

## **In the Dark, We Spoke: Emotional Discourse and Transformative Learning in South Africa**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study examines the role of emotion in shaping transformative learning during a short-term study abroad experience. Drawing on twelve semi-structured qualitative interviews with students who participated in a faculty-led program in South Africa, the analysis demonstrates that emotional experiences functioned as a central mechanism in processes of perspective change rather than incidental outcomes of travel. Participants described moments of emotional disruption that prompted sustained reflection on identity, relationships, and worldview. Through subsequent reflection and dialogue with peers, these experiences evolved into deeper reconsiderations of personal assumptions and social understanding. The findings identify an emotional arc of transformation consisting of three interconnected stages: disruption, intrapersonal reflection, and interpersonal discourse. Together these stages produced emotion-driven perspective change that extended beyond cognitive reconsideration alone. By tracing this arc, the study extends Transformative Learning Theory and proposes emotional discourse as a pathway that operates alongside critical reflection and rational dialogue. This paper suggests practical implications for educators designing short-term study abroad programs. Learning environments that intentionally support emotional processing, structured dialogue, and ethically facilitated vulnerability may strengthen the conditions under which perspective transformation occurs. In this sense, emotional experience becomes not an obstacle to learning but one of its most generative forces.*

**KEYWORDS:** Transformative Learning Theory; emotional discourse; study abroad; affective learning; intercultural education; reflective practice; qualitative research

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“And it’s happened once again. I’ll turn to a friend; someone who understands and sees through the masterplan. But everybody’s gone and I’ve been here for too long to face this on my own. Well, I guess this is growing up.” blink 182

Study abroad is a powerful educational experience, offering students opportunities for personal, academic, and intercultural growth (Mnouer, 2023; Paige et al., 2009). International programs place

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learners in unfamiliar environments that challenge their assumptions, broaden their perspectives, and foster new ways of understanding themselves and others (Vande Berg et al., 2009). Beyond linguistic and cultural learning, study abroad is associated with outcomes such as increased intercultural competence, greater adaptability, and deeper self-awareness (Anderson et al., 2006; Deardorff, 2006; Jones et al., 2012; Nguyen & Benet-Martinez, 2013; Vande Berg et al., 2009). These outcomes reflect not only cognitive learning but also shifts in worldview, making study abroad programs a natural context for applying Transformative Learning Theory (TL) to understand perspective changes.

Scholars have increasingly been drawn to TL to analyze study abroad experiences, as the theory highlights how exposure to disorienting dilemmas and unfamiliar cultural contexts can catalyze perspective transformation. Students abroad often encounter situations that disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions, leading to reflection on their views of the world, their peers, and themselves (Cunningham & Gross, 2021; Jackson, 2011, 2018; Jones et al., 2012; Kiely, 2004; 2005; Kumi-Yeboah, 2018; Taylor, 1994; Vande Berg et al., 2012). Research grounded in TL has shown how such encounters encourage students to adopt more inclusive and integrative perspectives (Kumi-Yeboah, 2018; Taylor, 1994). Thus, TL is a useful framework for making sense of the profound changes reported by students returning from study abroad.

However, while much of this scholarship emphasizes the rational and reflective dimensions of TL, there has been comparatively less attention paid to the emotional components of TL in study abroad contexts. Some studies acknowledge that emotions such as culture shock, frustration, or joy can accompany the adjustment process, but these affective elements are often treated as precursors to rational reflection and discourse rather than as integral to the learning process itself (Dirkx, 2006; Taylor, 2008). This limited focus leaves unexplored the ways in which emotion shapes the transformative potential of study abroad experiences (or any other experiential learning experiences).

Based on 12 semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted with students following a study abroad experience in South Africa, this paper examines emotional discourse within the context of transformative learning (TL). The paper outlines existing literature on TL and explores mechanisms involved in the transformative learning process. It then defines emotional discourse and highlights its relevance to perspective change, followed by an explanation of research methodology and findings. The paper concludes by outlining considerations for future research and practice.

## **Transformative Learning Theory**

Transformative Learning Theory (TL), introduced by Jack Mezirow in the late 1970s, is a significant framework in adult education. Mezirow (1978) observed that adult learning extends beyond acquiring new information or skills, involving a fundamental reorganization of how individuals interpret themselves, others, and the world. Central to TL is perspective transformation, where learners critically examine and revise the structures and assumptions that frame their experiences (Mezirow, 1991). Transformation occurs when learners become aware of these perspectives, subject them to scrutiny, and reconstruct their assumptions in ways that are more inclusive, discriminating, and reflective. Perspective transformation is a process that can lead to three distinct outcomes: thinking differently about your peers, about the world, and about oneself (Cranton, 2006; Illeris, 2014; Mezirow, 1997, 2000; Taylor, 2008;).

Mezirow (1991, 2000) outlined a series of phases that characterize the process of perspective transformation. It often begins with a disorienting dilemma, an event or experience that

challenges existing frames of reference and creates a sense of cognitive disequilibrium. This dilemma prompts self-examination, sometimes accompanied by feelings of fear, guilt, or shame. Learners then engage in critical reflection, questioning the assumptions that underlie their previous beliefs. Through rational discourse, students begin to explore alternative viewpoints and develop new ways of understanding (Mezirow, 1991). This process culminates in the reintegration of transformed perspectives into daily life, where learners enact new roles, relationships, and practices consistent with their revised worldview (Mezirow, 1991, 2000; Taylor, 2000).

