

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 15: Rubber Time or Slaves to the Clock?

They are always late! They are slaves to the clock! Joseph Shaules and Yvonne van der Pol explore cultural stereotypes about time. They discuss Edward Hall’s monochronic time and polychronic time, the embodied and embedded nature of time, and Ishita Ray shares her experiences with time logics in India. And you can take a quiz to test your own time logic!

| Time | Speaker | |
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| 00:00:00 | Joseph | He said: “You care more about that machine on your wrist, than the friend in front of your face?” Hello, this is Joseph Shaules. Welcome to the Deep Culture Podcast, where we explore culture and the science of mind. This podcast is for people who move between different cultural worlds. We talk about intercultural experiences, and we dig into the science and the psychology of culture and mind. And I'm here with my cohost Yvonne Van der Pol. |
| 00:00:47 | Yvonne | Hi, Joseph, good morning from my side. |
| 00:00:49 | Joseph | While it's an hour earlier for you today than usual, right? Because you just switched to wintertime. Isn't that right? |
| 00:00:57 | Yvonne | Yeah. We just switched the wintertime and yes, we had to check once more what time do we actually start our recording? |
| 00:01:04 | Joseph | Well, good morning. And that is fitting for today's topic because we will be talking about time. And this episode was inspired by a conversation that we had talking about cultural difference. I remember asking you, what is the single most common cultural difference that people ask you about when you are doing cross-cultural trainings? |
| 00:01:27 | Yvonne | And I said that in these trainings, and I often work with people from governmental and non-governmental organizations. Everyone has a story about cultural differences in time. |
| 00:01:39 | Joseph | What kind of things do you hear? |

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| 00:01:41 | Yvonne | Well, for example, um, complaining about people from a certain country being late to meetings, or not keeping deadlines actually quite some negative judgments. |
| 00:01:53 | Joseph | Yeah. It always seems to be complaints. Doesn't it? Sometimes it's the opposite kind of complaint. You know, people are too obsessed with the clock, but I don't often hear someone say, "Wow, I really like how the people in that country experience time." It always seems to be something negative. |
| 00:02:09 | Yvonne | And actually that's an interesting thing because time, when you think about it, it's not an easy topic to talk about. It's hard to get people to look at time in a new way, or even understand how culture can influence our experience of time. |
| 00:02:26 | Joseph | I don't think there's even much research or academic writing about this either. |
| 00:02:32 | Yvonne | Everyone notices cultural differences in time, but even the specialists aren't really helping us to get these cultural differences about time straight in our minds. |
| 00:02:42 | Joseph | Well then that's our challenge for today. It's up to us. So, on today's podcast, we will dig into this topic Culture and Time. |
| 00:02:51 | Yvonne | And that brings us to part one, The Silent Language. |
| Part 1: The Silent Language | | |
| 00:03:00 | Joseph | Yvonne, you said that in the trainings you give, there's always someone that brings up issues related to time. |
| 00:03:06 | Yvonne | Many participants in my trainings have a Western background and they come up with questions like "How can we get the input of everyone in the project cycle on time?" Or "How can I make sure we can accomplish our project planning on time?" There's indeed this emphasis on, on time. And these people are often really frustrated. |
| 00:03:29 | Joseph | Well, and I suppose what they want is that you kind of give them some magic words that will get their partners to perform on the kind of schedule that they expect. |
| 00:03:40 | Yvonne | Exactly. What about you, Joseph? |
| 00:03:44 | Joseph | Well, I teach students from all over the world and it's a topic that really gets students heated up. Not long ago I had a Turkish student arguing with a German student in front of everyone about, "Is it unreasonable to be upset if your friend is 20 minutes late for an appointment and doesn't apologize?" |
| 00:04:05 | Yvonne | Okay. And what did the German students say? |
| 00:04:08 | Joseph | Well, he said, "Well, friends shouldn't waste my time. So, it's natural to be bothered if they don't apologize." |

