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# Navigating Intra-National Culture Shock: A Case Study of Non-Javanese University Students in East Java, Indonesia

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## ABSTRACT

*This qualitative case study explores the experiences of culture shock among non-Javanese students studying at a university in Java, Indonesia. Despite staying within national borders, these students encountered significant cultural dissonance due to Indonesia's rich ethnic and cultural diversity. Drawing from personal reflections and narratives of four students from various provinces, the study investigates how culture shock manifested, affected their academic engagement, and how individual backgrounds influenced their coping strategies. The findings reveal that language barriers, cultural hierarchy, and separation from family contribute to emotional and psychological stress, particularly during the initial stages of adaptation. However, shared living environments, age, academic level, and cultural proximity to Javanese norms played a critical role in either mitigating or amplifying the impact. This study highlights the importance of culturally responsive support in higher education institutions and suggests that culture shock, when positively navigated, can lead to personal growth and intercultural competence.*

## ABSTRAK

Penelitian studi kasus kualitatif ini mengeksplorasi pengalaman culture shock yang dialami oleh mahasiswa non-Jawa yang menempuh pendidikan di sebuah universitas di Jawa, Indonesia. Meskipun masih berada dalam satu negara, para mahasiswa ini menghadapi disonansi budaya yang signifikan karena keberagaman etnis dan budaya Indonesia yang sangat kaya. Berdasarkan refleksi pribadi dan narasi dari empat mahasiswa dari berbagai provinsi, studi ini mengkaji bagaimana culture shock muncul, memengaruhi proses adaptasi dan pembelajaran, serta bagaimana latar belakang individu memengaruhi strategi coping yang digunakan. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa hambatan bahasa, hirarki budaya, dan keterpisahan dari keluarga menjadi sumber stres emosional dan psikologis, terutama pada tahap awal adaptasi. Namun, faktor seperti tinggal bersama, usia, tingkat pendidikan, serta kedekatan budaya dengan nilai-nilai Jawa turut berperan dalam memperkuat atau

mengurangi dampak culture shock. Studi ini menekankan pentingnya dukungan berbasis budaya dalam institusi pendidikan tinggi dan menunjukkan bahwa culture shock, bila dihadapi secara positif, dapat menjadi sarana pertumbuhan pribadi dan kompetensi antarbudaya.

## INTRODUCTION

Encountering a new place with a distinct culture, language, lifestyle, habits, and even weather can expose individuals to a psychological condition commonly referred to as culture shock. Originally coined by (Oberg, 1960) culture shock described the emotional disorientation experienced by people who are relocated abroad. However, recent studies argue that the scope of culture shock has become more nuanced and localized. Intra-national migration in culturally diverse countries such as Indonesia can also provoke this phenomenon (Nurhadi, 2021; Suryani & Wulandari, 2023; Ward et al., 2020).

Based on my own experience as a non-Javanese student studying in Java, along with the reflections of four peers from different provinces, this case study investigates how culture shock manifests and affects our adaptation and learning processes. Despite remaining within national borders, we encountered significant cultural dissonance. As Indonesia is composed of hundreds of ethnic groups, internal migration can feel akin to crossing national cultural boundaries.

Thus, a critical question to raise is what probably makes the phenomenon occur and if it exists in this context how it might be set. One possible answer is that Indonesia is a country of which provinces or areas equipped with diverse cultures, languages, lifestyles, habits, and weather. Hence, the vast variation of cultures might provoke the presence of culture shock. Another possible interpretation is that the non-Javanese students have problems with themselves in making a good interaction to the new environment. As simply stated by Kealey in (Zapf, 1991), the physical and/or emotional upset is not actually affected by the new culture or environment itself; yet he believes that the distress has emerged once the individual cannot make a good adjustment or a good contact with the new life settings.

The term culture shock was first introduced by (Oberg, 1960), who described this phenomenon as a form of “adjustment illness” experienced when a person is moved to a different cultural environment. Oberg outlined several symptoms such as homesickness, insecurity, fear of being deceived, and a strong desire to return home. This perspective was expanded by (Irwin, 2007) and (Xia, 2009), who divided culture shock into several stages: the honeymoon stage, crisis, adjustment, and mastery.

The U-curve model by (Lysgaard, 1955) and the subsequent W-curve development by (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963) clarified the emotional dynamics experienced by individuals during the adaptation process. However, the latest approach by (Ward et al., 2020) states that the stages of culture shock are non-linear and highly dependent on personal characteristics and sociocultural context. Figure 1 shows the U-curve and W-curve models of culture shock.

