

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 **Liu Liu** 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 43 – Proxemics–Your Space or Mine?)

Do people touch a lot or hardly at all? Do you show guests the kitchen? Do you speak to the stranger sitting next to you? In this episode, Joseph Shaules and Liu Liu explore proxemics—the study of the human use of space. We learn about Edward Hall’s pioneering work in this area, and cultural differences in body language, physical space, and life spaces. Podcast team members share stories of navigating these differences, and explain that they reflect cultural patterns we are just now starting to understand.

Time	Speaker	
00:00:00	Liu Liu	(Hook) I remember once I was on the airport shuttle bus at New Delhi airport and suddenly, I felt something warm pressing against my back. I turned around to check and it was a man with a big belly standing quite close to me. I moved forward to get away from his warm belly, but to my surprise, he moved with me, so his belly was against my back until we got onto the flight.
00:00:38	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 Liu Liu.
00:00:48	Liu Liu	Hello Joseph.
00:00:50	Joseph	So happy to have you co-hosting as the newest member of the podcasting team.
00:00:55	Liu Liu	I'm very pleased to be part of this team and to co-host this episode with you.
00:01:03	Joseph	So, Liu Liu, the title of this episode is <i>Proxemics - Your space or mine?</i>
00:01:10	Ishita	Yes. The word proxemics is not something you hear every day, but it refers to the study of the human use of space.
00:01:20	Joseph	And we have talked about the use of space before. In episode 42, for example, Ishita Ray talked about how she felt invaded when a French person kissed her on the cheek for the first time.
00:01:33	Liu Liu	That's right. Proxemics concerns itself with things like this. For Ishita, having a man go deeply into her personal space was uncomfortable and something that wouldn't usually happen in India.
00:01:48	Joseph	But in France, of course, kissing on the cheek is a typical greeting in lots of situations. So how we use space, how much we touch, these things depend on culture.

00:01:59	Liu Liu	I remember when I moved from China to the UK, I was struck by the way people formed lines, like for a bus, anytime there was more than one person waiting for anything. It's not like that in China.
00:02:14	Joseph	Well, and when I was living in Mexico, my male friends would hug me and put their arms around me, whereas now living in Japan, that just doesn't happen.
00:02:23	Liu Liu	And when you run into these differences, you start to learn that they aren't just habits or different ethical rules. They reflect deeper cultural patterns.
00:02:35	Joseph	And that's because culture shapes not just how we use physical space, it also shapes our psychological spaces.
00:02:45	Liu Liu	For example, is it okay to ask your colleague if they are married? Do you talk to a stranger in the checkout line? Would you invite your boss to visit your home? These questions relate to our psychological territory, how we manage life spaces.
00:03:05	Joseph	And so that's what we'll dig into in this episode. What are some cultural differences in how we organize our life spaces? What is considered public or private? How much we touch? How much eye contact we make? Do we shake hands when we first meet.
00:03:24	Liu Liu	We will see these things reflect universal aspects of human nature like territory. But teach us about cultural differences as well.
00:03:33	Joseph	And we'll hear about the pioneering work of Edward Hall. He's the one who coined the term proxemics.
00:03:41	Liu Liu	And we will hear from podcast team members about how they have navigated these cultural differences.
00:03:49	Joseph	And that brings us to part one, Space Speaks
Part One – Space Speaks		
	Joseph	So, Liu Liu, we've said that proxemics is the study of the human use of space, but that sounds pretty vague.
00:04:18	Liu Liu	I think it's vague because we usually don't think about space consciously, but we certainly do feel it. If someone stands too close to you, you step back. Or your boss has an office, but you just have a desk. And we will talk about cultural differences. But before that, let's give some background about the person who invented this field of study, Edward Hall.
00:04:48	Joseph	Edward Hall is often considered the founder of the field of intercultural communication. He published the book <i>The Silent Language</i> in 1959, which focused on cultural differences in how we experience time. Then in 1963, he first used the term proxemics in an article. And in 1966, in the book <i>The Hidden Dimension</i> , he explores the idea of proxemics in detail.
00:05:17	Liu Liu	He starts with the idea of territory. Many animals, including humans, have a space that they defend as their own. A dog, for example, will bark at people it considers to be coming into its territory. But animals also