One of the most distinctive aspects of Mezirow's (1991, 1997) TL is the function of rational discourse. Mezirow, drawing from Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action, argued that learners must engage in dialogue where assumptions are openly questioned and tested against evidence and reason. Rational discourse is characterized by the presentation of arguments, critical questioning, and openness to alternative perspectives, with the goal of reaching consensus about the validity of beliefs (Habermas, 1984; Mezirow, 1997). For Mezirow (1991, 1997), this process provides how learners ensure that their new perspectives are not arbitrary or idiosyncratic but rather justified through shared reasoning.

Rational discourse enables learners to achieve greater clarity and coherence in their thinking by uncovering hidden assumptions that had previously structured their worldviews (Mezirow, 1991). Moreover, it fosters autonomy in judgment, as individuals develop the ability to critically evaluate their beliefs independently of tradition, authority, or unexamined social norms. Rational discourse also serves an "emancipatory function (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 58-63)." By challenging and discarding distorted assumptions, learners gain freedom from limiting perspectives and are empowered to act more inclusively and responsibly in their personal and social lives (Taylor, 2008).

### **Conceptualizing Emotional Discourse**

Although Mezirow's formulation of transformative learning foregrounded rationality as the primary mechanism of perspective change (Mezirow, 1991, 1997), subsequent scholarship has expanded the field in ways that challenge a purely intrapsychic and cognitive account. Sociocultural perspectives situate learning within relational, contextual, and identity mediated processes (Illeris, 2014; Taylor, 2008); critical approaches emphasize power, ideology, and structural constraint (Brookfield, 2005); and postcolonial and intercultural strands underscore the historical embeddedness of transformation within systems of privilege and inequality (Kiely, 2004, 2005). Collectively, these traditions recast transformative learning as socially mediated and somewhat affectively textured rather than exclusively rational.

Within this broader terrain, emotion remains insufficiently theorized. Although emotions are increasingly recognized as constitutive of meaning making, shaping how learners interpret experience and negotiate identity (Dirkx, 1997, 2006; Illeris, 2014); Mezirow's model positioned affect largely as a precursor to rational reflection. Some critics contend that this perspective limits transformation by placing learners' emotional experiences below argumentative reasoning (Dirkx, 1997; Dirkx et al., 2006). Transformation, from this perspective, entails engagement not only with reasons but also with fear, vulnerability, hope, desire, and other affective currents that can orient interpretation.

In response, this paper conceptualizes emotional discourse as an analytically distinct yet interdependent dimension of transformative learning. Emotional discourse refers to the communicative and interpretive processes through which emotional experience becomes an object of reflection, articulation, and shared meaning making. In other words, emotional discourse occurs when people intentionally talk about and think through their feelings as part of making sense of their experiences. Rather than treating emotions as private reactions that remain unexamined,

emotional discourse involves recognizing feelings, putting them into words, and sharing them with others so that they become part of collective understanding. Through this process, emotions are not simply felt; they are interpreted, discussed, and used as meaningful sources of insight about oneself, others, and the situation at hand.

At the intrapersonal level, emotional discourse involves reflective engagement with feeling. Emotions such as guilt, discomfort, awe, or uncertainty are not incidental reactions but signals that invite examination. Research in emotion and identity supports this view (Gross, 1998; Saarni, 1999). Theories of emotion regulation and development suggest that individuals interpret affect as indicative of personal significance, thereby shaping self-understanding and authenticity (Gross, 1998; Izard, 2009; Saarni, 1999). Within transformative learning, emotions may mark alignment or dissonance with one's commitments, prompting reconsideration of frames of reference (Dirkx, 1997; Saarni, 1999; Taylor, 2008). In this sense, intrapersonal emotional discourse both regulates affect and contributes to identity reconstruction (Dirkx, 2006; Illeris, 2014).

Dirkx's characterization of emotions as "messengers of the soul" further extends this argument by suggesting that intrapersonal emotional reflection may reveal symbolic, imaginative, or spiritual dimensions of experience (Dirkx, 1997, 2006; Tisdell, 2003). For example, recurring anxiety in professional or relational contexts may reveal internalized assumptions of inadequacy that shape how individuals interpret performance and belonging, and reflective engagement with this anxiety can prompt a reassessment of one's self concept (Dirkx et al., 2006; Illeris, 2014). Similarly, sustained joy in particular roles or activities may signal unrealized capacities or aspirations, and attending to it as "meaningful" can orient individuals toward forms of expression aligned with their evolving identity (Dirkx, 1997; Tisdell, 2003). By engaging emotions rather than dismissing them, learners access aspects of self that might have previously been unarticulated; a process aligned with transformative outcomes (Cranton & Roy, 2003; Dirkx et al., 2006; Illeris, 2014).

At the interpersonal level, emotional discourse manifests through emotional sharing. Research demonstrates that emotionally intense experiences are frequently communicated to others, across cultures and age groups (Peters & Kashima, 2015; Rimé, 2009; Rimé et al., 1998). Such sharing functions not merely as catharsis but as a mechanism of meaning construction (Páez et al., 2015; Zech & Rimé, 2005). Through verbal articulation, private affect becomes a socially situated narrative open to validation, reinterpretation, and integration. Disclosure can elicit empathy and support while strengthening relational bonds and facilitating emotional regulation (Laurenceau et al., 1998; Rimé, 2009). Moreover, feedback from others provides a "relational mirror" through which individuals refine their self-concept (Páez et al., 2015). Thus, interpersonal emotional sharing can contribute to both social cohesion and identity formation.

