

## Manifestations of Transformative Learning: A case study of a short-term study abroad program in Israel

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### Abstract

*Study abroad participants, including in short-term programs, often describe their time abroad as “transformative” and a period of intense personal growth. However, the contents of this transformation are often treated by administrators and students themselves as inscrutable, with the fact of having developed intercultural skills and “worldly” knowledge taken for granted. Using multiple data sources within an interpretive framework, this case study focuses on the manifestations of transformative learning to provide insights for international curriculum development. Using a qualitative approach, data was analyzed inductively and thematically. The findings point out that change emerged in the forms of (1) intercultural learning and sensitivity development, (2) learner expectations and behavior alteration, (3) ideological reconstruction or transition, and (4) academic and professional orientation conversion or refinement, suggesting that even short-term programs can lead to in-depth and broad transformation.*

*Les participants aux programmes d'études à l'étranger, y compris dans le cadre de programmes à court terme, qualifient souvent leur expérience de "transformatrice", concluant qu'il s'agit d'une expérience de développement personnel intense. Cependant, le contenu de cette transformation est souvent considéré comme insaisissable, aussi bien par les administrateurs que par les étudiants eux-mêmes, l'acquisition de compétences interculturelles et de connaissances du monde étant tenues pour acquises. En récoltant diverses sources de données au sein d'un cadre interprétatif, cette étude de cas se concentre sur les manifestations de l'apprentissage transformateur afin d'apporter des éclairages pour le développement des programmes internationaux de courte durée. En adoptant une approche qualitative, les données ont été analysées de manière inductive et thématique. Les résultats soulignent que le changement des étudiants s'est matérialisé à travers (1) un développement de l'apprentissage et de la sensibilité interculturels, (2) une modification des attentes et des comportements des apprenants, (3) une reconstruction ou une transition idéologique, et (4) une conversion ou le raffinement de leur orientation académique et professionnelle, suggérant ainsi que même les programmes internationaux à court terme peuvent conduire à une transformation non seulement en profondeur mais également en amplitude et envergure.*

**Keywords:** intercultural competence, international education, student mobility, study abroad, transformative learning

### Introduction

Short-term study abroad (STSA) programs are popular and cost-effective, offering more students the chance to study abroad. These experiences are often advertised as life-changing experiences, and students often claim they underwent a deep transformation. This study examines transformative learning and addresses the need for a deeper understanding of

these experiences. Transformative learning is defined as “processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes and interacts with the world” (Hoggan, 2016a, p. 77). However, these students struggle with articulating and elaborating on what was life changing, how, and what was actually changed. Hence, students tend to summarize their whole sojourn in a few vague words, not demonstrating how life altering the change was to them, perhaps due to their lack of “expressive abilities” (Wong, 2015, p. 124), but also because of the lack of interest in their experience they notice from people once they return home, suggesting our understanding of experiences might also be relational.

STSA programs have been debated, with concerns about shallow experiences and program length, perhaps at times locking students in superficial understandings of the host country (Dwyer, 2004; Kehl & Morris, 2008; Tarrant & Lyons, 2011). Scholars have therefore critiqued the length, compared short and longer-term programs, arguing that the longer usually means the better (Coker et al., 2018). However, addressing the affordability argument (Pope, 2023), research shows that carefully designed short programs can lead to deep learning outcomes (Anderson et al., 2006; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Mapp, 2012; Jones et al., 2023). Beyond considerations of length, researchers have been increasingly advocating that students get involved with host country locals in a variety of ways. These interactions include (collaborative) research, service learning, structured encounters with guest speakers or visits of offices, organizations, or factories, as high impact practices create room for change and intercultural development (Chiocca, 2021; Solís et al., 2015; Vande Berg & Paige, 2012), thus arguing that length is not proportional with learning outcomes. It is crucial to understand how students perceive and express the effects of their learning.

This article is part of a qualitative case study partially published in a previous paper (Chiocca, 2021) presenting a group of students who participated in a STSA in Israel and who experienced transformative learning from directed and diverse conversations with locals, hermeneutical reflections, emotional disequilibrium, intercultural competence development, and student engagement in a classroom culture. Drawing from the literature on transformative learning, this article is intended for study abroad professionals and stakeholders interested in upscaling the student experience during STSA.

## Literature Review

### Transformative Learning

Transformative Learning (TL), one of the leading theories in adult education, is defined as follows:

...the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about the world; of reformulating these assumptions to permit a more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspective; and of making decisions or otherwise acting upon these new understandings (Mezirow, 1991, p.167).

This theory has been evolving but Mezirow’s seminal work of identification of 10 TL phases remains widely used, including in research on international education. The 10 phases are listed in Table 1 below (Mezirow, 2009, p. 19).

**Table 1**

*The 10 phases of Transformative Learning (Mezirow, 2009)*

|   |
|---|
| 1. A disorienting dilemma   |
| 2. A self-examination   |
| 3. A critical assessment of assumptions   |
| 4. Recognition of a connection between one’s discontent and the process of transformation |
| 5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action                        |
| 6. Planning a course of action  |
| 7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan                             |
| 8. Provisional trying of new roles  |

|  |
|--|
| 9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships                 |
| 10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's perspective |

Mezirow (2009) argues that TL is a “reconstructive theory” (p. 21) which “involves how to think critically about assumptions supporting one’s perspectives and to develop critically reflective judgment in discourse regarding one’s beliefs, values, feelings, and self–concepts” (p. 29). The goal, then, is the independence and autonomy of learners who learn to question and critique their frame of reference. In short, they transition from being passive to being active in their understanding of the world. However, this does not necessarily mean learners radically change their ideas, but rather not take them for granted anymore, thus resulting in a mindful and intentional “elaboration, confirmation, or creation of a scheme” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 108).