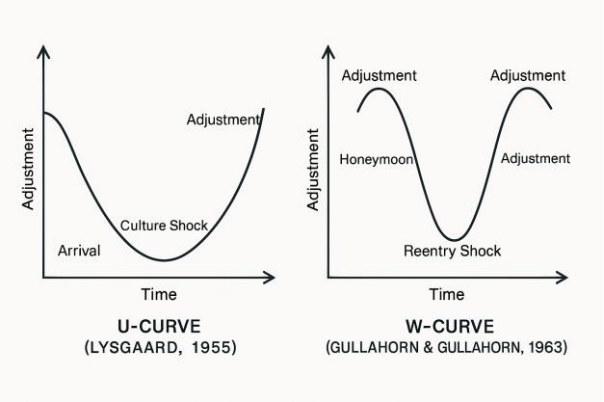


**Figure 1. U-Curve and W-Curve Models of Culture Shock**

While early culture shock studies focused on cross-national relocation, contemporary research has begun to examine culture shock within the context of intra-national migration. In multicultural countries like Indonesia, inter-provincial moves can also trigger culture shock due to differences in language, value systems, communication styles, and social norms. (Nurhadi, 2021) and (Suryani & Wulandari, 2023) demonstrated that students from Eastern Indonesia studying in Java experience psychological stress and social discomfort similar to international students.

Distinct cultural differences in social structure and communication also affect the adaptation process of students. Javanese culture, for example, is known for its values of harmony, hierarchy, and indirect communication (Geertz, 2021), which may confuse students from more egalitarian or expressive cultures such as Minangkabau (Abdullah, 2017a) and Sasak (Saptari, 2019a). Adjustment to a new culture requires diverse coping strategies, ranging from behavioral adaptation, seeking social support, to changes in learning patterns (Furnham & Bochner, 2020). Students who have cultural proximity to their new environment or who have support systems (such as roommates or friends from the same region) tend to experience smoother transitions.

Culture shock has been shown to impact learning motivation, class participation, and academic self-confidence. (Andrade, 2021b) found that students who fail to culturally adapt experience decreased engagement in learning. However, (Zapf, 1991) emphasized that when faced positively, culture shock can trigger personal growth, enhanced intercultural competence, and the development of a stronger learner identity.

In light of these perspectives, it becomes evident that culture shock is not exclusive to international relocation but is also deeply relevant within intra-national contexts, particularly in culturally heterogeneous countries like Indonesia. The experiences of non-Javanese students studying in Java reveal how cultural differences—ranging from communication styles and social norms to learning expectations—can trigger psychological discomfort, hinder adaptation, and influence academic engagement. These challenges are not solely the result of external cultural contrasts, but also stem from the individual's ability to interpret, respond to, and manage the unfamiliar environment. Hence, this study aimed to explore how culture shock manifested among non-Javanese students studying in Java, how they interpreted and coped with the experience, and what strategies supported their

academic and social adaptation. By focusing on the lived experiences of four non-Javanese students (five including me as the researcher), this qualitative case study sought to uncover the nuanced realities of internal culture shock, contributing to a broader understanding of intercultural adaptation within national borders.

## METHOD

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to explore the experiences of non-Javanese students encountering culture shock while studying in Java. A case study design was selected because it enables an in-depth examination of a phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2018), especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly defined. This approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By focusing on culture shock in an intra-national setting, this study sought to contribute to the growing body of literature on internal cultural transitions, which are often underexplored compared to international migration.

The participants consisted of me as the researcher, two undergraduate and two graduate students who had migrated from their home provinces to study at a public university in East Java. One participant, *Rika* (pseudonym), is originally from Nusa Tenggara Barat (NTB), where Sasak culture predominates. Another participant, *Nita* (pseudonym) is from East Kalimantan. The other two participants, *Dini* and *Andra* (pseudonyms) are from West Sumatra and identify with Minangkabau cultural values. Three of them had resided in Java for three months and *Nita* had resided in Java for a year. Participants were selected through purposive sampling (Patton, 2015), targeting individuals who had directly experienced cultural adjustment challenges and who were willing and able to articulate their reflections on the phenomenon in depth.