Emotional discourse is analytically distinct from emotion itself, from expression alone, and from reflection in general. It designates structured processes in which emotions are interpreted, articulated, and engaged as legitimate epistemic resources. Its logic parallels that of rational discourse, which in transformative learning involves internal critical reflection and external testing of assumptions through dialogue (Mezirow, 1991, 1997; Taylor, 2008). Similar rational processes appear in moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984), cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957), decision making research (Kahneman, 2011), and deliberative democratic theory (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1984). In each domain, individuals justify beliefs intrapersonally and interpersonally through exchange.

Emotional discourse operates through a parallel structure. Intrapersonally, individuals interpret emotions as meaningful indicators of identity and value (Gross, 1998; Izard, 2009; Saarni, 1999). Interpersonally, they articulate those emotions within dialogue, inviting validation,

contestation, and empathy (Rimé, 2009; Zech & Rimé, 2005). Whereas rational discourse privileges argumentative justification, emotional discourse privileges affective signaling and relational validation. The two are not competing paradigms but parallel epistemic pathways.

Despite foundational contributions highlighting the importance of emotion (Dirkx, 1997, 2006), scholarship on how emotional discourse is conceptualized here remains conceptually diffuse. Some studies focus on emotional expression during transformative experiences (Courtenay et al., 1998; Dirkx et al., 2006), while others emphasize emotional processing and identity integration (Cranton & Roy, 2003; Dirkx, 1997; Taylor, 2001). This variability complicates theoretical precision and limits systematic examination of how emotion can shape transformative outcomes (Taylor, 2008).

The present study addresses this gap by clarifying emotional discourse as a distinct dimension of transformative learning. By situating emotional interpretation and sharing alongside critical reflection and rational dialogue, it advances a model in which transformation unfolds through the integration of reason and affect. Perspective change emerges not solely from argument, nor solely from feeling. Instead, emotion and reason both lend independent and parallel pathways to the transformative learning process.

### **The Current Study**

This study adds to the existing literature on TL by focusing intently on the emotional aspects of the perspective changing process. Specifically, it identifies the intra-and-interpersonal dimensions of emotional discourse and how it adds to the transformative learning process. It also explores how emotional discourse played a role in shaping world views, perceptions of peers, and self-discovery.

### **Program and Participant Description**

In Fall 2023, State University of New York Oswego offered “CRJ 300: Illegal Hunting and Poaching in Africa,” an upper-level elective for Criminal Justice majors and minors, taught by the lead author. The 8-week course, running from October to December, focused on the history and current realities of animal poaching in Africa. Fourteen students enrolled (three men and eleven women), primarily criminal justice majors, with one broadcast and one art major also participating due to interest in the topic and travel opportunity. In January 2024, the class traveled with their instructor and another professor on an 11-day study abroad experience in South Africa.

During the trip, participants stayed at Mabalingwe, a private nature reserve in Limpopo Province. Out of ten nights, seven were spent at Mabalingwe, with remaining nights during transit. Upon arrival in Johannesburg, a coach transported them north to Mabalingwe. Lodging was in four chalets arranged by gender and preference, with one woman choosing to stay with three men due to their prior friendship.

The itinerary included multiple safari-style game drives at different times of day. Safari style game drives refer to guided wildlife viewing excursions conducted in open vehicles, typically within protected reserves, where participants observe animals in their natural habitats. Moreover, the itinerary included visits to two elephant sanctuaries (one for rehabilitation, one for permanent care, with group visits staggered as needed), and on the second-to-last day, a visit to Pretoria featuring cultural and culinary experiences. The program cost students about \$4,500 (covering all essentials meals, activities, insurance, flights, and lodging) while personal purchases were extra.

## Research Methods

The SUNY Oswego Human Subjects Committee approved protocol number 2023.059 before data collection commenced in the Spring of 2024 after the end of the travel portion of the course and lasted for about a month. The methodology comprised semi-structured interviews that were conducted by three different investigators. Interview guides contained questions regarding participant prior travels, initial impressions of South Africa, and the study abroad program. Moreover, interview guides also probed after experiences in South Africa, their perceptions of the trip after having traveled, their perceptions of themselves, the world, and their peers. Of the 14 students who embarked on the trip, 12 voluntarily participated in the interviews. Moreover, none of the students at that time were students in any of the investigators' classes (when data was being collected in the Spring of 2024), which eliminated any power dynamic. Moreover, students were given the option to be interviewed by investigators who were not faculty leaders in South Africa.

Participants had the choice to be interviewed in-person or via Zoom. This would accommodate current students and alumni. Nine of 12 participants chose to be interviewed over Zoom and consented to Zoom meetings being recorded. The three who chose interviews in person were also happy to have their conversations recorded on voice recorders. On average interviews lasted about 40 minutes, and the average age of participants was 21.7, with nine females participating and 3 males. Moreover, participants comprised four seniors, four juniors, and four alumni. All participants were white with one participant identifying themselves as biracial. Students were interviewed knowing that they would receive pseudonyms and that their responses would be confidential.

Interview audio files were transcribed using a combination of AI (recommended by the IRB chair) and manual transcription. Two research assistants and the lead PI reviewed AI transcriptions to ensure accuracy. Overall, the AI made a few mistakes across the 12 transcripts. These transcriptions were then uploaded to the web version of Atlas.TI.

Data analysis proceeded through an integrated inductive and deductive thematic approach. Initial coding drew on a deductive framework informed by TL and the study's guiding research questions, which oriented attention toward processes such as disorienting dilemmas, reflection, dialogue, and perspective change. This framework provided analytic structure while allowing the research team to examine how these processes appeared within participants' accounts of their experiences. At the same time, the analysis remained open to inductive insight, enabling patterns and meanings to emerge directly from the narratives. Through multiple rounds of coding, preliminary codes were refined and divided into subcodes as more specific thematic distinctions became visible, a process consistent with established practices in qualitative interview analysis, as illustrated in Koen & Mathna (2019).