TL is now considered a metatheory (Hoggan, 2016a, 2016b), as Mezirow’s theory has been critiqued for focusing primarily on epistemic changes. Hence, TL has been greatly expanded beyond Mezirow’s original work which he himself modified. Hoggan (2016a) proposes to call “perspective transformation” Mezirow’s theory mentioned above, and “transformative learning” a metatheory allowing a wider range of TL outcomes beyond epistemic dimensions (Hoggan, 2016a, 2016b).

Building on Mezirow’s typology of learning outcomes (worldview, epistemology, ontology, and behavior), Hoggan (2016a), in his review of the literature of TL, which he defines as “processes that result in significant and irreversible changes in the way a person experiences, conceptualizes and interacts with the world” (p. 77), developed a typology and identified three criteria for transformation: depth, breadth, and permanence. His typology thus included Mezirow’s categories (which he rearranged) and added two new categories: self, and capacity. Table 2 offers a summary of Hoggan’s (2016a) typology of TL outcomes.

**Table 2**

*Typology of TL Outcomes (Hoggan, 2016a, p. 70)*

| TL outcome   | Specific change   |
|--------------|---|
| Worldview    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, expectations</li> <li>- Ways of interpreting experience</li> <li>- More comprehensive or complex worldview</li> <li>- New awareness / new understandings</li> </ul>                       |
| Self         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self-in-relation</li> <li>- Empowerment / responsibility</li> <li>- Identity / view of self</li> <li>- Self-knowledge</li> <li>- Personal narratives</li> <li>- Meaning / purpose</li> <li>- Personality change</li> </ul> |
| Epistemology | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- More discriminating</li> <li>- Utilizing extra-rational ways of knowing</li> <li>- More open</li> </ul>  |
| Ontology     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Affective experience of life</li> <li>- Ways of being</li> <li>- Attributes</li> </ul>   |
| Behavior     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Actions consistent with new perspective</li> <li>- Social action</li> <li>- Professional practices</li> </ul>  |

|          |  |
|----------|--|
|          | - Skills   |
| Capacity | - Cognitive development<br>- Consciousness<br>- Spirituality |

In this study, TL refers to a process, a set of pedagogical decisions, learning experiences and outcomes, and an awareness and manifestations of learning outcomes.

### TL and Study Abroad

Research on TL’s connection to international education spans diverse emphases. As Pang and colleagues (2023) note, most research on the topic tends to lean towards qualitative methods, privileging reports on lived experiences of participants, whereas quantitative studies document specific TL growth or connect TL with other theories.

Studies often concentrate on demonstrating in a binary way whether TL happened, treating TL as an outcome only, rather than conceiving it as a process, pedagogical tools and decisions, a learning experience, and as (a set of) outcomes. Pang et al. (2023) caution against bias in desiring positive impacts, leading to exuberant data analysis and inflated transformation identification. Research often prioritizes participant sentiments, neglecting specific changes. Qualitative studies aim to prove transformation, overshadowing its intensity and perceived student changes.

Beyond proving STSA program’s transformative impact, scholars have tried to identify curricular aspects fostering TL (Walters et al., 2016). Effective transformation-promoting elements include critical reflection journaling (Perry et al., 2012) and service-learning (Walters et al., 2016), and some scholars have investigated reflection types (Savicki & Price, 2017, 2019, 2021). Assessing lasting change, Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011), in their study of STSA programs one year post STSA, found true transformation is tied to one’s trajectory, thus evolving over time, suggesting it cannot be assessed immediately upon students’ return. We are much more than simply the sum of our experiences, and the effects of our learning, as Dewey (1934) states, are long-lasting and intertwined in our paths. Building on Dewey’s idea, Perry and colleagues (2012) emphasize how past experiences continuously shape our future actions. Experiences intertwine, complicating assessing TL’s permanence, especially post STSA.

While transformation does take time to unfold, it is constantly reinvented through narratives (shared and individual), and where stability of change poses a challenge for assessment, some students still do get a sense of a certain change they experience. With time and room, some articulate how they changed, detailing causes, and illustrating transformations (Wong, 2015). However, the TL and STSA literature lacks research on specific STSA-induced transformation types.

As noted by Pang and colleagues (2023), most studies on TL and international education tend to rely on supplemental theories and concepts in conjunction with TL, suggesting strong connections between TL and various types of intercultural development constructs. Research has therefore identified that students who had studied abroad usually demonstrate, among others:

- Growth in cultural awareness and self-awareness (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004; Lumkes et al., 2012);
- Heightened intercultural competence (Behrnd & Porzelt, 2012; Niehaus et al., 2019; San & Htwe, 2023), including cultural intelligence (Wood & St. Peters, 2013), intercultural awareness, knowledge, and sensitivity (Anderson et al., 2006; Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Czerwionka et al., 2015; Jackson, 2008), and adaptability (Mapp, 2012);
- Widened global perspective or competence (Schenker, 2019; Whatley et al., 2021);
- Redefined and refined career plans and a higher interest in international careers (Norris & Gillespie, 2009).