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in *Bahasa Indonesia* to ensure linguistic comfort and depth of expression. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The interview protocol focused on initial cultural impressions, adaptation challenges, coping mechanisms, and perceived academic or social consequences of culture shock. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase process: familiarization, coding, theme development, reviewing, defining, and reporting (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Trustworthiness was maintained through triangulation of data across participants, member checking, and thick description to enhance credibility and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ethical procedures, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the voluntary nature of participation, were rigorously followed throughout the study.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Culture Shock and Its Stages

(Oberg, 1960) was among the earliest scholars to define culture shock, characterizing it as a form of

"adjustment illness" that may cause distress when individuals are relocated into unfamiliar cultural settings. While often associated with international migration, culture shock can also arise in intra-national contexts, as this study illustrated through the lived experiences of non-Javanese students studying in Malang, East Java. Oberg proposed that culture shock affects many people differently—some recover quickly, others linger in discomfort, and a number may even fall into prolonged depression if coping strategies are not developed. (Irwin, 2007) later emphasized that although culture shock may lead to depressive episodes, it is not a clinical disorder and can be resolved with proper emotional support and awareness. One of the most effective ways to mitigate culture shock is by recognizing its symptoms early. These symptoms, as outlined by Oberg, include compulsive hygiene behavior, excessive concern about food and water, anxiety over physical contact, dependency on co-ethnics, fear of exploitation, sensitivity to minor illnesses, and persistent homesickness.

These symptoms align closely with my personal experience as a student from outside Java. Although I did not experience compulsive behaviors such as frequent handwashing, I found myself highly attentive to basic needs such as food and water—especially in terms of taste, hygiene, and availability. Emotionally, I felt a strong longing to return home and reconnect with family and familiar routines. This longing, as Oberg described, is not just a sign of homesickness, but a deeper psychological reaction to the dissonance between one's expectations and the unfamiliarity of the new environment.

My peers shared similar sentiments. *Dini* stated, "*Saya kangen dengan suasana rumah, makanan ibu, cengkrama keluarga*…" [I miss home, my mother's cooking, and the family gathering], while *Andra* expressed difficulty adjusting to the social and linguistic environment: "*Bagaimana mungkin aku ikut berbicara dan tertawa sedangkan aku tidak mengerti apa yang mereka bicarakan…*" [How can I join the conversation and laugh when I don't understand what they are talking about?]. These examples reflect what Xia (2009) identifies as the crisis stage of culture shock—an emotionally taxing phase marked by confusion, frustration, and growing difficulties.

Interestingly, before these negative experiences set in, many of us went through what is commonly referred to as the honeymoon stage—a time of excitement and optimism upon arrival in a new place. *Rika* recalled, "*Hati ini gembira ketika diizinkan untuk melanjutkan kuliah di kota Malang ini…*" [I was so happy because my parents gave me permission to go to a university in Malang], while *Dini* noted, "*Pertama kali menginjakkan kaki di sini, sesaat mataku tercuci dengan keadaan kota yang kuidam-idamkan*…" [At first, I felt so excited and was so captivated by the city environment]. According to Lysgaard's U-curve model, the honeymoon phase typically occurs shortly after arrival, followed by the crisis stage, adjustment, and finally mastery (Lysgaard, 1955). While this study found clear evidence of the honeymoon and crisis phases, it did not capture the latter two stages—adjustment and mastery—because the participants had only been in Malang for less than three months. According to (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963), these stages typically emerge after a longer period of exposure, often one year or more.

Despite remaining within the borders of Indonesia, our experiences showed that inter-provincial migration can provoke culture shock comparable to that experienced in cross-cultural, international

transitions. As noted by (Ward et al., 2020), the intensity of culture shock is influenced not just by geographic distance but also by cultural distance—differences in communication styles, values, norms, and ways of life. This reinforces the argument that culture shock should be understood as a context-sensitive phenomenon, capable of arising in multicultural societies such as Indonesia. Thus, the term culture shock, while originally coined for international contexts, is clearly applicable to internal relocation scenarios as well. The findings support the view that if Indonesians continue to hold tightly to their own regional identities without embracing intercultural openness, the boundaries of culture shock will remain sharp—even within the same nation.

**How Culture Shock Affects Learning**

Culture shock can significantly influence students' academic engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy, especially during their early phases of adaptation. In my own experience, the feeling of inferiority initially hindered my willingness to speak or participate in class discussions. I often second-guessed my words, concerned that my regional accent or different way of speaking would mark me as "other" in a predominantly Javanese environment. This hesitation is not uncommon; as (Andrade, 2021b) asserts, students undergoing cultural adjustment frequently experience reduced participation, difficulty concentrating, and a decline in intrinsic motivation. Cultural misalignment, communication barriers, and psychological stress can converge to produce academic withdrawal and a lack of self-confidence.

