

Revised Edition

**TRANSITIONS
ACROSS
CULTURES**

**A Guide to Culture Shock for Travelers
and Those Who Love Them**

STEPHEN W. JONES

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DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to those who choose
sojourn to make the world a better place, and
to those who have to sojourn because it isn't.*

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PREFACE

REVISED EDITION

The original edition of *Transitions Across Cultures* was intended to fill a gap. Over and over again, I came across people who should have known about the principles presented in the book but had no real grasp of them. It has been seven years since I first wrote the book, and both research¹ and practical experience since then have continued to point to the importance of the subject.

Both sojourners and their family members have confirmed to our team that this book was uniquely useful to them. They have told us that having the simple frameworks this book makes available close at hand has helped them unravel some of their own interior mystery and to sort out the relational and practical difficulties connected to transitions.

I think we can always improve. In this edition, I have made the underlying source material more accessible. Combined with *The Practical Interculturalist's* growing web presence and teaching aids, I think this revised edition will help sojourners and their friends and families to continue to grow in their practical understanding of the topics at hand.

I have also tried to provide clarity around the difficult issues of mental health throughout the book. This is a difficult issue and I wrestled with whether to include it at all. I decided to keep the language related to mental health because on the balance, I would rather acknowledge that the stresses of culture shock can be psychologically disturbing than pretend that this isn't the case. I am not a mental health professional and do not pretend to be one.

All I can do is what I do when I meet with people in person—encourage you to consider the question of whether you might need to seek professional mental health support. Sometimes I have literally walked with people to the counseling office to set up their first appointment as they have asked for help overcoming their fears. That is more than I can do for you, for obvious reasons. Not everyone needs to meet with a counselor, but it is important that we destigmatize both the presence of mental health challenges and the important help offered by qualified therapists.

My profound hope for you, the reader, is that the cross-cultural transition that inspired you to acquire this book (whether the transition is yours or a loved one's) will be rewarding and successful. Great things can come from cross-cultural transitions, but they are almost never easily attained. The team at *The*

Practical Interculturalist will continue developing resources to attempt to serve you better.

With love, hope, and admiration for the millions who are crossing cultures every day.

STEPHEN JONES,

December 2019, Minnesota

NOTES

- ¹ Furnham, A. (2019). Culture Shock: A Review of the Literature for Practitioners. *Psychology, 10*, 1832

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I am grateful to Jennie, to my colleagues, and to you, the readers who make this work both necessary and possible.

CHAPTER ONE

WHY THIS BOOK?

Every year, millions of people are engaged in cultural transition. Study abroad students and facilitators, international students, missionaries, Peace Corps Volunteers, global service-learners, international businesspeople and business travelers, refugees, asylum seekers, asylees, economic migrants, aid and development workers, military members, and trailing spouses and third-culture kids are all undergoing cross-cultural transitions every day.

Unfortunately, many people are underprepared for the disruptions caused by these transitions. For some the consequences are relatively minor—culture shock may be experienced as an inconvenience, or as L. Robert Kohls called it “the occupational hazard of overseas living.”² For others, however, the consequences of culture shock can be profound and have lasting impacts on their lives. At the least, people who are unprepared for culture shock are likely to be unable to make the most of their experiences. Many people have a vague sense that they have not gotten all they could out of their cultural exchange, and some are left with a lasting inability to integrate

valuable lessons into their life. However, for others the disorientation caused by culture shock can give rise to relational, career, and health challenges and breakdowns of either short or long-term duration. Major decisions people make during periods of culture shock can irrevocably impact their lives.

The results of poor preparation for cultural transition can be stark. Moreover, this disorientation continue, often unexpectedly, if and when people return home. Lack of proper reintegration can result in lost productivity, unplanned vocational changes, and broken relationships. Cultural transitions are so potentially disruptive that some have observed that mental illness can result from cultural transitions that are not fully or properly processed.³

There is good news, however. When sojourners effectively prepare for and engage in cultural transitions, the results can be phenomenally good. Broadened perspectives, increased creative capacity, and expanded networks can result from well-managed cultural transitions. Preparation alone is not a cure-all; nearly everyone who enters deeply into another culture will experience culture shock. This does not diminish with age or prior experience.⁴ However, it is possible to better prepare yourself to navigate the transition, and even just understanding the transitional experience can be helpful to overcoming its worst effects.

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

I have been personally involved in cultural transitions since the 1980s, when I was growing up as the son of a naval officer. The first transition I remember was from Virginia to Texas. I began kindergarten there, and my memory is that Texas does a great job of instilling the love of the place in young children. But after two years in Texas public schools, we were headed off to Japan. I remember looking at books from the library with my mom and sister and being not only bewildered but terrified about this strange and faraway place.