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| 00:04:15 | Yvonne | And the Turkish students? |
| 00:04:18 | Joseph | Or the Turkish students said, "Oh, come on, they're your friend. Why would you make such a big deal out of it?" |
| 00:04:23 | Yvonne | So, we hear this kind of thing over and over. Why are people from that country always late and the other way around? Why are people from that country so obsessed with schedules and deadlines? |
| 00:04:35 | Joseph | Which leads to all those negative stereotypes that we've been talking about. So, what is going on here, Yvonne? |
| 00:04:42 | Yvonne | Well, let's turn to the master. As you know, the person who has done the most, who has shed light on this topic is Edward Hall. |
| 00:04:50 | Joseph | I am always happy to bring up Edward Hall, his classic book, which he published in 1959 was called <i>The Silent Language</i> and silent because he discussed how unconscious culture shapes our perceptions. |
| 00:05:07 | Yvonne | Yes. And so, the silent language relates to how we communicate using space and time. By giving someone a larger office, we make them feel important. And by keeping someone waiting, we may insult them. |
| 00:05:23 | Joseph | So, in that sense time talks, it's not simply a way to keep track of activities. It is integral to human life and communication. |
| 00:05:34 | Yvonne | So, what were Hall's insights about time? |
| 00:05:38 | Joseph | Well, his genius was to identify patterns, which we don't normally think about consciously. Hall pointed out that time is not simply a matter of minutes on the clock or the changing of the seasons. Humans organize their behavior with different time systems or feelings or, or time logics. And that we take these for granted as though they're the same for everyone. But in fact, they are deeply influenced by culture. So, I like this quote here from Hall, and this is a slight paraphrase: "People in the Western world, particularly Americans, tend to think of time as something fixed from which we cannot escape, just like the air we breathe". |
| 00:06:25 | Yvonne | When I work with Westerners, this sounds like the way they relate to time as well. |
| 00:06:31 | Joseph | These different time logics become the source of all these stereotypes that we hear. |
| 00:06:37 | Yvonne | Yeah. And it's interesting. People complain about others being late often don't realize there are stereotypes about them too. For instance, they are always pressuring people to hurry up, or they don't take the time to get to know the situation, the context, the |

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| | | people, or they have unrealistic expectations about how long things take. |
| 00:07:03 | Joseph | So, these are the stereotypes each coming from these different points of view, these different time logics. But that raises the question: What exactly are these different time logics? And then how can we bridge people between them? |
| 00:07:19 | Yvonne | And that brings us to part two Rubber Time or Slaves to the Clock. |
| Part 2: Rubber Time or Slaves to the Clock? | | |
| 00:07:33 | Yvonne | Before we put labels on different time logic, wouldn't it be nice to give our listeners a chance to think about their own time logic? |
| 00:07:42 | Joseph | Let's do a little mental experiment. If someone says: draw a picture of time, what is the image that comes to your mind? I don't mean draw a clock. I mean, try to visualize time as an idea or metaphorically. |
| 00:08:02 | Yvonne | Okay. Now compare the image in your mind to this description written by Edward Hall, about how Americans think of time: <i>"Americans think of time as a road or a ribbon stretching into the future, along which one progresses. The road has segments or compartments, which are to be kept discrete. One thing at a time. People who cannot schedule time are looked upon as impractical".</i> |
| 00:08:35 | Joseph | So, what was the image in your mind? Was it similar to this, a line or a road stretching off into the future? If that was the image in your mind, then just spend a minute imagining what other images might be possible. |
| 00:08:53 | Yvonne | Some people see time very differently than a straight line. |
| 00:08:57 | Joseph | When I do this with students, some represent time as a circle, or as in cycles that repeat, or as a spiral going upward, or as a series of overlapping circles, the different things that you spend your time on. |
| 00:09:16 | Yvonne | Well, and these two different sets of images are about what Hall refers to when he talks about monochronic time and polychronic time. Monochronic time is what Hall was describing time as the order in the universe. Efficiency refers to doing the most possible in the smallest increments of time. And there's a tendency to feel that things should be done one thing at a time, because time is experienced in a straight line. |
| 00:09:46 | Joseph | Well, and there is of course an important truth behind this logic of monochronic time, and that is that time is limited. There are only so many hours or minutes or seconds in a day. And because of that, the thinking goes, we should try and do as much as possible as quickly as possible. |