These studies, while not always using TL terminology, suggest STSA fosters diverse transformative outcomes aligned with Hoggan’s (2016a) typology, including worldview, assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and epistemology, encouraging openness and reflectivity. TL also encompasses changes in one’s sense of self, responsibility, and purpose, ontology, alongside behavioral alignments with one’s new perspective.

This manuscript reports on a study I partially published (Chiocca, 2021). I argue that the participants did experience various degrees of TL, attributing their change to several pedagogical choices and experiences including 1) directed and diverse conversations with locals, but also to 2) hermeneutical reflections, 3) an emotional disequilibrium, 4) their intercultural competence development, and 5) their engagement in a classroom culture, which, all together, acted like a

gestalt. This present article completes the 2021 article to focus this time on the process of TL and its outcomes or manifestations of TL through a qualitative lens: depth, breadth, and permanence.

### Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This study builds on the literature by exploring perceived outcomes of a STSA and the student-perceived changes. Specifically, it examines participant meaning-making six to eight months after the STSA, and how students describe their change beyond the STSA context. This study is guided by the following research question:  
In what ways, if any, do STSA participants perceive that they changed as a result of their STSA?

### Methodology

This study used a qualitative case study design to “understand an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration” (Creswell, 2007, p. 73). The bounded system is consistent with the approach employed in the first part of the study (Chiocca, 2021), which focused on students enrolled in a four-week summer course on cultural diversity at a university in Jerusalem. The course included responses to readings, field trips observations, conversations with locals, and written reflections. The course culminated in a research project on cultural diversity in Israel.

### Data Collection and Analysis

I conducted two-hour-long semi-structured audio-recorded interviews with course participants (n=5) and from their instructor. I also collected:

- All materials distributed through the course;
- Student assignments;
- My ethnographic observations and field notes as a “researcher-participant” in the course (Spradley, 1980);
- 120 min semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2007) about six to eight months after the end of the STSA;
- Other materials provided by the participants (i.e., pictures, timelines).

### Participants

The table below outlines details of the participants.

**Table 3**

*Demographic and Background Data of Study Participants*

| Pseudo.   | Sex | Nationality            | Age | Class  | Major   | Minor | Prior international experiences   | Post SA   |
|-----------|-----|------------------------|-----|--------|---|-------|---|---|
| Alex      | F   | USA of Egyptian origin | 20  | Soph.  | International affairs; religious studies after STSA | N/A   | Several trips to visit family in Egypt; Western Europe and Singapore with father; vacation in Spain | STSA in Scotland (following semester)                   |
| Katherine | F   | USA                    | 21  | Junior | Global Studies + Middle East Studies                | N/A   | Brazil with family summer 2016 (1 <sup>st</sup> trip outside of US)                                 | Traveled in Europe with father; Fall semester in Jordan |

|        |   |           |    |            |                         |   |   |  |
|--------|---|-----------|----|------------|-------------------------|---|---|--|
| Hailey | F | Australia | 21 | Senior     | Islamic Studies         | Political Sc. + International relations | Various trips to Western Europe and North Africa  | Graduate school in Australia                         |
| Sarah  | F | USA       | 20 | Junior     | International Affairs   | Arabic                                  | High School STSA in Rwanda; interned in Uganda (2016, 1 mo.); trips with family to Western Europe, Canada, and Mexico | Returned to the US to continue undergraduate studies |
| Maria  | F | Denmark   | 38 | N/A        | Bio-analysis / Theology | N/A                                     | Volunteered in Venezuela (9 mo.) and India (3 mo.); worked and lived in Norway (2 years); traveled across Europe      | Volunteered teaching Danish to migrants              |
| Ehud   | M | Israel/US | 45 | Instructor | -                       | -                                       | -   | -  |

I conducted two-hour-long semi-structured audio-recorded interviews and followed-up with questions via email of all students and of their instructor to triangulate data. I sent them the transcription and analysis for member-check to increase the validity and credibility of the findings (Creswell, 2007). The university IRB approved the research protocol, consent was obtained for all participants, and pseudonyms are used.

My field notes as a researcher-participant in the STSA program (but not as a study participant), taken during the sojourn, embedded descriptive and focused observations of surface-level behaviors and some specific features, and questions about patterns related to the experiences of the participants based on my own experience (Spradley, 1980), as well as short reflections on the pedagogy used in the course. Here is an excerpt from a note: *“July 22<sup>th</sup>: Wish I had observed + talked more with locals every time I travel. Gene, inconfort ou honte (?) [discomfort or shame] of ignorance of how layers of history and pain make the current context complex? Like I’m rafting, waves and streams, splashes with every encounter, every text. All of it. A lifetime of study not enough to understand this place and evolving complexity - maybe anywhere else? Are [the students] feeling it too? [...] Discretely observed [Alex] from café during [Observation] #3 – seeking ados [teenagers] in groups to understand perspectives on feminism and self-actualization, relationships + sex. Some giggles. Discomfort with topic? She’s been reading a lot. Should implement talking and not just observations with clear instructions + WHY in my own STSA course development when time happens.”* [sic].

### Data Analysis

Interview data (interviews) were transcribed verbatim and, like the rest of the documents (papers, reflections, observations), underwent inductive, thematic analysis to extract patterns and meanings (Ezzy, 2002; Shank, 2002). In-vivo codes were assigned at the sentence or paragraph level, and compared, contrasted, aggregated, and arranged (Charmaz, 2006; Morse, 1994). Researcher triangulation was also used to improve trustworthiness to limit my own biases as a participant in the study abroad experiences (Creswell, 2007).