Japan ended up being a wonderful place to live, but between the death of my grandfather shortly after we moved, my dad's long deployments including Desert Shield and Desert Storm, and the Mt. Pinatubo eruption in the Philippines, I was ready to return to the US in fourth grade.

Coming back to the US was good but very hard. We lived in southern California for about nine months and then headed to Kansas. In a situation to which many military brats and **TCKs** can relate, I was in three different schools my fourth-grade year, each in vastly different places.

It wasn't until I was working on my master's degree that I really discovered the principles of culture shock, reentry, and what the third-culture

kid is. I repeatedly called my sister with new insights: “I just found out why we were so messed up!”

After studying in Mexico for six months as part of a global service-learning program in college, I decided to go into higher education. Since 2004, I have been working with college students in various stages of cultural transition as well. I have worked with students preparing to study in Asia, Europe, Latin America, and Africa. I have traveled with and been responsible for students in Africa and Latin America, as well as in various regions in the US, including on an Indian Reservation in South Dakota, in the Deep South, and in the Pacific Northwest. I have also worked with international students studying in the US.

I also have worked with international non-profit organizations. Each year the position at my college most closely related to mine filled by a couple on a one-year home assignment. This is my seventh year in this role, and I have had the opportunity to watch 14 of my colleagues up close in the two semesters of collaboration we have while they are in the midst of transitions. In my work teaching, I have had the opportunity to visit others abroad and often to observe and sometimes coach people in the midst of different stages of transition.

My wife Jennie and I have also had the privilege of debriefing groups of “first-term returners” who are living in the US for a year for the first time after

four or five years abroad. Jennie and I have debriefed both students and career professionals who are in the midst of transitions.

One of the most unfortunate things I have observed in all of this is how few people are well prepared for cross-cultural transitions. I have seen, in my own students, the difference in success between students who are well prepared and those who aren't. I have also seen tremendous differences between those who recognize the realities of culture shock and reentry and those who are unaware of the effects of these phenomena. Without a doubt, those who understand why culture shock happens and how to deal with it are better adapted in the long run. Unprocessed culture shock seems to have a way of lingering—the buried discomforts don't ever really go away. Sometimes, they strike back with a vengeance, like an unattended splinter left to fester. Other times, people are successful at building walls of separation between those disruptive experiences and their present selves, but at the cost of cutting off a very real (and often vibrant) part of their lived experience.

Despite all this, there are still too many schools, businesses, and organizations that don't take seriously how disruptive culture shock can be. I have written and revised this book for three purposes. The *first*, and most immediate, is to enable the people actually traveling to understand what they can expect and

how to cope with the disorientation caused by cross-cultural transitions. This includes sojourners who are already well beyond the opportunity to “prepare” but are trying to understand what has happened or what is currently happening in their transition. The *second* purpose is to enable those who are responsible for travelers to understand the seriousness of the cross-cultural transition so they can make appropriate decisions about supporting these individuals. The *third* purpose is to enable supporters of travelers, such as parents, friends, and loved ones, to understand what the traveler is experiencing so they can provide better support.

WHAT TO EXPECT IN THIS BOOK

This short book is intended to enable sojourners, the people responsible for them, and those who love them to better prepare for, process, and reintegrate following cultural transitions. This book is intentionally concise, designed to provide the basic principles for successfully navigating intercultural transitions. This book is *not* about how to effectively communicate across cultures. I have included a list of recommended resources at the end to help in that regard.

To accomplish the goal of doing transition better, each chapter of this book contains a mixture of intercultural theory and examples. Finally, readers

can expect to find specific guidelines for engaging the transition, as well as practical tips on how to make the most of applying the theory.

Bolded words can be found in the glossary for clarification.

DISCLAIMER

Although this book is definitely intended to assist you in your journey, each person's experience is necessarily different. Some of the ideas here may apply to you (or your family, friends, employees, etc.), while others may not. These are suggested as hypotheses, to be held openly in your hand. If these tools fit, great! If they don't, don't try to force them to work—there may be something else going on. As per usual in a book like this, any advice given should not be interpreted as medical, psychological, or other professional advice. Don't use this book to replace your need for the help and support of competent professionals!

NOTES

- ² Kohls, L. R. (2001). *Survival kit for overseas living: For Americans planning to live and work abroad* (4th ed). London: Published by Nicholas Brealey Pub. in association with Intercultural Press, Yarmouth, Maine. More at: <https://survivalkit.traxcultures.com>

- ³ Lucas, J. (2009). Over-stressed, Overwhelmed, and Over Here: Resident Directors and the Challenges of Student Mental Health Abroad. *Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad*, *XVIII*, 187–216.
- ⁴ For a review of literature that includes a discussion of risk factors for culture shock, see Furnham, A. (2019). Culture Shock: A Review of the Literature for Practitioners. *Psychology*, *10*, 1832. <https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2019.1013119>

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT IS CULTURE?