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| 00:10:06 | Yvonne | Is this the time logic that comes naturally to you? |
| 00:10:10 | Joseph | It's certainly what I grew up with in the US. And it's really common in Japan. So yes, this monochronic logic does feel very natural to me. And how about you? |
| 00:10:20 | Yvonne | Yeah. Well, same thing living in the Netherlands definitely monochronic time is part of me. |
| 00:10:26 | Joseph | So, you and I have both been influenced mostly by monochronic time. So, we need another perspective. So, I asked Ishita Ray from the podcast team about her experience of different time logics growing up in India, working for Indian multinationals and with international teams. So, let's take a listen. |
| 00:11:11 | Ishita Ray | In my family everyone is a stickler for time. Everything happens by the clock. This might seem normal, if you grew up in a country where people pack their schedules and live by the clock, but not so normal where I grew up, in Durgapur, a small town in Eastern India. I grew up using different times systems. In English, we say time is money. Like it's a precious commodity. In Bengali, there is a word "naagad", it means "around" or "approximately", and can be used only for time. Time for us, more often than not, is approximate. Not an exact quantity, which we can spend or waste. The word for yesterday and tomorrow, "kaal", is the same. In Bengali, the word kaal could mean yesterday, tomorrow, time or season, depending on the context. The concepts we use to talk about time are themselves very flexible and fluid, even distances are given in time. So, when asked, how far is it to the store? We say it's a 10-minute walk. |
| 00:12:42 | Ishita | There is a certain logic, a rhythm to this fluidity. India is primarily an agrarian society with vast shifts in climate and temperatures within a single year. So, time cannot be viewed as linear, static, or be defined once and for all. Time must depend on context. Seasons are viewed as something that returns. Farmers who have lost their crops this year due to floods must remain hopeful about a bounty the following season. If there is drought, the time for repaying the loans will have to be extended to continue feeding families. Seasons influence time. Relationships influence time. Community influences time. Life influences time. In my modern work life, I do understand the logic of the clock. Yes, it is important to reach the office in time for the 9:00 AM meeting. But do I ignore my neighbor whose car has broken down and needs a lift, an unwell loved one who needs to go to the doctor? How do I control the water on the roads from the especially heavy |

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| | | monsoons? Does this mean the meeting is less important? That time is less important? No, but when life itself is uncertain, how can time be fixed? Because of this, the overall approach towards something that couldn't be done today is very forgiving. There is always a next time. So, what about when setting timelines in an international project with multicultural team members? Does one stick to deadlines no matter what, or should some things be left flexible? Well, it depends. |
| 00:14:53 | Yvonne | I love it when she says, "life influences time". And unlike monochronic time, polychronic time is more flexible. It can be stretched and adapted to the needs of a particular situation. |
| 00:15:07 | Joseph | Well, I've heard it called "jamkaret" or rubber time in Indonesia, or Island time in Hawaii, or elastic time in Africa, and the emphasis is flexibility. Time should serve the needs of people, the needs of the situation, and not the other way around. People expect the unexpected and they use time accordingly. |
| 00:15:29 | Yvonne | And there's an important truth that lies behind the logic of polychronic time, and that is there is always more time. The sun will come up again and time will go on. And because of that, we should appreciate the time we have and give time to the things that are important. And it's not so difficult to understand these concepts, but that doesn't mean that it's easy to adapt to other time systems or to use them to our own advantage. |
| 00:15:59 | Joseph | Oh, no. On the contrary, it's, it's really hard. How did you learn about these different time logics? |
| 00:16:06 | Yvonne | Yes. Well, mainly through my work in Central America. And I vividly remember a field visit in Nicaragua and as a program officer working for an NGO, my colleague and I we visited various stakeholders. And one of these persons was the local director of the water company. And when arriving the set time, the director was still in a meeting, but he waved that we could join. And we shook hands with everyone inside and we were given chairs to the side. |
| 00:16:38 | Joseph | So, he invited you in while there was another meeting with someone else that was still going on? |
| 00:16:45 | Yvonne | Well, yes. And we were a bit embarrassed actually, because their conversation, what seemed to be in a crucial phase and were we supposed to hear this? is what I thought. And when it was finally finished, and we thought that our conversation could start... |
| 00:17:01 | Joseph | So, it was going to be your turn, right? |