Analytic rigor was supported through collaborative discussion among the research team throughout the coding process. Coding decisions were reviewed collectively, and emerging interpretations were examined in relation to the data. Rather than applying formal intercoder reliability metrics, which remain contested within interpretive qualitative traditions (Braun & Clarke, 2021; O'Connor & Joffe, 2020) the team employed a consensus-based strategy. Coding discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached, ensuring that thematic interpretations remained grounded in participant narratives while sustaining reflexive awareness of the researchers' interpretive role.

## Findings

Analysis of the twelve post-travel interviews revealed that many of the participants' transformative learning experiences during the South Africa study abroad program unfolded primarily through emotional processes. Rather than viewing emotion as a peripheral by-product of reflection, participants described their feelings as integral to how they interpreted, discussed, and ultimately re-constructed their worldviews. Thematic analysis identified four interrelated stages that form an emotional arc of transformation: (1) emotional disruption, in which participants encountered powerful affective experiences that destabilized prior assumptions; (2) intrapersonal emotional reflection, through which they processed and interpreted those emotions in relation to self-concept and moral agency; (3) interpersonal emotional sharing, involving the sharing and validation of emotions among peers; and (4) emotion-driven perspective transformation, wherein feeling and cognition merged to produce enduring changes in identity and worldview. It is important to add, however, that while emotional processes were prominent across interviews, participants varied in the intensity, duration, and consequences of these experiences, with some describing moments of ambiguity, tension, or incomplete resolution rather than clear transformation.

### Emotional Disruption

Mezirow (1991) conceptualized disorienting dilemmas, where established perspectives are challenged by experiences that feel too significant to ignore or rationalize. For many participants in this study, the transformative learning process also began with similar disorienting dilemmas that evoked intense emotional responses or emotional disruptions. Encounters that were emotionally charged or morally overwhelming such as learning about the realities of poaching, witnessing economic inequality, witnessing a classmate enduring an emotionally abusive relationship, and seeing wildlife up close produced powerful affective responses that unsettled prior assumptions about comfort, privilege, love, and justice. In the context of this experience, such emotional disruptions were often visceral, emerging through embodied reactions of shock, sadness, awe, or guilt. However, not all emotionally charged encounters resulted in immediate reflection or perspective change, as some participants described temporarily distancing themselves from discomforting experiences or struggling to articulate their reactions.

Six participants mentioned that they were struck by learning about the realities of poaching. This was especially the case after they saw elephants in the wild and spent time at the two elephant sanctuaries. Bo-Katan, for example, described how her expectations about conservation and wildlife protection were upended once she learned about the harsh realities of anti-poaching work. Claiming she "had never really learned or thought much about South Africa" before and came into the experience with idealized views of the wildlife seen in "National Geographic." Yet hearing from rangers who risked their lives to protect animals led her to recognize the human and moral gravity of poaching, stating that the experience "made me appreciate everything," contrasting her time as a park ranger in the United States, where "we didn't have any animals we needed to really protect..." with the Mabalingwe rangers' daily struggle. Similarly, Padmé described feeling "heartbroken to hear how people could do that just for money," while Han admitted he "never thought about how dangerous" conservation work could be until learning about it firsthand. Chewie recalled being "speechless" when hearing how poachers mutilate animals for ivory and horn. The participants' sadness, guilt, and anger were not incidental. They were the very means through which meaning making began. At the same time, several participants suggested that these reactions were initially experienced as overwhelming or difficult to process, indicating that emotional disruption

did not uniformly translate into insight but sometimes involved periods of confusion or emotional saturation. Emotion, nonetheless, functioned as both the catalyst and the interpretive lens through which participants began to reconstruct their perspectives on human–animal relations, privilege, and responsibility.

For five participants, emotional disruption emerged not only from empathy toward animals but from confrontation with human inequality. Leia for example, explained that it was difficult for her to see so much poverty so close to all the natural beauty around her. It made her feel uncomfortable and forced her to think about her social privileges. These five participants reflected on the collision between aesthetic appreciation and moral unease. The cognitive awareness of privilege was amplified through both guilt and gratitude. This kind of moral discomfort, as Taylor (2008) argues, functions as a gateway to transformation, forcing learners to confront contradictions within their own value systems. Yet, participants’ accounts also suggest that moral discomfort can generate tension without guaranteeing transformation, as learners may interpret unease in multiple ways, including normalization, avoidance, or unresolved contradiction.

A particularly salient instance of emotional disruption emerged from a female student, Cara’s account of being in an abusive relationship during the trip. She described being trapped in a cycle of control and emotional exhaustion that severely affected her ability to engage with the experience:

“Before I had made that decision [to end communication with him], I was getting one hour of sleep because he wanted me to stay up to talk to him. But we were, what, seven hours apart? ... I was miserable for the first, half of the trip... That’s how abusive relationships work.”

This statement illustrates how psychological distress and coercive control can become embodied forms of emotional disruption. However, Cara’s disclosure to some of her peers had a ripple effect across the group. While this will be discussed in more detail below, the students Ahsoka, Leia, Omega, Bo-Katan, Chewie, and Hera described feeling emotionally shaken and deeply concerned for her well-being. For many, this moment served as an unexpected form of emotional disruption, as they confronted the reality of intimate partner emotional abuse within their own peer circle. Their reactions ranged from shock and sadness to empathy, with several students noting how the conversation made them “reflect on their own relationships and boundaries. This collective affective response demonstrates how emotional disruption can emerge not only from direct experience but also through empathic engagement with others’ suffering. In this sense, the group’s reaction to Cara’s situation blurred the line between individual and shared emotion, foreshadowing the interpersonal emotional discourse that later became central to their transformative experience.