		have shared territory. A group of chimpanzees will defend its territory against chimps from other groups.
00:05:45	Joseph	So what Hall was interested in was how humans use space. And his book attempts to “provide an organizing frame for space as a system of communication”. So that's a bit abstract. Let's dig into that a little bit. Space as a system of communication means, in effect, that space speaks. Space means something.
00:06:12	Liu Liu	That's right. A large office means you are more important. Standing closer communicates something - intimacy, perhaps, or maybe a threat. We use space in ways which are meaningful. We look down on someone, or we look up to somebody or turn our back to someone.
00:06:37	Joseph	And as cultural bridge people, we often have to navigate cultural differences in the use of space. As podcast team member Daniel Glinz tells us...
00:06:51	Daniel	I am rather used to cultural differences in how we use space. I've lived with such extremes as Mexico, where slapping your back indicates that you're in business, and Japan, where you hardly ever touch other people's bodies. But I have been caught off guard at times. Once I arrived in a charming small town in Morocco, Ouarzazate, and a guy was waiting at the bus station just to see whether he could make friends with some tourists, probably for fun, or maybe in the hope that starting a friendship that could get him a job abroad. He invited me to stay at his home, which I was happy to accept. We sat around talking for quite a while until it started to get late. Finally, I said, I think I'd like to go to sleep. And he asked me, “Where?” At that moment I realized there was no other room than the living room and his room. In the end, I spent the night lying on the same bed as he did, next to him. I felt rather awkward lying next to this near stranger. But that was all. He wasn't trying to be, shall we say, invasive? On the other hand, once I met a Brazilian woman in an airplane from Geneva to Amsterdam. We started chatting and she kept accenting what she said by slapping me on the leg. She didn't even know my name.
00:08:42	Liu Liu	I love how matter of fact Daniel is about these experiences. But things like this can be quite uncomfortable. When I moved to the UK, I remember I was quite surprised to sometimes have women touching my arm while talking to me, looking straight into my eyes, saying, “How are you doing, love?”, “Oh, hello darling!”
00:09:09	Joseph	Which I guess wouldn't happen in China?
00:09:12	Liu Liu	Well, if it did, I would think that the woman likes me.
00:09:18	Joseph	That's the thing, right? The way that we use space is not just about staying in our comfort zone. How we use space means something.
00:09:28	Liu Liu	Exactly. At first, I wasn't sure what it meant to have a woman talk to me like that.

00:09:36	Joseph	And what did it mean for the Brazilian woman to be slapping Daniel on the leg? Is that typical? Did she like him?
00:09:44	Liu Liu	And this is what Hall meant by “space as a system of communication”. The use of space has to be interpreted.
00:09:55	Joseph	Now, Hall divided space into four different zones, which he describes in terms of distance - intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, and public distance.
00:10:10	Liu Liu	Intimate distance is for very close relationships. Personal distance for friends, social distance for more formal settings, and public distance for strangers.
00:10:27	Joseph	Hall was trying to understand the hidden rules or the unconscious systems that regulate human behavior. I imagine him watching people interact almost the way that you study animals, trying to make sense of the patterns.
00:10:46	Liu Liu	What he noticed, for example, that at an intimate distance, people automatically whisper. At a public distance, people naturally raise their voice. And when people’s behavior doesn’t match these expectations, we get uncomfortable or defensive. Like when a stranger stands too close. Or the opposite, when your friend doesn’t hug you like they normally do.
00:11:29	Joseph	And Hall even tried to measure these distances. He said intimate distance was from zero to around 45 cm, personal distance from there to around 120 cm, social distance up to just over 2 meters and public distance above that.
00:11:49	Liu Liu	But I found a contradiction here. Hall proposes these distances, but he also says that these distances depend on culture and on the situation.
00:12:05	Joseph	Well, I agree, and I don't think it's possible really to measure this in a very exact way, although some people have tried. In one study, researchers asked almost 9000 people in 42 countries their preferred intimate distance, personal distance and social distance. They used a diagram, but of the countries they studied, the three that chose the greatest public distance used with a stranger were Romania, Hungary and Saudi Arabia. And the three closest were Bulgaria, Peru and Argentina. The average personal distance chosen by Romanians was more than 130 cm, while Argentinians said 75 cm.
00:12:53	Liu Liu	Well, that’s a big difference, but maybe it’s not so surprising. It’s pretty obvious that people in some places use space differently. I remember once I was on the airport shuttle bus at New Delhi airport and suddenly, I felt something warm pressing against my back. I turned around to check and it was a man with a big belly standing quite close to me.
00:13:23	Joseph	Wow. And so, what did you do? How did you react?
00:13:27	Liu Liu	Well, obviously I moved forward to get away from his warm belly, but to my surprise, he moved with me, so his belly was against my back until we got onto the flight.
00:13:42	Joseph	Oh, my goodness. So how was that for you?