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| 00:17:04 | Yvonne | Well right! But then the secretary passed by, the director excused himself a moment, he returned, answered an incoming phone call, and other staff members came in to ask questions so, they got instructions and so forth, a lot was happening at the same time. |
| 00:17:21 | Joseph | Also, you were kind of integrated into the environment and then eventually you did get to talk to him, right? |
| 00:17:29 | Yvonne | Yeah. It gave us the chance to chat with everyone. And we exchange bits and pieces of information of what we wanted to discuss and not only with the director, but also with relevant others. Maybe four or five hours later, we really had discussed everything we wanted. Well, but I must say it took slightly longer than we had foreseen. |
| 00:17:50 | Joseph | So, so this really sounds like a polychronic experience. How did that feel to you? |
| 00:17:57 | Yvonne | I liked it a lot, but I can imagine that it can be so stressful. And mainly for people who arrive with a packed schedule book and a long to-do list, well, people for whom time is money. |
| 00:18:11 | Joseph | So, what's the time logic that's operating here? |
| 00:18:15 | Yvonne | Well, it shows what Hall meant by the word Polychronic. Poly means many. So polychronic time is when people juggle multiple tasks at the same time and use time flexibly, you dedicate more time to important things. |
| 00:18:33 | Joseph | Well, it took me a long time living in Mexico to get used to polychronic time. But even then, I often didn't handle things well. |
| 00:18:43 | Yvonne | Well, what happened? |
| 00:18:46 | Joseph | Well, I was living in central Mexico, this beautiful city of Zacatecas, cobblestone streets and plazas and churches. And I, I walked everywhere that I went and on one occasion I was walking towards the central Plaza to meet my girlfriend. And I was walking a bit quickly because I happened to be a bit behind schedule. But then a friend of mine spotted me from across the street and he ran over, and he excitedly started to tell me about this car that he had bought and what a great deal he got. And he started to go on and on about this. Well, I was interested, but I was also feeling kind of impatient, and it was making me more late. So eventually I kind of pointed at my watch and said, "Oh, I know, sorry, but I really have to go." And when I did that, he stopped in mid-sentence. He looked at me, he looked at my watch and he said: "You are so American!" (<i>Como eres americano!</i>). He said, "You care more about that machine on your wrist, than the friend in front of your face". |