## Findings

Participants reported changing during their study abroad and gaining awareness of change transcending the Israeli context. Field trips, meeting social actors, reflecting, undergoing emotional disequilibrium, developing cross-cultural competence, and staying engaged allowed students to renegotiate initial representations of locals in the face of the tensions within Israeli society and with neighbor countries.

### **In What Ways, if any, do STSA Participants Perceive that They Changed as a Result from Their Experience Abroad?**

Students recounted various forms of change around the idea of gaining nuance and expanding, resulting from interactions with locals, the hermeneutical reflective nature of the course, emotional disequilibrium, cross-cultural competence development, and engagement in the classroom culture (see Chiocca, 2021). The changes were categorized into four themes:

- Transcending intercultural sensitivity development
- Learner expectations and behavior alteration
- Ideological reconstruction, transition, or complexification
- Academic and professional orientation conversion or refinement

While the mechanisms leading to change were consistent across participants (directed and diverse conversations; hermeneutical reflections; emotional disequilibrium; intercultural competence development; and student engagement in a classroom culture), not all participants were similarly or even equally affected. The time, intensity, and the contexts in which the changes emerged varied across participants, affecting the quality of the change, its depth, its breath, and perhaps its longevity.

### **Transcending Intercultural Sensitivity Development**

Students demonstrated greater knowledge and understanding, more sensitivity during interactions, and increased conscious and deliberate adaptation of actions, suggesting gradual affective and behavioral changes. These evolutions were originally confined to the Israeli context, but some participants expressed that they had expanded their sensitivity to non-Israeli environments, as if this new sensitivity had moved from one area to expand to another. For example, participants actively looked for interactions with international students and migrant communities upon their return to their countries, suggesting breadth in their transformation. This finding demonstrates not only an affective change in self-perception and towards others, but also a change in behavior.

All participants attributed their increased interest in otherness to their STSA, making them want to deconstruct the meaning of “other.” For example, Hailey explained that her experiences interacting with locals made her feel more comfortable with different people, transcending the context of the STSA, attesting of her perceived breadth of change, explaining she has been engaging with a variety of people and opinions since her return: “now [I’m] more confident in interacting with people who have different beliefs or opinions to mine, [...] respecting, you know, their opinions, and their beliefs and their background.”

Increased intercultural interaction confidence seems to be prompted by the amount and perceived quality of interactions. Students who had more interactions with locals perhaps enhanced interaction confidence and self-efficacy, which is consistent with the literature (Cubillos & Ilvento, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2018). Furthermore, students’ efforts to understand locals during their time abroad indicate a shift in their worldview (Hoggan, 2016a), as measured by the BEVI scales, an instrument used to capture the depth of change in sociocultural openness (Wiley et al., 2021). To expand on this and on breadth of change, Katherine mentioned hoping to “*continue to practice the things that class [...] made [her] aware of,*” which she perceived made her “*a better listener.*” She noticed this improvement during a subsequent semester-long STSA in Jordan and upon her return to the United States. She reported:

not trying to impose my own perspectives or allow my questions to get the information out of them that I’m looking for, but to just let them share with me what their perspective is of themselves, of their country, of their relationship to my country [...].

Similarly, Alex described her STSA led her to change beyond the Israeli context, affecting her curiosity about other cultures, making her more interested in learning about her own cultures and being tolerant of, and comfortable around diverse opinions: “I love to interact with people that don’t agree with the ‘West’ or my views. It really provides me with a nuanced idea of my own country and my own opinions.” She perceived that the effect, transcending Israel, influenced her socialization since her return to the United States. She actively engaged with international students and opted to live with South American peers, clarifying that “When you engage in the international community, you don’t want to leave[...].”

It seems like Alex’s STSA in Israel was a turning point in her socialization. It is possible that the positive experience she associates with [host city], because of its “greater cultural distance” (Haredi-feminist/Arab), impacted her in a way that made her more accepting of certain types of otherness than culturally “closer” ones, perhaps making her more “culturally relative.” Alex cited a controversy in her American university involving a racist photo posted on social media:

I don’t think that we should ostracize [the student who posted the photo] as a pariah of the community, I think this girl’s ignorant [...] we should educate her. I think we should welcome her back into the community after her education. [...] I am putting myself in her perspective right now [...].

### **Learner Expectations and Behavior Alteration: Individual and Social Responsibility**

All participants mentioned for example that their experiences in class made them reconsider teacher-student interactions and the role of educators. They all noted that they realized how instructors do not necessarily have to embody a finite knowledge. The other form of change as a student revolved around increased levels of criticality. All participants reported that they were more motivated and made efforts to educate themselves outside of class to confront sources—a new behavior, they noted, perhaps suggesting depth of change.

### **New Perspective on Teacher-Student Interactions**

Sarah mentioned having new expectations of teacher-student interactions, and more systematically asking questions:

My expectations for a teacher-student relationship changed a lot with Ehud’s class because I think he encouraged us to ask a lot of questions (...). I guess [he] encouraged us a lot to feel like there doesn’t have to be an answer.

Ehud himself explains that emotions have a central place in his course:

one of the things that I do try to provide in this class is context to deal with these emotions. [...] we talk about it, we try to understand it, we talk about it individually with some students, we talk about it as a group [...]. It’s not the kind of learning that students generally get to do.