This experience was echoed by *Dini*, one of the West Sumatran participants, who reflected on how her learning spirit was affected by homesickness and the absence of emotional support: *"Kadangkala semangat belajar itu hilang ketika aku bosan memikirkan tugas dan membutuhkan tempat (keluarga) untuk berbagi."* [Sometimes my motivation to study disappears when I'm overwhelmed by assignments and need someone (like my family) to share my feelings with]. In addition, she noted, "*Saya kadang-kadang merasa tertekan menjalani kehidupan baru ini, khususnya ketika berhadapan dengan proses belajar mengajar di kelas* [I was rather stressful with my new life, particularly in dealing with the teaching and learning process]. This finding aligns with findings by (Sawir et al., 2008), who observed that international and cross-cultural students often experience academic disengagement when emotional and cultural adjustment is lacking. The absence of familiar support systems, different norms, and the challenge of integrating into the new academic culture often trigger the feelings of isolation and academic burnout.

However, despite these initial setbacks, some students were able to channel their discomfort into positive transformation. *Rika*, the participant from Nusa Tenggara Barat, provided a striking example of resilience and adaptation: *"Saya bersyukur berada di sini karena kemampuan bahasa dan pengetahuan saya meningkat. Saya berusaha mengubah kebiasaan buruk saya dan belajar setiap hari."* [I'm grateful to be here because my language skills and knowledge have improved. I'm trying to change my bad habits and study every day].

This transformation supports Zapf's (1991) argument that culture shock is not inherently negative; rather, when approached with reflective intention, it can serve as a catalyst for tremendous growth and the development of new worldviews (Zapf, 1991). Culture shock, in this sense, functions as a

transitional learning space—one that challenges individuals to reassess their behaviors, attitudes, and habits in response to a culturally unfamiliar environment.

Another participant echoed a similar experience, stating "*So far, I have attempted to be able to adjust myself with my surroundings, i.e. I sometimes ask my friends who are Javanese about Bahasa Jawa. But I am grateful to be here because I think my language ability and knowledge has improved significantly. You know, since I graduated in January 2013, I rarely learn and read. However, since I have been learning in graduate school, I ought to change such bad habits. I attempt to read every day because my surroundings challenge me to do that. I also learn many things from my colleagues."* This reflection illustrates what (Kim, 2001) describes as the "stress–adaptation–growth" dynamic, where acculturative stress—if managed constructively—stimulates learning, strengthens cognitive flexibility, and builds intercultural competence. In the context of this study, the student not only became more engaged with academic reading but also improved her interpersonal communication through intentional efforts to understand Javanese language and culture. The process of adaptation, therefore, extended beyond mere survival—it led to the intentional cultivation of new academic habits and the reshaping of self-efficacy.

Nonetheless, the adjustment process is not always linear or uniformly successful. *Nita* expressed a more tentative approach, sharing: "*Lambat laun mungkin aku akan terbiasa dengan keadaan yang seperti ini walaupun sebenarnya sangat sulit untuk dijalani*…" [I think I am going to get used to it, even though it is very hard for me to do it]. This reflects what (Ward et al., 2020) emphasize as the highly individualized and nonlinear nature of cultural adaptation. While some students gain momentum and thrive, others experience prolonged disorientation and only gradually learn to cope with cultural discrepancies. These findings reinforce the idea that culture shock can play a dual role in educational settings: it can either hinder students' academic motivation and well-being or, conversely, become a driving force for intellectual, emotional, and behavioral transformation—depending largely on the individual's willingness to manage the experience. Ultimately, whether culture shock becomes a barrier or a breakthrough is contingent upon the students' responses to the challenges of their new learning environment.

**Influence Of The Background And Environment**

An important factor influencing how students cope with culture shock is their cultural proximity to Javanese norms and values. Students whose home cultures share similar social structures or communication styles with Javanese culture tend to experience a smoother transition. *Rika*, a student from Lombok (Nusa Tenggara Barat), exemplifies this dynamic. She reported fewer difficulties during her early adjustment phase, which she attributed to the resemblance between Sasak and Javanese cultures. Both emphasize social hierarchy, indirect speech, and collective harmony (Saptari, 2019b). These cultural overlaps appeared to reduce the sense of dissonance she felt when engaging herself with her Javanese peers and lecturers. Her ability to interpret social cues and adhere to local etiquette contributed to her relatively smooth adaptation process.