00:13:47	Liu Liu	I learned that space is to be filled in, in some cultures, in this case in India, and to be left empty in others.
00:14:00	Joseph	I love the way that you put this – “space is to be filled in, in some cultures and to be left empty in others”. And so, the challenge is how do we navigate these different cultural uses of space?
00:14:15	Liu Liu	Which brings us to part two: The Psychology of Space
Part 2: The Psychology of Space		
	Liu Liu	Joseph, we have been talking about culture and space in terms of physical distance, but the biggest differences relate to psychological distance.
00:14:46	Joseph	Well, I feel this in Japan. In Japan, there's this big distinction between inner and outer spaces, and there's a clear dividing line between them.
00:14:57	Liu Liu	So, for example, what I noticed that when you enter a Japanese home, you take off your shoes.
00:15:04	Joseph	Exactly. And the entryway marks the boundary between the outside and inside. So, taking off your shoes is not only about keeping the floor clean. And there are other things that also reflect this inside outside distinction, like the word <i>honne</i> , which refers to your inner or true self, versus <i>tatemae</i> , your outer or public self. Or for example, one of the words for friend or colleague is <i>nakama</i> , which literally means something like ‘in the inner space’ or ‘in group’. And the list goes on and on.
00:15:43	Liu Liu	And the point is that humans manage space both physically and psychologically. What is personal, what is private, the boundaries that keep us separate. We can be physically close to someone yet keep a large psychological distance.
00:16:02	Joseph	And this is something that Ishita Ray tells us is important for understanding the psychological spaces in in India.
00:16:12	Ishita	India is a country with many crowded spaces. Take a local train in Mumbai or the metro in Delhi and you'll experience it firsthand. And it can seem like spaces are intertwined, boundaries are diffuse. On that train you may exchange seats with co passengers or learn about the salary of your seatmate's daughter. But this apparent physical closeness coexists with complex psychological distances. How space is used in India reflects the scarcity of resources and the inequality of who can access them. When resources are scarce, who you share them with - the in-group - is clearly defined and within the ingroup, boundaries are fluid. For example, in Indian household, family members are very physical with each other. Siblings and cousins swap clothes, sleep in the same bed. At the same time, you need to know exactly who does not belong to the in-group. Hence, there are also impenetrable psychological barriers even within the same physical space. For example, you maintain a psychological distance with the person who cooks food for your family, typically from a less privileged community. They cook the food for every meal you put inside your body,