Sarah’s expectations of teacher-student interactions and participation were shared by all the other students who reported that their course experience “*widened [their] perception of a good teacher*”: someone approachable, political while acknowledging biases, and modeling vulnerability thus affecting their class contributions.

### **A More Critical Epistemology**

Participants reported they grew critical in diverse areas, becoming more analytical, engaged, and cautious with class readings and news. They displayed heightened criticality impacting their worldviews, mentioning exploring controversies from multiple perspectives, engaging with dissenting voices, and questioning their own views. For example, Hailey reported, six months after returning to Australia: “[I am] probably more critically aware than I was before. (...) [Now I] critically engage with given material that I might not have otherwise. It has also helped me to recognize the biases in Australian media and academic literature.”

Similarly, Alex’s search for various perspectives for her research project encouraged her to be increasingly active and critical. She mentioned that upon her return to the United States, her conference abstract on Haredi women self-actualization was accepted but she decided not to present, justifying “*I want to share it with people, but on my own terms and when I feel like it best reflects my goal: to accurately represent Haredi women.*” Alex’s decision suggests that beyond her individual responsibility to educate herself, she developed a sense of social responsibility to educate others, seemingly born in the agency she developed through conducting research. Social responsibility resonates with a commonly identified outcome of TL in the literature on STSA: gaining a sense of responsibility towards a larger circle.

The course research project was highly significant and had a positive impact on all participants. Alex's intention to present her findings on Haredi women self-actualization at a conference, followed by her decision to cancel the presentation, exemplified the concept of a public scholar, her growing sense of responsibility to share her knowledge with others. While most students developed a sense of urgency to educate themselves (Tarrant et al., 2015), Alex felt a social responsibility to educate both herself and others as well about underrepresented communities.

Returning to academia or pursuing a new STSA prompted participants to continue reflecting on their experiences. All participants, except Maria, resumed their studies after their STSA and found themselves thinking about their time abroad while in their classrooms. Alex noted that her courses in Scotland reminded her of the learning environment and inquiry freedom she experienced in Israel. Katherine had similar sentiments about her Middle East-focused courses on her American campus, constantly recalling her Israeli experiences.

### **Added Complexity Paving the Way for a (Nuanced) Ideological Reconstruction, Transition, or Complexification**

Ideological shifts emerged from the data, specifically regarding Israel but transcending it at times. Some participants reported changes in their political views towards the Israeli government, its citizens, and conceptions of feminism. As the course instructor, Ehud, describes it, "you might believe something, but in Israel you have a meaningful experience with that thing and that changes, complicates, enriches, thickens your understanding of something."

Katherine acknowledged that interacting with locals of various perspectives broadened her understanding of the local conflict. Although her political stance did not shift, she observed that learning about both sides helped her get a more nuanced and informed understanding. She felt:

open to various opinions that maybe I wouldn't have been otherwise [...]. Being there and everything becoming, not clear in the sense that I understand, but clear in the sense that [...] everything's entangled, made me understand, and not necessarily agree, but be willing to listen to various opinions.

Alex underwent significant changes in two areas. First, her views on Israel as a state and her preconceptions about Israelis and Jews transformed. Second, her learning about women's community expanded her perspective beyond Israel. These changes in her intercultural competence led her to question her previous assumptions, an ideological change she perceived to be an "*identity crisis*":

I have become more sympathetic to a side that wasn't mine, which I even hate saying that I was on a side. (...) It was a little bit of an identity crisis because I had been subjected to so many pro-Palestinian ideologues before that.

Alex actively worked towards overcoming hasty generalizations and challenging her biases by engaging in meaningful interactions with individuals from various communities, leading her to deconstructing prior misconceptions:

I was welcomed into a Jew's home [the instructor], I was given food, (...) material things by Jewish people. It's so trivial but debunks the whole 'Jews are cheap.' I know it sounds silly, but it carries over, right? It resonates with other stereotypes. (...) It's a small stereotype that's significant of the larger form of intolerance.

This quote, suggesting honesty and openness to uncomfortable thoughts and emotions, further indicates changes in one's sense of identity and self. Another salient instance of self-transformation, epistemological shift, and worldview change is evident in Alex reporting that conversations and interactions with ultra-orthodox women introduced her to diverse definitions of feminism and womanhood, prompting her to recognize that opinions she does not endorse "still have a seat at the table": "interacting with these women made me want to have that element of femininity that I did not have. I wanted to enhance my ability to feel feminine while being modest. I think my values changed personally [...]."

Her instructor, Ehud, summarizes Alex's deep transformation: "there was growth in her understanding of what self-actualization means. [...] she understands that there is a variety, and that one choice is not better or worse than the other necessarily." Exposure to diverse perspectives nurtures students' perspective consciousness (Hanvey, 1982) and peripheral vision (Stoddard & Cornwell, 2003), enhancing their global citizenship by actively exploring multiple viewpoints.

## Academic and Professional Orientation Conversion or Refinement

STSA experiences had varying impacts on academic and professional orientations. Although not a complete shift in career plans, students became more critical of their career choices, explored new interests, and redefined professional expectations. For example, Maria volunteered to teach Danish to immigrants a few months after her STSA in Israel, a decision potentially influenced by her research on immigration laws and language policies. Interestingly, Maria seems to be the most active student to be explicitly socially involved to pursue social equity. It is challenging to directly attribute her social involvement and desire for societal change to the STSA, but her focus on newly arrived populations in Denmark may have been reinforced by her observations in Israel.