In contrast, *Andra*, a Minangkabau student from West Sumatra, faced more significant adaptation challenges. The Minangkabau culture is known for its matrilineal system and egalitarian

communication style, which stands in contrast to the more hierarchical and restrained Javanese norms (Abdullah, 2017b). *Andra* initially struggled with what she described as "ambiguous social cues" and "indirect expectations" in academic and peer interactions. She often found it difficult to interpret implied messages or to understand the unspoken norms of politeness and deference that guide many interactions in Java. This cultural mismatch led to episodes of withdrawal, confusion, and emotional exhaustion—typical of the crisis stage in culture shock (Xia, 2009). These differences in communication values contributed to her sense of exclusion and impacted on her ability to actively engage in both academic and social settings.

Another influential factor in students' coping processes was their living arrangements and social support systems. *Rika* and *Andra* shared the same boarding house and attended the same university, which unintentionally created a micro-community of mutual support. Their cohabitation allowed them to reflect on shared struggles, provide emotional reassurance, and engage in culturally familiar routines such as cooking traditional meals together. Social support from peers who share similar backgrounds has long been recognized as a buffer against acculturative stress (Ward et al., 2020). Furthermore, differences in age and academic level shaped their adaptation strategies. *Rika*, as an undergraduate, demonstrated more emotional dependence and flexibility, often seeking guidance from her peers. In contrast, *Andra*, a graduate student, exhibited more cognitive and problem-solving strategies, consistent with Furnham and Bochner's findings that older learners tend to rely on internal resources and rational approaches in navigating cultural transitions (Furnham & Bochner, 2020).

A third participant, *Nita*, from East Kalimantan, added another dimension to this discussion. Unlike *Rika* and *Andra*, *Nita* did not share housing with other students from her region. As a result, her sense of cultural isolation was more pronounced. She reflected: "*Kadang saya merasa tidak dianggap karena logat saya berbeda. Saya berusaha menyesuaikan, tapi tetap merasa asing*." [Sometimes I feel unnoticed because of my accent. I try to adapt, but I still feel like a stranger.] Despite her efforts to blend in, her regional dialect and unfamiliarity with Javanese customs often made her feel excluded in group discussions. This sense of marginalization is consistent with previous findings that linguistic and paralinguistic differences can hinder integration and self-esteem in new cultural environments (Andrade, 2021a; Sawir et al., 2008). However, over time, *Nita* began to find solace through academic participation, stating that actively engaging in class and joining a study group helped her regain confidence. Her case reflects the non-linear and evolving nature of cultural adaptation, where discomfort may coexist with moments of growth and resilience.

## CONCLUSION

This study has shown that culture shock is not limited to international migration but is equally significant within culturally diverse nations like Indonesia. Through the lived experiences of non-Javanese students studying in Java, it became clear that intra-national relocation can result in psychological and academic challenges similar to those experienced in cross-cultural contexts. Differences in communication styles, values, and everyday customs can produce dissonance, homesickness, and social withdrawal. Yet, as demonstrated through this case study, these challenges

also offer opportunities for self-reflection and personal development. The stages of culture shock—honeymoon, crisis, adjustment, and mastery—unfold in non-linear ways and are shaped by each student's background, support systems, and coping strategies.

A central finding of this study is that students' ability to manage culture shock varies greatly depending on cultural proximity, peer support, and personal resilience. *Rika*'s smoother adjustment, aided by similarities between Sasak and Javanese cultural values and the presence of a supportive roommate, stood in contrast to *Andra* and *Nita*, who experienced more disorientation and exclusion. However, even for those who struggled, academic engagement and reflective practice provided avenues for growth. When students embraced discomfort as a space for learning—intellectually and emotionally—they began to develop new habits, deeper intercultural understanding, and stronger learner identities. This supports previous research (e.g., Zapf, 1991; Kim, 2001) that views culture shock not merely as a challenge but as a potential site for transformation.

Ultimately, this study highlights the need for educational institutions to recognize and address intra-national culture shock as part of their support systems for students. Orientation programs, culturally inclusive pedagogy, and accessible peer networks can help mitigate the negative effects of cultural dissonance and foster intercultural learning environments. While the participants in this study had only been in Java for a relatively short time, their reflections demonstrate the complexity of navigating cultural difference even within a shared national identity. Future research should investigate long-term adaptation trajectories and explore how these early stages influence academic success and social integration over time. In an increasingly mobile and multicultural Indonesia, such insights are essential for building inclusive higher education systems that affirm diversity while enabling all students to thrive.

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