Importantly, not all forms of emotional disruption were negative. For seven participants, feelings of awe and wonder produced equally destabilizing experiences. Omega, a woman, reflected, “Seeing the landscape and animals up close felt unreal. I couldn’t stop smiling; it was overwhelming in a good way.” Similarly, one of the male students, Chewie said: “I felt like I was able to look into the elephant’s eyes. I felt like it knew that I was in awe of it. Like it knew that I deemed it a majestic beast.” While not painful, this positive emotional overload nonetheless disrupted the students’ normal frame of reference and expanded their sense of connection, humility, and appreciation for non-human life. In transformative learning terms, awe created openings for cognitive accommodation and self-reflection, demonstrating that not all disorienting experiences are distressing; some, like these, are joyfully unsettling. This aligns with Keltner and Haidt’s (2003) assertion that awe (by evoking vastness and a need for cognitive accommodation) can catalyze openness and humility, both of which are central to transformative learning.

Emotional disruption functioned as the affective ignition point of transformation. Whether through grief, guilt, disgust, empathy, or awe, students' emotional responses fractured previously unquestioned assumptions about privilege, morality, justice, love, and belonging, creating what Illeris (2014) calls "a crack in the identity structure." In this way, emotional disruption marked not an endpoint of experience but the threshold of transformation: the moment when emotion shifted from reaction to reflection.

### **Intrapersonal Reflection**

Following initial moments of emotional disruption, participants began to turn inward, reflecting on what their feelings revealed about their values and assumptions. However, reflection was not uniformly described as deliberate or structured, with some participants characterizing insight as gradual, retrospective, or only partially formed at the time of the interview. Nonetheless, this stage of intrapersonal emotional reflection marked the beginning of meaning-making: emotions moved from being mere experiences to becoming sources of insight. As Mezirow (1991) describes, critical reflection allows learners to examine the assumptions that underlie their interpretations of experience, while Dirkx et al. (2006) extends this idea by emphasizing that emotions are not distractions from cognition but essential "carriers of meaning."

Six students described processing intense guilt and privilege after confronting South Africa's social and environmental realities. Leia, who earlier expressed discomfort at seeing poverty amid beauty, reflected that those emotions lingered long after returning home. She explained that she was taken aback by seeing natural beauty outside of Bela-Bela but then seeing intense poverty in the city of Bela-Bela. She made similar remarks about going to Pretoria and seeing beautiful suburban neighborhoods, grand shopping malls, and eating at a 5-star restaurant making it seem like the caricature promulgated by American media of Africa being a place rife with poverty is a farce. However, driving a few blocks from these places of abundance to see intense need.

"Another thing that stuck out was just like driving through [Pretoria] seeing how everyone lived. And I'm like, wow, people live here like this? It's just like crazy to think about." (Leia).

Padmé also described her internal response to witnessing poverty in Bela-Bela, connecting her feelings to disrupted expectations about life in South Africa. During her interview, she affirmed that her experiences in South Africa were "eye opening," adding, "And then I guess like traveling also to the city, I don't think I really expected it to be like that, to be honest." Padmé's experience was not characterized by overt guilt, but by a growing awareness of the limits of her own preconceptions. Her statement reveals how exposure to the material realities of inequality prompted an internal reorganization of assumptions, realizing that a country could be simultaneously modern and impoverished, vibrant and unequal. In Padmé's case, the process was less about moral reckoning and more about perceptual recalibration: learning to hold multiple, seemingly contradictory realities at once. Her reflection shows the transition from emotional reaction to self-directed moral reasoning. By interrogating guilt, students converted affective unease into an awareness of global interdependence. Yet, the depth of this awareness varied, as participants differed in how explicitly they connected emotional reactions to broader structural or political interpretations.

Other students engaged in quieter forms of reflection, marked by appreciation, gratitude, or humility. Omega spoke about the awe she felt in nature as a moment of grounding: "Being out there made me realize how small I am, but in a good way. I stopped worrying about stupid things." Similarly, other students like Chewie explained that they found themselves unplugging from their phones and "drama back home." They would spend little time on their phones, with some students

saying that they would call or text with friends and family or keep Snapchat streaks alive before putting their phones down for extended periods of time. Chewie also explained that he found himself sitting out in the bush on a rock with a pen and a pad of paper writing down some of their thoughts or drawing sketches. To these students, the natural beauty that they were surrounded by made them realize how insignificant human strife was.

Similarly, Han and Din described using solitude to process emotions, explaining that at the end of each day when he was either sitting by themselves on the porch of the chalet or lying in bed, they would reflect on how small or insignificant some of the issues people perceive as problematic were back home. They felt that in these moments of solitude, they would gain perspective on how lucky they were to be there but also that the world is a big place and that once you come to this realization, problems seem less significant.

I think it kind of helped me, like sometimes I tend to get caught up in my own little world here and forget that there's more to life than like whatever I got going on in my little social circle and going out and experiencing a whole new place. It just shows you how large the world is and how much more there is to life than you, you sometimes realize... I don't know, it made me a happier person. (Din)

By integrating awe into their worldview, students reframed small anxieties within a larger existential perspective.