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| 00:19:54 | Yvonne | Oh, wow. That's painful. At the same time, it's also a great story that shows people can get frustrated by monochronic time too. |
| 00:20:05 | Joseph | Yeah. You know, with polychronic time, you give time to that, which is important. So why would you ever blame your watch for cutting off a conversation with your friend? |
| 00:20:17 | Yvonne | And which raises a question, how could you have entered the conversation more artfully given that you really didn't want to stay much longer? |
| 00:20:26 | Joseph | Well, if I had understood the polychronic logic a bit better, it would have been easy. I just needed to explain to him, "Oh, you know, my girlfriend is waiting." And he would have understood why it was in a hurry and that I needed to go. And he would have sent me along my way. |
| 00:20:42 | Yvonne | But it's not easy to learn a new time logic. Why should that be? |
| 00:20:47 | Joseph | Well, that's what brings us to part three Embodied and Embedded. |
| Part 3: Embodied and Embedded | | |
| 00:20:59 | Yvonne | Okay. Joseph, how long did it take you to get used to the time logic that you encountered in Mexico? |
| 00:21:05 | Joseph | To be clear, not everyone uses the same time logic all the time in Mexico, but when I was living there, I tried, but I never really got used to this polychronic time. I remember for example, waiting in front of a movie theater for that same girlfriend and the movie started at seven, but at five to seven, she still hadn't arrived. So, I told our friends, "Well, you guys go inside and I'll look for you after she gets here." But I was getting irritated because I hated to miss the beginning of the movie. And I was thinking to myself, you know, "She's gonna make me miss the beginning of the movie. And that's definitely not okay. There can't be a cultural excuse for that." |
| 00:21:52 | Yvonne | Okay. Now what happened? |
| 00:21:55 | Joseph | Well at, at seven 10 she arrived, and I was irritated and I kind of snapped at her, and I said, you know, I hate missing the beginning of the movie. And once again, I got this amazed look and she just said: "Look, if it's so important for you to see the beginning of the movie, why didn't you go inside?" And, and she was right. I mean, I was stuck in my linear logic thinking I couldn't go into the theater until she had arrived. Of course, she would have understood. Of course, she would have found us inside. |
| 00:22:29 | Yvonne | Makes sense. |
| 00:22:30 | Joseph | And she was confused about why I would wait for her rather than going in to see the beginning of the movie, and then why I would |

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| | | blame her for the fact that I didn't go in to see the beginning of the movie. It just made no sense to her at all. |
| 00:22:50 | Yvonne | So, what can brain mind sciences teach us about these different time logics? |
| 00:22:56 | Joseph | Well, time differences are hard to adjust to because there's such a deep part of the intuitive mind, this unconscious autopilot that we rely on so much in our everyday life. |
| 00:23:10 | Yvonne | Yes. And in terms of brain and mind sciences, we can say the time is embodied and embedded. |
| 00:23:17 | Joseph | So, it's embodied because we internalize these time systems and these expectations so thoroughly. And it's embedded in the environment around us. That is to say that these patterns of time are in our environment. And so, one of the lessons from the brain and mind sciences is that these time logics are absorbed at a very young age, which reminds me of this article about unconscious cultural assumptions about raising children and that article discusses differences in time, and it talks about Dutch attitudes in particular. |
| 00:23:57 | Yvonne | Yes, I know what you're talking about. It refers to the famous three r's "rust, regelmaat, en reinheid", in English rest, regularity and cleanliness. |
| 00:24:10 | Joseph | It's an article by Harkness and Super, uh, and I wrote about it in my book, the intercultural mind. And so, here's a passage about that: <i>"In contrast to Italian and American parents, Dutch parents spoke at great length of the need for regular routines and getting enough sleep. Dutch parents emphasized the need for regularity. As one Dutch parent said: "To bed on time, because they really need to rest to grow, and regularity is very important when they are little".</i> Does that match your experience Yvonne? |
| 00:24:46 | Yvonne | Oh, definitely it does. And rest and regularity are still integral values in bringing up children. And babies need their rest, and all children have specific bedtimes and having dinner altogether as rest points in the hectic family life is indeed something that parents try for. It's not strange even that CEOs of huge businesses or even ministers say that they have to be back home at six, to have dinner with our kids. |
| 00:25:18 | Joseph | It's a very linear time logic, but you actually set aside or schedule a very particular period of time to rest. |
| 00:25:28 | Yvonne | Exactly! |
| 00:25:29 | Joseph | So, we've talked about these different time logics, but let's give our listeners a test. |

