to understand levels of intercultural understanding.
00:19:27	Yvonne	Well, the model we use is called the developmental model of lingual cultural learning, the DMLL. It is supposed to create it using something called dynamic skills theory.
00:19:37	Joseph	Yeah. And that may sound a little technical and there is some theory involved. So, we are not going to go into that in today's podcast...
00:19:48	Yvonne	...but we are planning to do that in a future podcast.
00:19:51	Joseph	But for now, we will just give you a snapshot, the basic idea of the DMLL so that you can understand this party example.
00:20:00	Yvonne	Yes, indeed. Well, the DMLL has four levels: i-1, i-2, i-3 and i-4. The i refers to integrating new things into the self. Those levels relate to the way the brain learns complex skills, and that could be any complex skill or like tennis or cooking, new language, or new cultural understanding.
00:20:26	Joseph	Learning a complex skill requires more than simply adding new knowledge bit by bit.
00:20:33	Yvonne	For example, learning a new language is not just learning more and more words and learning about a foreign culture is not just about learning more facts and new facts. You need to make increasingly complex mental structures.
00:20:48	Joseph	So, the four levels at the party represent an increasingly complex understanding of culture. Gilma is interested in facts and figures. Those are individual bits of knowledge. Burke wants to know the cultural do's and don'ts, those are rules. Junah is interested in the Elbonian perspective. That is much more complex. It requires looking at culture in a complex, dynamic way; and Milpo wants a critical understanding of the Elbonian worldview. That is even more complex than understanding the Elbonian perspective.
00:21:35	Yvonne	Exactly. You may start by simply adding bits of information, but then you need to connect those bits in a meaningful way. And

		then, at a certain point, things come together at a higher level.
00:21:47	Joseph	Like with a language you are not just learning words, you start making sentences. And then eventually things start to come together and almost like magic, you are speaking the language as a dynamic system.
00:21:59	Yvonne	Yeah. That is the Junah level. He is looking at culture in a complex and dynamic way, as a way of looking at the world.
00:22:09	Joseph	And finally, the fourth level is the metalevel of understanding, when the language speaker becomes the language teacher or when you understand culture, not just from a new perspective, but from multiple perspectives.
00:22:24		Piano sounds
00:22:35	Joseph	Okay. Yvonne. So, we have gone through these four levels, but let's relate all of this back to where we started, which was this idea of customers that ask you for do's and don'ts.
00:22:47	Yvonne	Yeah, indeed. And in fact, what they are asking for is the i-2 level or the mapping level of intercultural understanding.
00:22:54	Joseph	They are looking for these rules because that is how they are thinking about cultural difference. And they either have not experienced or have not fully realized that cultural understanding requires a systems level understanding to go to this deeper level where you actually enter into a new worldview, you gain a sense for the local perspective. You can then see that culture cannot be reduced to rules. That culture is dynamic and complex. Wow! We have come a long way from, uh, whether they whistle in Switzerland, but it is time to wrap up. And I wanted to thank you today, Yvonne, for sharing this time with me.
00:23:42	Yvonne	It was a joy to be here and thank you all listeners to be with us, and also, do the exercise with us. I am sure you did. Yeah, that was fun too.
00:23:53		Piano sounds
00:24:03	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. If you are interested in culture and the mind out Jii's brain, mind, and culture masterclass, it is a blended learning course. It is an online community for cultural bridge people. Yvonne and I are both facilitators for that. To find out more, just do a web search for the Japan intercultural Institute. If you liked today's episode, we would really like to hear from you. Leave a comment on Apple podcasts or write us at DC podcast @ Japanintercultural.org. Thanks to our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz, and everyone at Jii. And thank you once again, Yvonne for sharing this time.
	Yvonne	Yeah, thank you, Joseph!
00:24:57	Joseph	All right. See you all next time.
00:25:00		Piano sounds
00:25:54		End of podcast