Lastly, seven students spoke about how traveling to South Africa helped them realize that despite the world being vast, comprising many groups of people and cultures; traveling is easier than they had initially thought. They explained that their experiences in South Africa helped them realize that there are interesting and sometimes unexpected things about other places and people that helped expand their worldviews. This left them wondering how much more they could expand their horizons if they traveled more and to other places, they never thought about going to. In short, these students, after reflecting on their experiences, gained courage to explore the world further.

Wow, I can't believe I'm here. I can't believe I'm doing this...looking out into a crazy view. You're like, in another part of the world. I feel like it opens your eyes up to the possibilities of life. You can go and do those things. Like you can go and do it if you want to do it. You look at yourself differently. Maybe you're forced to reflect on who you are for the first time... That you can 100% and just go and do it. Like, I felt like it was so not difficult. If you have the money and the passport, that's really all you need to go and do it. (Padmé)

After traveling to South Africa with the group, these students realized that it was easier than they thought it would be. To them it was less intimidating, leading to a newfound sense of confidence that they could do it on their own, they could do it often, and they could travel even further. Padmé, who provided the quote above, immediately booked a trip to Europe when she returned after her time in South Africa.

For Cara, intrapersonal reflection emerged through the process of reclaiming autonomy from her abusive partner back in the United States. Having first experienced disruption through distress and exhaustion, she later described how she was “miserable for the first half of the trip” because her partner’s abusive communications. Eventually, she “decided to let that go and actually enjoy myself.” She explained that realizing the sheer distance she had from him during her time abroad empowered her to take back some autonomy that had been taken. This realization exemplifies what Dirkx (1997) calls engaging the inner emotional imagination or the

reinterpretation of emotion as a message about personal boundaries and self-worth. Cara's reflection illustrates transformation through introspection initiated by emotional disruption.

Across these accounts, students used emotional reflection as a mechanism for reconstructing identity and values. Feelings of guilt became opportunities for reexamination; awe turned into humility; and pain evolved into autonomy. Engaging with their emotions allowed participants to integrate what they felt with what they believed, leading to more coherent and inclusive meaning perspectives. Intrapersonal emotional reflection thus represented the bridge between raw emotion and conscious transformation. It was through this introspective process that learners began to translate emotional experiences into enduring insights about self, others, and the world.

### **Interpersonal Emotional Sharing**

While students processed their emotions internally, they also increasingly turned outward by sharing personal stories, doubts, and vulnerabilities with one another as time passed and they began becoming more comfortable around each other. These interpersonal exchanges became pivotal spaces for transformation. Emotional sharing as part of emotional discourse, as conceptualized here, refers to the intentional or spontaneous sharing of emotional experiences through conversation and collective reflection. Whereas intrapersonal reflection helped participants recognize emotion as information, interpersonal emotional sharing allowed them to test and deepen those insights through dialogue and empathy. In this sense, group interaction functioned as the social dimension of transformative learning, transforming isolated emotions into shared meaning.

One of the most striking instances of emotional sharing occurred during a moment of loadshedding, when the group lost power and gathered by flashlight (on a phone) to talk. This unplanned environment created intimacy and vulnerability, prompting candid discussions about relationships, fears, and personal struggles.

According to reports from the students, it was about 11 p.m. at night and several students from two adjacent chalets were visiting in the communal area of one chalet. At this time the power went out, and the students started chatting about their personal lives and anxieties about being in South Africa. It was at this time that Cara emerged from her room after being in a long arduous argument with her partner. She looked at her peers and said "I think I hate my boyfriend" before divulging more details about the nature and extent of the emotional abuse she had endured.

I was crying on the phone with my boyfriend... I was so anxious and I walked out my room, and I remember saying to the girls "guys, like, I know we don't know each other at all, but I need to talk to somebody because I'm having a really hard time." And they were like, "all right, like, lay it on us, like, that's fine." And I was like, "I think I hate my boyfriend. Like, he's so awful and so mean to me." And I basically, gave them the rundown of why I thought I didn't like him, and they literally changed my life... (Cara)

Cara's disclosure about her abusive relationship acted as emotional disruption which led to the group rallying around her. Ahsoka recalled that everyone stopped conversing when Cara spoke, describing that the group listened quietly as she opened to the group. Leia reflected that she was disturbed by hearing what Cara was going through, noting that it had reminded her of her own past abusive partners and that she felt like she understood how Cara was feeling. Omega described how the conversation turned supportive rather than "gossipy" as everyone began feeling comfortable talking about their current or past relationships: "We were just talking about our past partners... one of the girls was talking about her current partner... and we were trying to help each other out... we were all crowded around the light and just chatting." For these participants, emotional sharing

transformed distress into connection, creating a space where care and empathy replaced judgment. Although participants overwhelmingly described this exchange as supportive, it is possible that such emotionally charged disclosures may also generate discomfort or pressure within group settings, a dynamic that warrants further investigation.

This moment exemplified the relational function of emotional sharing. Through listening and responding to one another's disclosures, participants experienced empathy and solidarity. What began as a moment of one person's emotional pain became a collective act of meaning-making, an interpersonal process where peers co-constructed insight into autonomy, self-respect, and emotional health.