Alex's research project on Haredi women during her STSA increased her interest in religion, leading her to declare a dual major in religious studies upon her return. She expressed a desire to pursue graduate studies in philosophy and work on theology and interfaith dialogue for women. Alex credits her STSA for the change in her academic and professional orientation, stating *"now it's my goal in academia to create and foster an environment of interfaith dialogue so we don't have these problems anymore."*

Israel changed my life.(...) I went in very confused about my major, I wasn't as interested in religion, and I came out wanting to provide a platform for women, regardless of their belief. Extreme, fundamental, liberal, I wanted to create a better vocal table for everyone, so we can discuss our beliefs in an environment that is inclusive, includes marginalized representations, has conflicting views. (...) I learned that conflict is good.

Alex emphasized that the impact of her STSA was of a rare intensity, a *"sublime experience"* that was positively transformative, but also uncomfortable and disconcerting:

The overall experience of it was so groundbreaking to the formation of my academic and professional identity that I could never replicate the experience, but if I could, I don't think I would do it, because what I have right now is SO GREAT from it that I don't want to touch it. (...) I don't want to have another mind-boggling experience.

These quotes reflect enhanced self-awareness and increased comfort with challenging thoughts and emotions, indicating a deepening of self and ontological change. This aligns with the BEVI's measurement of depth of TL (Wiley et al., 2021). Katherine shared that her interest in journalism and the Middle East became more personal and reflective of her professional stance during her STSA. She *"became open to the possibility of interning or working in Israel"* rather than limiting herself to neighboring countries, while also questioning the relationship between her faith, the land, and her career orientation:

it wasn't my place to be my gaining from an Israeli and Palestinian issue. (...) I'll never have a sense of ownership over that space and those places. Those events will never be mine, [...]. I am Christian and some of those spaces are tied to my faith, and so that's one thing that's still very hard: what part of this is mine and what part of it do I have to respect as not being something for me to approach? I'm still trying to figure out... How much can I emotionally attach myself to the place without being disrespectful? How much can I claim it as part of my identity without being inappropriate? What sense of ownership do I have over that space as someone who's studying it versus someone who has heritage there?

The data indicates that participants experienced both depth and breadth of change during their STSA. Depth reflects a profound transformation on a specific issue or aspect of their perspective, possibly confined to the STSA and Israeli context or shaking them to their core. On the other hand, breadth demonstrates an extension and transcendence of the initial impact, going beyond the STSA and Israeli contexts and showing effects upon their return, once students are aware of how much they changed. Although depth and breadth are intertwined and challenging to differentiate, students tend to be more aware of the breadth of change once they confront the depth of their transformation in their environment post-STSA. Additionally, assessing the permanence of change only a few months after the STSA remains challenging, despite data collection at various points during the STSA and several months later.

## Discussion

Intercultural sensitivity, as outlined by Bennett (2013), is an ongoing process on a continuum with potential setbacks. Despite the absence of pre-post quantitative data in the present study, students maintained a connection to their STSA experiences through academic pursuits and subsequent STSA opportunities, exemplified by Alex (Scotland) and Katherine (Jordan). This observation aligns with Rowan-Kenyon and Niehaus (2011), emphasizing that sustained engagement fosters the further development of the experience's meaning, underlining the relational importance of understanding our experiences. Notably, participants' intercultural sensitivity continued evolving after returning home, possibly facilitated by strong connections within their STSA community. While all participants reported heightened intercultural sensitivity beyond the Israeli context, Alex and Katherine particularly insisted on the connection with the STSA curriculum and their change.

Contrary to the findings of Stone et al. (2017) and Nguyen et al. (2018) regarding the positive impact of prior international and intercultural experiences on TL, the present findings, despite a small sample size, challenge this idea. Participants with less experience seem to report not only a deeper, but also a broader transformation, while students with more experience experienced less intense and broad TL. Similarly, Nguyen et al. (2018), in their study comparing multi- and monocultural students, found that multicultural students, as they tend to start with a higher cultural intelligence than monocultural peers, appeared to benefit less quantitatively from STSA, yet qualitative data revealed unique benefits. Although participants in the present study (aside from Alex) identified as monocultural, they had all spent time outside of their home country, be it through traveling, internships, or volunteering abroad. Surprisingly, students with limited prior international exposure, specifically Alex, Katherine, and Hailey, reported a deeper and broader change in their holistic intercultural competence, especially in terms of immediate affective and behavioral changes toward respect and curiosity for other ways of being in the world.

A common temptation in research is to speculate about the correlation between prior international travel and higher intercultural competence resulting from subsequent STSA. While this study refrains from comparing pre- and post- STSA intercultural competence to predict higher competence, it suggests that students with limited short family-travel experience exhibit more radical change. Maria's extensive volunteer experiences might overshadow her Israel trip, possibly desensitizing her to milder intensity situations. Her delayed recognition of change may stem from everyday multicultural interactions in Denmark and volunteer stints in India and Venezuela, more intense experiences which could have disrupted her more than Israel, considered to be "*fairly similar to Denmark.*" On the other hand, Katherine, with only one international travel was a trip to Brazil before her STSA, reported a more intense transformation than students with broader international exposure, supporting McKeown's findings (2009) who argues that the effect of STSA seems to be stronger with students with little international exposure. The present study also seems to support Pedersen's point (2010) that intervention is significant for students who have never been abroad, but again, the temptation is great to try to categorize who benefits the most from STSA.