		but you rarely have any physical contact with them. Their place in the house is separate, perhaps on the ground or in a corner of the kitchen, and they eat leftover food from previous days or food that is cooked in separate utensils. So, in India, although you may be physically close to many people, your life is often dominated by psychological boundaries that keep people separate.
00:18:33	Joseph	Well, this is powerful. And it is uncomfortable to think that human beings can exclude each other in this way.
00:18:42	Liu Liu	Yes, it is a really powerful account. Of course, this doesn't just happen in India. Every society has categories of people who are seen as the other, who are kept in separate physical and psychological spaces.
00:19:01	Joseph	And in everyday life too, we divide our lives up into different zones. For example, what is considered private and what is considered public. An American might say to guests, "Oh, just get whatever you want from the refrigerator". Whereas in Japan you typically won't be shown the kitchen, much less the refrigerator. It's just too private.
00:19:25	Liu Liu	And these expectations reflect underlying values and assumptions. For me, growing up in China, for example, in my home, I didn't have what you might call personal space, a room or a desk or even a drawer that was considered mine. And this represents a more collective logic – "We are family. We are all in this together. It's not about yours or mine, it's all ours."
00:19:57	Joseph	But these cultural logics are not always obvious, even to people in those societies. Why do people use space in the ways that they do?
00:20:08	Liu Liu	And this is something that podcast team member Zeina Matar has been thinking about as well.
00:20:18	Zeina	<p>I grew up in Lebanon, in a region known for elaborate hospitality, but also where people can be sensitive to signs of disrespect.</p> <p>In the Middle East, there is no way that a person will readily get on an elevator already occupied by three or four others. Why? Because with three or four standing against the walls, the next person in will have to stand in the middle, thus turning their back to somebody. That's very impolite. So, people prefer to wait for the next elevator.</p> <p>Another common taboo relates to using the left hand, which is associated with using the toilet. For example, you should avoid using your left hand when eating, which can be tricky if you use your utensils continental style, with a fork in the left hand and knife in the right. Although this is done.</p> <p>I have lived for many years outside of the Middle East, Australia, the United States, Germany. But even after all these years, when I get into an elevator, I too want to be standing against the wall. I still feel uncomfortable if a stranger stands behind me. I have the feeling that they are, so to speak, breathing down my neck. These embodied cultural logics run deep indeed.</p>

00:21:53	Liu Liu	I love Zeina's example of the elevator. She and Ishita remind us that how we use space is one small piece of a much larger system, just as Edward Hall says.
00:22:10	Joseph	And that brings us to Part 3: The Science of Space
Part 3: The Science of Space		
00:22:29	Liu Liu	So, Edward Hall wanted Proxemics, the study of space, to be scientific. But how can this be researched?
00:22:40	Joseph	Earlier, we talked about research into preferred social distance in different countries, and results showed that, yes, there are big differences, but again, that's really just confirming common sense.
00:22:53	Liu Liu	There was one result from their study which interested me. Sometimes you hear that people in warm climates are more expressive. They touch more, they talk with their hands. And this study looked at the relation between personal space and climate, but what they found was not easy to interpret. In countries with warmer climate, people prefer to be closer to strangers than in colder countries. But in colder countries, people prefer to be closer towards intimate partners compared to warm countries.
00:23:36	Joseph	So, in a warm country, you're closer to strangers, but further from intimate partners.
00:23:42	Liu Liu	Yeah, exactly.
00:23:45	Joseph	Well, I'm not sure exactly how to make sense of that, but I do know that cultural use of space relates to a lot more than how far away we stand. It reflects deeper differences. For example, in more collectivist societies, space is often shared quite closely. And was it that way for you in China?
00:24:04	Liu Liu	Very much so. I lived with my grandmother for many years, where my only personal space was a drawer where I put my clothes. But even that is not personal because everyone in the house can open it. Then when I was older, I had my own room, but my parents would just walk in without knocking. This was not just at home. When I was a student, I remember I once returned to the dorm and found my pillow had disappeared because someone had borrowed it for the night.
00:24:45	Joseph	Wow. So did you get it back?
00:24:49	Liu Liu	I did. I had to search up and down the whole dorm to get it back. Even then, the person that borrowed it was not happy. In China in general, if it is a shared space, unless the drawers, cupboards, and doors are locked, it is kind of open access to everyone.
00:25:11	Joseph	Well, and research shows that these differences have a big psychological impact. They shape us as we grow up. And this is something we talked about in episode 21, <i>Culture in the Cradle</i> , when we talked about cultural differences in parenting.
00:25:29	Liu Liu	Yes, I remember you and Yvonne spoke about the <i>kanji</i> character for river, which is three vertical lines close together.