Emotional sharing also extended beyond this single evening. More students became comfortable talking about their relationships with others, whether these were romantic, platonic, past, or present. Talking about relationships became a constant feature during group lunches, group outings, or group dinners. For example, Chewie, Din, Han, Omega, and Ahsoka shared freely about the nature of their romantic relationships. For example, Chewie described how difficult it was for him to communicate with his partner back home and that it was putting strain on their relationship causing him some anxiety. Din talked about how he feared that the relationship he was in had "run its course" and that he and his partner were "in denial" about the relationship no longer being a viable one. Ahsoka and Han on the other end told of how happy they were in their current relationships and what they did to make their relationships productive. Sometimes students would ask the trip leaders for their input or advice on some of these issues or to share their own stories. What started as emotional sharing in the chalet among a handful of students, became a pervasive theme that characterized the entire trip to South Africa.

Participants repeatedly emphasized how the group's openness created a sense of psychological safety. Bo-Katan reflected that she "felt more comfortable talking with [her fellow students] in general" attributing that comfort to the bonds formed through shared vulnerability. Din described how close the group became by the end of the trip linking that closeness to the emotional honesty fostered during conversations and time spent together.

I would say how close we got as a group...as a group of students who went like we got very close within like less than a day or two. People that during the class I sat on opposite sides of the classroom and never spoke to really.... I was friends with them within like a day or two. But in a situation like that you either go out of your way to make friends with those people, or you don't and have a miserable time. And I think we all kind of realized that and it was surprising how fast we got to know each other and [got] closer.

Sharing like this went beyond relationships but also had much to do with the "big scary" nature of traveling so far from home. For all the students except Fennec (who had traveled to Japan) before, this was the furthest they had ever been from home.

It's, it's hard, it's hard. I was so scared. I literally cried before I got in line at Syracuse Airport to my mom, and I was like, "I'm so scared." And I have a lot of anxieties. She has a lot of anxieties that just passed down. (Omega)

Padmé shared:

Me and Han...after we got through security, we were walking through the airport and Han looked at me, he's like, "I'm kind of sad." I was like, "why?" He's like, "I'm feeling homesick. Like I'm scared to go further." He was like, "if you think about it, we're just getting further and further away from home." And I was like, "oh my God, you're right!"

Students freely shared their anxieties with one another about “how crazy” it is to be on a plane traveling to the Southern hemisphere to stay on a continent they never had dreamt of going to. At the same time while many of them were anxious about traveling so far from home, they found comfort in the fact that they were going through the same experiences and had similar perceptions about what they were doing.

Through interpersonal emotional sharing, participants co-created a learning environment that blurred the boundaries between peer support and critical reflection. Sharing emotions about what students were experiencing not only reinforced trust but also enabled participants to test new interpretations of their experiences. As emotions moved from private to collective space, they gained moral and social dimensions. In Mezirow’s (1997) terms, these dialogues represented communicative actions that are not solely rational but profoundly affective acts through which participants negotiated new meaning perspectives together.

### **Emotion-Driven Perspective Transformation**

While emotional disruption and interpersonal sharing represented the precursors to transformation, participants’ reflections reveal that these emotional processes culminated in concrete changes in perspective. In TL, perspective transformation marks the point at which learners reconstruct their meaning frameworks to become more inclusive, self-aware, and critically reflective (Mezirow, 1991). What distinguished participants’ transformations here was the degree to which emotion itself served as the engine of change. However, participants’ narratives also reveal variation in how transformation was articulated, with some describing subtle shifts in awareness rather than dramatic reorientations of identity or worldview. Nonetheless, it seemed that through guilt, empathy, sadness, awe, and relief, emotions became both the medium and mechanism for reinterpreting experience.

For some students, this transformation manifested as a shift in worldview. Some students articulated that learning about the intersection of beauty and suffering in South Africa reshaped how they viewed global inequality, explaining that their view of travel had changed permanently. Similarly, others noted that seeing communities living in hardship made them rethink what they took for granted in the United States, signaling a recalibration of gratitude and humility. Emotional discomfort thus evolved into an affective realization that privilege carries responsibility. This pattern reflects what Dirkx (2006) describes as the emotional reorientation that enables learners to integrate empathy into their moral and cognitive identity.

Other participants described perspective changes tied to self-discovery and emotional healing. Cara’s process of reclaiming autonomy from an abusive relationship became a profound redefinition of self-worth. By naming her experience aloud and receiving empathy from her peers, she transformed private distress into empowerment. What began as emotional pain became a catalyst for understanding her own agency.

One of the most unanimous sentiments that came from interviews was that after the trip students felt more confident in themselves, navigating other cultures, and travelling. Moreover, they claimed to feel generally braver to take on challenging situations whether they relate to travel or not. Students like Padmé, Omega, Chewie, Din, Leia, and Han (to name a few) described how confident they had become to travel during this experience. After South Africa, Leia, Mothma, and Padmé booked separate trips to travel across Europe by themselves. Omega, Cara, Ahsoka, and Mothma traveled together within the United States. Cara, with her newfound independence, confidence, and autonomy became certified and taught English at a summer camp in Eastern Europe the following summer before traveling to several countries in Eastern Europe by herself.

This was not something I ever thought I'd be able to do. And I've gotten better with like my anxiety and things like that... But I never thought that I would ever be able to do something like that, which, you know, I mean, everybody is different. To some people it's like, why not? But to me it is debilitating to be that far from home and that far out of my comfort zone, I literally cannot do it. Yet, I just decided one day, do it, and ripped the band aid off. (Cara)

Furthermore, feelings of awe and wonder during game drives and sanctuary visits expanded participants' sense of connection and humility. Students also explained how their world views changed in that they felt that much of what they worried about back home felt so insignificant when confronted by the raw beauty of the African Bushveld and the animals contained in it. They came to appreciate that there are bigger things to appreciate in the world and that some of the daily stressors they feel back home are often self-constructed consequences of culture. Students specifically referred to how social media played a role in creating these stressors. Being in South Africa with their peers and seeing more of the world, helped them contextualize the significance of the "drama back home." Such sentiments highlight what Keltner & Haidt (2003) identify as self-transcendent emotions that dissolve self-focus and promote openness to broader systems of meaning. For these participants, joy, awe, and reverence, rather than guilt or pain, seemed to initiate transformation by altering their perception of humanity's relationship to nature.