Building on the transformative impact of STSA experiences, students' encounters in the classroom not only shaped their sense of self as learners but also influenced the expectations of behavior they held for their peers and themselves. The classroom dynamics revealed a distinctive shift, where the emphasis on discussing unknowns, asking questions, and openly acknowledging ignorance surpassed the pursuit of impressing professors and peers. This shift aligns, to some extent, with the observations of Coker et al. (2018), who argued contribution to class discussion was particularly salient in semester-long study abroad. Within this context, students demonstrated a transformation not only in their self-perception but also in their behavior concerning the emotions they experienced in their classroom community. The shared vulnerability within the group chased away the pretense of possessing exhaustive knowledge. The alteration in the sense of self, particularly in relation to diversity and classroom community, stands out as a potential outcome in the TL literature, as noted by Sohn (2021). However, its connection to classroom communities and subsequent changes in student behavior remains underexplored in the STSA literature.

The reported heightened criticality shaping students' worldviews resonates with the depth of change associated with global resonance, sociocultural openness, and epistemological shift rooted in transcending basic determinism and complexifying explanations of the world, as outlined in the BEVI scales (Wiley et al., 2021). This profound epistemological change appears to be influenced by students' discussions with diverse people during their research projects, illustrating not only shifts in epistemic beliefs and autonomous engagement with various ways of learning, but also a heightened level of self-awareness, which echoes Wiley et al. (2021). Within the TL literature, changes in epistemology, or "habits of mind" (Mezirow, 2000) are commonly reported. Although Bongila's (2022) study does not refer to TL per se but rather to the

effects of Global Positioning Leadership pedagogy, their findings on students participating in STSA in Cuba and Brazil support similar changes in worldview thanks to the confrontation to contrasting knowledge during their sojourns and tensions between their previously held beliefs and new knowledge. In the context of the present study, participants exhibited more discriminating and autonomous views of explanations and information, reflecting a newfound ability to construct their opinions on various topics. This new critical epistemology was paired with new tangible behaviors such as feeling empowered to conduct research, challenge sources, and develop ideas, instead of merely echoing opinions from authoritative figures. This dual evolution suggests a depth and breadth in the transformation experienced by the students.

The students' transformation emerging in the findings appears to be at the convergence of epistemological, worldview, and self-aspects, according to Hoggan's typology (2016a), suggesting connections with what Wiley et al. (2021) identify as the meeting point of "self-awareness" and "meaning quest" on the BEVI scales. This meeting point reveals a profound sense of caring and responsibility for the disempowered, pointing to a depth of change. While previous studies on the outcomes of STSA have often centered around ecology and sustainability (Bell et al., 2014; Landon et al., 2017; McLaughlin et al., 2018), the findings presented here highlight a distinctive aspect: participants demonstrated a sense of empowerment and social responsibility (Hoggan, 2016a, 2016b) transcending their own communities and those encountered in Israel. This sense of responsibility might have started as that of a savior of the host community but then evolved into that of an educator of their own communities, recognizing the ongoing work that needs to be done on themselves and their peers.

Research on STSA and TL commonly indicates that questioning one's views and seeking understanding of others' perspectives (Coker et al., 2018) leads to increased knowledge and empathy. Engaging in non-transactional conversations with locals exposed students to differing and sometimes conflicting views, challenging stereotypes, and broadening their understanding of local and global politics. These experiences prompted an ideological shift and expansion of political views, as well as a deeper comprehension of feminism. Through reflective discussions and a supportive classroom environment, learners became more critical, inclusive, and empathetic, echoing Mezirow's (2009) change in meaning structure. However, it appears that the present TL outcomes in the present study transcended a mere change in these meaning structures. This change in worldview, becoming more complex and comprehensive, seems to be a direct outcome of TL.

The openness to uncomfortable thoughts and emotions indicates changes in one's sense of identity and self, a point echoed in MacCartney and Parsons' (2023) study emphasizing the centrality of emotions and vulnerability on student transformation in study abroad sojourns. This aspect is also salient in Jones' and colleagues (2023) study on pre-service teachers in Ethiopia, which explores the impact of students' emotions on their future selves, including future education goals.

Despite the positive effects of inquiry-based learning abroad, and the lack of documented research on students' engagement in research abroad, these aspects are often overlooked in the literature, including in reports like Open Doors. While Alex did not explicitly attribute her desire to pursue graduate education to inquiry-based learning, such a finding seems aligned with Hathaway and colleagues' argument (2002) that undergraduate research, whether abroad or not, can foster interest in pursuing advanced studies. Streitwieser's (2009) assertion that undergraduate research can profoundly explore the meaning of global citizenship through immersive study in another culture further emphasizes the importance of inquiry-based learning for developing research appreciation and students' intercultural growth. While formal research training may be more suited for students pursuing rigorous research, introductory research through STSA can significantly impact students' quest for understanding.