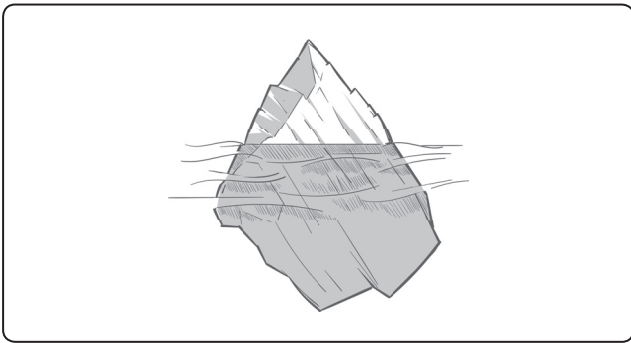
CONCEPT 1

Culture is the way people do life together

Countless definitions exist for culture, but for the purpose of this book, we are really interested in exploring **culture** as *the way groups of people do life together*. Think about it this way: What makes your family different than your best friend's family? What makes your city or town different from the next city or town up the road? What makes Florida different from New Mexico? What makes Holland different from Sri Lanka? In each case, there are certain patterns of how the groups of people do life together. These patterns are influenced by everything from geography to climate to religion to patterns of commerce, and more!

The challenge with culture is that not all of these patterns are readily visible. One of the popular illustrations of culture is the comparison

to an iceberg. The basic idea is that while certain elements of culture are readily visible at the top of the iceberg, such as clothing and food, the majority of culture is actually below the surface, making it more difficult to see, understand, and relate to.



So what makes up the bottom of the iceberg? At this level, you find values and beliefs that both undergird the visible behaviors and are shaped by them. For example, a culture that highly values competitiveness may demonstrate this through external behaviors like youth club sports. Of course, culture is not *an iceberg*.⁵ Specifically, the danger of thinking of culture as an iceberg is that it might lead us to think of culture as some kind of static entity. Culture is not so much a *thing* as it is a *process*.⁶ But, the important point here is that while much of culture is visible to us, much more is invisible.

CONCEPT 2

Cultures are often (very) different from each other

If culture is how people do life together, then we are able to rely on culture to provide written and unwritten rules about how life works. Our cultures tell us how to greet people, what makes a good job candidate, how to interview, and how to express confidence and respect.⁷ We usually learn all of these things without ever having to read books on etiquette. Our cultures also tell us what success looks like, and they instill deep values about the relationship between people and task. What might be most important is that culture forms in us the crucial skill of recognizing and utilizing common sense.

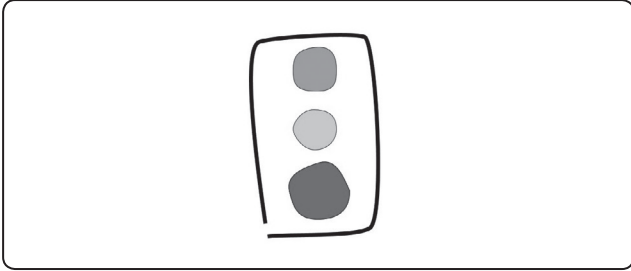
The challenge is that cultural patterns are doing this same thing—teaching common sense—for someone from another part of town or another part of the planet. But, it’s happening differently. What my culture has decided looks like respect might look like arrogance in someone else’s culture. Our cultures might define a successful job candidate in different, or even opposite, ways. Just imagine how different common sense could look. For example, in the culture I currently live in, it is usually appropriate to look someone else in the eyes

to show genuineness. Yet there are cultures in which eye contact is a sign of disrespect. If you and I have a conversation in which I keep looking into your eyes and you keep looking down, what a terribly confusing conversation we could have! If we come from cultures with different respect strategies, you and I might both feel disrespected precisely because we were both trying to show respect to the other! And not only that, but my friends would know that I was doing it right because it's just *common sense* that looking in someone's eyes shows respect. Yet your friends would also know that you were doing it right because it's just *common sense* that looking down shows deference.

CONCEPT 3

It's more complicated than we think it is

The following conversation between a teacher and his students exemplifies the use of cultural shortcuts in everyday life. The teacher starts by asking the students to describe this object:



More about this image at: <https://stoplight.traxcultures.com>

Teacher: *What do you see?*

Student: *It's a stoplight!*

Teacher: *What do you see?*

Student: *A traffic signal!*

Teacher: *What do you see?*

Student: *A rectangular box with three circular lights—yellow, red, and green!*

Teacher: *What do you see?*

Student: *A drawing of a stoplight?*

Teacher: *Okay, now we're getting somewhere. What do you see in the drawing?*

Student: *Well, it looks like a rectangle, but it isn't quite, and your circles are drawn badly.*

Teacher: *Great, so you see a drawing of something kind of like a rectangle, with three badly drawn circles of different colors? Is that what everyone would see looking at this?*