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| 00:25:35 | Yvonne | Let's see if you can apply to different time logics to the same situation. |
| 00:25:42 | Joseph | So, imagine you run to catch the subway, but you just miss it. The door closes in your face and the next subway comes in 10 minutes. There you are on the platform. Have you gained 10 minutes, or have you lost 10 minutes? Both answers are possible depending on the time logic that you are using, |
| 00:26:12 | Yvonne | You lose 10 minutes if you think in terms of monochronic time, you are prevented from going on to your next activity, so the time is lost. But from the polychronic point of view, you've gained 10 minutes because now you have 10 minutes free to use in any way you want. You're free from the tyranny of the clock for a short time. Joseph, how would you react? |
| 00:26:36 | Joseph | Well, I'd like to say that I'd be flexible and enjoy the extra 10 minutes, but probably I would simply just be irritated. |
| 00:26:43 | Yvonne | So even if your attentive mind, the linear rational mind told to that, it was no big deal, your intuitive mind, your unconscious autopilot would make you react with irritation. |
| 00:26:57 | Joseph | These are things that are experienced intuitively. So, what we need to develop is a feeling for these different time logics so that we can use or understand both of them. And that's what lets us be a cultural bridge person. |
| 00:27:12 | Yvonne | What about a final quiz question? Which time logic is more efficient? Monochronic time or polychronic time? |
| 00:27:23 | Joseph | People who are used to monochronic time will often answer that it's more efficient because according to them, it lets you get more done. It makes things more predictable. However, this is only true if the activity you're talking about is a predictable one. For unpredictable activities, polychronic time can be more efficient. So, for example, in Mexico, I remember getting on a bus and I asked the driver, uh, excuse me, what time will the bus leave? And he said, when the bus is full, now this creates a different kind of efficiency. |
| 00:27:59 | Yvonne | Yes. Then for instance, if you're an artist, you can't plan everything by the clock. You need flexibility and you need to shift to some other activity if you're not making progress. And it's not efficient for an artist to try to make art from nine to five, because you never know when the inspiration will strike. And if you're not inspired, it's best to wash the dishes or do the laundry. |

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| 00:28:24 | Joseph | And, you know, Google is famous for allowing employees one day a week to work on their own projects. They understand that rigid schedules get in the way of creative work. |
| 00:28:34 | Yvonne | Yes. Well, there's so many other aspects of time that we haven't talked about today, such as future versus past orientation. Do you look to the future to guide the present and therefore assume that change is good? |
| 00:28:50 | Joseph | Or do you look to the past to guide the present and assume that we have to treat change with caution? |
| 00:28:57 | Yvonne | And they're even cultural groups for whom the future is not in front of them, because you cannot see it. What is in front of you is the past, and you are moving backwards towards the future. The future is unknown, so you cannot see it. |
| 00:29:14 | Joseph | And then there's also this idea of the time horizon. So, if I say plan for the future, do you think in terms of six months or 50 years? |
| 00:29:26 | Yvonne | Of course, there's so much more, but I think it's almost time to wrap up this episode, Joseph. |
| 00:29:32 | Joseph | I think so. If you are looking for more information about this, please check out the <i>Silent Language</i> by Edward Hall. The article that we discussed, is called <i>Themes and variations: Parental Ethno-theories in Western cultures</i> , that's by Sarah Harkness and Charles M. Super. |
| 00:29:57 | Joseph | The deep culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute. We are an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. If you are interested in culture and the mind, check out JII's Brain, Mind, and Culture Masterclass. It is a blended learning course and an online community of cultural bridge people. Just do a web search for the Japan Intercultural Institute and check out our early bird discount, 50 euros off. If you liked today's episode, we would really like to hear from you, leave a comment on Apple podcasts or write us at dcpodcasts@Japanintercultural.org . You can also find us on YouTube and leave comments there. Thanks so much to our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz, a special thanks to Ishita Ray for sharing her reflections about time today. And of course, thanks to everyone on the podcast team. Zeina Matar and Daniel Glinz and everyone at JII. And of course, Yvonne, it is always a pleasure to spend this time with you. |
| 00:31:12 | Yvonne | Well, thank you, Joseph, and thank you for sharing the time also listeners, thanks for sharing the time we've used this word frequently in this podcast, but it was wonderful. |
| 00:31:22 | Joseph | It has been a wonderful, shared time. |