00:25:40	Joseph	Yes, it's called <i>kawa no ji</i> , which is literally the character for river. And the three vertical lines are used to refer to children sleeping between their parents.
00:25:51	Liu Liu	It is the same in China, Thailand, and many southeast Asian countries. Children would sleep with their parents. So, let's listen back.
00:26:03	Joseph	Well, in Japan, it's not rare for children to sleep together with their parents, even up to elementary school age. So, the term <i>kawa no ji</i> kind of represents this family closeness, a kind of family fusion. And it goes along with things like children taking a bath together with their mother or father, a kind of family bonding. And there's even a special word for this parent-child bond. It's <i>amae</i> , which is kind of hard to translate, but it's something like 'nurturing dependence'.
00:26:35	Yvonne	Interesting. So, <i>kawa no ji</i> is really about more than the fact that children sleep together with their parents. It reflects Japanese attitudes towards family relations, towards human relations, I guess.
00:26:49	Joseph	Yes, and it's not just that parents are close to their children. In Japan, there's a strong sense of public and private spaces being separate, and inner spaces are to be kept safe and pure, and outer spaces are more public and less pure. And that's why taking off your shoes in a Japanese home is a big deal. You need to keep these separate realms separate. And there are even terms for that: <i>uchi</i> , which is inner space, and <i>soto</i> , which is outer space.
00:27:26	Liu Liu	How we use space reflects larger cultural patterns, but it's even more complex than that. In episode 19, which talked about cultural differences in cognition, you and Yvonne talked about brain imaging, which found differences in how people experience identity. Let's listen back.
00:27:53	Yvonne	And I think that in the past, we talked about a study which showed that when Chinese participants think about their mothers, their brain lights up as though they are thinking about themselves, whereas when Americans think of their mothers, their brain lights up as though they are thinking of a stranger.
00:28:18	Joseph	Now, when I talk to my students about this research, my Chinese students are sometimes kind of amused at the idea of thinking about your mother as a stranger. Like, you know, "Don't you feel close to your mother?" Yet my American students have the opposite reaction, like, "Well, of course, my mother is a different person from me."
00:28:36	Yvonne	Yeah, interesting. And then this also shows that cultural differences in cognition are part of how we make sense of the world, how we solve problems, how we experience our identity, how we relate to other people, a lot of things.
00:28:54	Liu Liu	This is fascinating, but a bit hard to follow. Basically, research is showing that many kinds of cultural differences are interrelated. How we use space can be related to our identity, sometimes called "independent" or "interdependent" self, and it can also relate to cognitive processes.

00:29:23	Joseph	So, if you grew up in a society like I did, where children typically sleep separately from their parents and where there's a strong sense of individual private space, those things are associated with more subject / object thinking, putting things into categories. Whereas if you grow up in a more enmeshed society where personal space is shared, those patterns are associated with more holistic relational thinking.
00:29:55	Liu Liu	And for more on this, you should definitely go back and check out Episode 19, <i>Why do we think differently?</i>
00:30:06	Joseph	And this brings us back to Edward Hall, who started us thinking about proxemics. He was writing about this almost 60 years ago when we had little understanding of cognition. So, there was a lot of guesswork in what he said. But he did clearly understand that culture shapes our minds and our behavior in complex ways that we aren't aware of.
00:30:31	Liu Liu	And this is a good thing for cultural bridge people to keep in mind. Whether we are standing in an elevator in the Middle East or taking off our shoes in Japan, these differences run deep, and they have a lot to teach us.
00:30:48	Joseph	...which is, I think, a good place to bring this episode to an end. We should mention our sources. Today, we talked about cross cultural research into personal distance that comes from <i>Preferred Interpersonal Distances: A Global Comparison</i> , which is in the <i>Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology</i> . And, of course, you should check out Edward Hall's 1966 book <i>The Hidden Dimension</i> . The Deep Culture podcast is sponsored by the Japan Intercultural Institute, an NPO dedicated to intercultural education and research. I'm the director of JII. If you are interested in using these podcasts for teaching and training, you can find full transcripts at the Japan Intercultural Institute website. Also, we will be starting a project to develop teaching materials using these podcasts. To find out more, do a web search for the Japan Intercultural Institute or write us at dcpodcast@japanintercultural.org Thanks to Daniel Glinz, Zeina Matar, and Ishita Ray for sharing their stories with us. And thanks to our sound engineer, Robinson Fritz and the rest of the podcast team, Yvonne Van der Pol, Emre Seven, Ikumi Fritz, and everyone at JII. And thanks to you, Liu Liu, for sharing this time with me.
00:32:13	Liu Liu	Thank you, Joseph, for sharing this episode with me. I wish next time when our listeners look around themselves, they would have a very different perspective on the spaces around them.