Across the dataset, emotional experiences whether painful, compassionate, or awe-inspiring appeared to serve as the structural core of transformation. These emotions unsettled participants' habitual ways of knowing and opened space for new understandings of self, others, and the world. At the same time, the findings do not suggest a uniform or deterministic pathway from emotion to transformation. Participants' accounts reflect variability, interpretive complexity, and differing degrees of resolution, underscoring that emotional processes may facilitate, complicate, or coexist with transformative learning rather than guarantee it. Yet, our findings do suggest that rather than functioning as a prelude to rational discourse, emotion was an autonomous and discursive medium through which participants constructed new meaning. Emotional discourse, therefore, was the felt process by which transformation became real.

### **Implication, Limitations, and Conclusion**

Beyond documenting emotional processes within this study abroad context, the findings invite us to reconsider how perspective change takes shape within transformative learning. Emotion appears not as a threshold to be crossed on the way to reason, but as a parallel current, an interpretive stream through which meaning perspectives are unsettled, negotiated, and slowly reformed. This reframing draws transformation away from a solely cognitive endeavor and toward a more integrated account of sense making, where affective, relational, and interpretive forces move together, sometimes in tension, often in quiet alignment.

Emotional disruption, reflection, and sharing are therefore more than sparks that ignite rational scrutiny; they are themselves generative acts through which learners discern what matters, renegotiate who they are, and restore coherence after disorientation. Transformation emerges less as a solitary triumph of critique and more as the layered convergence of thought and feeling, two systems of meaning moving in parallel, each distinct, each shaping the other, as perspective slowly shifts.

Despite its contributions, several methodological limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample size was small (N = 12) and drawn from a single, faculty-led short-term program,

limiting generalizability. Although qualitative inquiry privileges depth over breadth, future studies could expand on these findings with quantitative and qualitative data from multiple institutions or longer-term programs to assess consistency across contexts. Second, participants were interviewed shortly after returning from South Africa, meaning responses may reflect the immediacy of emotional recall rather than enduring transformation. Longitudinal follow-ups would clarify whether emotional insights consolidated into lasting perspective shifts. Third, because one of the investigators was also a program instructor, there is potential for positionality bias. While care was taken to minimize this (e.g., allowing students to choose an interviewer unaffiliated with their course), researcher involvement in the trip could have influenced both disclosure, comfort and interpretation. Finally, emotional topics, particularly those related to trauma or guilt, can be difficult to articulate; therefore, the data likely underrepresent the full range of emotional experience.

The findings underscore the need for both researchers and practitioners to treat emotion as a central component of transformative learning. Future studies might examine how specific emotions interact to shape meaning making, or how group settings mediate the translation of private emotion into collective learning. Cross-contextual studies could also compare emotional discourse in study abroad to other experiential learning settings such as service learning or field research. Furthermore, more pointed studies can attempt to understand how outcomes are differentially impacted by emotional and rational discourse. For example, whether emotional discourse is more impactful in terms of self-discovery outcomes, while rational discourse might be more effective at spurring changes in worldviews. More focused research can help us elucidate a more nuanced depiction of the TL process.

For practitioners, the implications are equally significant. Faculty leading study abroad programs should create intentional structures for emotional processing. For example, encouraging students to engage in group reflection, debriefs between smaller groups, meditating, or journaling could help prompt emotional as well as rational discourse. Emotional sharing should be normalized as part of academic reflection, not as something ancillary to it. Program leaders should also be trained to recognize and ethically manage emotional disclosures that goes beyond the mundane, “cover your ass” online Title IX training faculty are subjected to, fostering environments of psychological safety where vulnerability is met with empathy. Doing so not only could support student well-being but could also enhance the depth of transformative learning outcomes.

This study contributes to the TL scholarship by positioning emotion not as an accessory to cognition but as a primary mechanism of transformation. Through qualitative analysis of twelve interviews, it became clear that in this case participants’ most meaningful learning moments were driven by emotional experiences that reshaped their perceptions of self, others, and the world. Emotional discourse functioned both intrapersonally, as reflection on feelings and identity, and interpersonally, as collective meaning-making among peers. In doing so, it fulfilled the same emancipatory purpose that Mezirow (1991) ascribed to rational discourse, yet through emotional rather than purely logical engagement.

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### **Conflicts of Interest**

There is no conflict of interest that related to this study.

### **Ethical Approval**

This research was approved by the Human Subjects Committee of SUNY Oswego. All study procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report

and the Declaration of Helsinki. Participants provided informed consent and were assured of confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

### **Authors' contributions statement**

Marthinus Koen conceptualized and wrote the first draft of the paper. Moreover, Dr. Koen created first drafts of all research protocols and IRB materials as well as conducting most of the data collection and analysis. Matthew McLeskey helped conceptualize the paper and was heavily involved in writing the second draft of the paper. He also helped with data collection and analysis. Madeline DeVito helped write the third and fourth drafts of the paper, aided in finding sources for the literature reviews, and did some data analysis. Abigail Hall helped write the final draft of the paper, did some data analysis, and aided in forming the literature review. Celinet Duran helped collect some data and helped write the final draft of the paper.

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