Although Müller's (2023) study suggests a decrease in the flow of motivation over time due to the lack of integration of STSA experiences with university curriculum, returning to an academic setting, especially with a focus on the STSA location, seemed to sustain the reflective cycle initiated in the STSA for the current participants. This phenomenon may help explain why all participants, except Maria, underwent more intense changes. Notably, Katherine and Alex, who maintained regular contact with their instructor, through emails and meetings during breaks, may have further facilitated their reflective process. Despite the absence of a structured post-STSA set of activities and reflections, the continuous contact and reflective cycle among these students align with the arguments from Vande Berg and colleagues (2007; 2009; 2012), Pedersen (2010), Almeida (2020), and Jackson (2015) advocating for ongoing support, including cultural mentoring, throughout the STSA cycle to foster intercultural development and potentially support long-term transformation.

Building on the transformative outcomes observed, as highlighted in the preceding paragraphs, it is frequent for students to plan to incorporate STSA influence into future career trajectories, even a few months upon their return, a trend noted by Müller (2023). While longer study abroad programs have been known to influence participants' academic and career plans (Geyer et al., 2017; Norris & Gillespie, 2009), limited literature exists on such effects specifically related to STSA programs. However, the data in this study reveals that several participants directly and explicitly reevaluated their

professional goals after their short sojourns, thereby contributing to the existing literature. These findings align with previous research on STSA and TL, where self-awareness gained during STSA can provide new perspectives on future possibilities (Vatalaro et al., 2015).

The increased respect for others and heightened intercultural sensitivity observed in the present study are intimately connected to the students' pursuit of justice and equity through social action, representing what Inglis (1997) considers to be the ultimate goal or outcome of TL. Social action is demonstrated through various behaviors resulting from other TL outcomes, indicating that changes in worldview, epistemology, and self, lead to a desire for action and influence behavior. These layers of change seem to be highlighting the interdependence of TL dimensions (Pang, 2023) and lend support to the idea that change stems from a gestalt of STSA and previous experiences (Chiocca, 2021). The interconnectedness of these dimensions further emphasizes the holistic impact of STSA programs on students, extending beyond personal development to encompass their career aspirations and their commitment to social change.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

This article explores transformative learning in a STSA program, examining participants' descriptions of change, including depth, breadth, and near-term effects, six to eight months after their return. It contributes to the literature on STSA programs and their TL outcomes, employing a TL framework.

According to the findings, the participants perceived they all changed in four different areas:

- Intercultural sensitivity development
- Learner expectations and behavior alteration
- Ideological reconstruction or transition
- Academic and professional orientation conversion or refinement

Data was collected through students' papers, surveys, and in-depth interviews. As a researcher-participant, my field notes along with the rest of the data collected, were analyzed to triangulate timelines, field trip and assignment topics. Perspective transformation experiences and types of change were identified and compared across participants.

This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the broader impact of STSA programs. It reveals that even short programs as brief as four weeks can lead to deep and broad transformations. The observed changes varied between gradual shifts and sudden transformations, but they all interconnected and extended beyond the STSA context, both geographically and ideologically. Hoggan's (2016a) TL typology and constructs served as the analytical framework, while other concepts helped elucidate the specific types of changes students underwent. Increased knowledge about host communities was accompanied by transformations of self, fostering greater confidence and empowerment. These changes positively influenced emotions towards oneself and the host communities, prompting conscious adaptation of behavior in different host country contexts. Simultaneously, participants demonstrated unconscious behavioral changes, such as interacting differently with individuals holding differing views or engaging in social action transcending Israel. These unconscious behavioral changes enhanced intercultural sensitivity, resulting in a more nuanced and accepting approach to differing ideologies. Students also questioned their academic and career orientations or practices, either through a clear rupture with previous plans or through a smoother transition. The described changes were exemplified through stories from Israel but extended to contexts transcending the STSA program both in time and space.

To fully qualify as TL outcomes, evidence of "relative stability" is necessary, indicating that the changes are not temporary (Hoggan, 2016a, 2016b). As noted by Müller (2023), many studies on TL in studying abroad lack near and long-term data collection, making it important for future research to investigate the lasting effects of STSA programs by following students over an extended period.

It is challenging to attribute the outcomes of TL solely to the STSA or to the ongoing reflection throughout the experience and leading up to the interviews. TL outcomes, like any learning, are subject to individual narratives and reassessment (Dewey, 1934). However, the reported changes, or TL outcomes experienced by the participants, were profound and had a significant impact on the students, extending beyond their experiences abroad into various contexts, transcending Israel or academic environments.

### **Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Implications for TL and international education include the extent and lasting impact of TL are not solely determined by program length, but rather influenced by individual and program-specific factors.

Limited data suggests that students with limited meaningful international exposure are more likely to experience deep, broad, and long-lasting transformative learning outcomes, contrary to previous studies. To enhance this potential, global education offices should focus on recruiting such students for STSA programs and consider utilizing recent returnees with limited international travel as peer-mentors to engage with interested students. This approach can facilitate the development of an attainable vision of future-self, utilizing what Vygotsky (1978) refers to as the zone of proximal development.

Students can extend and solidify the impact of their STSA experience by pursuing related academic majors, volunteering with immigrants, participating in subsequent study abroad programs, maintaining contact with their instructor, or staying connected with their study abroad group. Institutions can support this process by creating systematic opportunities for students to re-engage with their learning and share the effects of their experience. This can be accomplished through post-STSA courses, conferences on student learning, or events that facilitate the sharing of their insights. Additionally, pairing domestic students with international or exchange students and providing local volunteer opportunities can further facilitate the sharing and application of their learning.

Educators should create disorienting dilemmas to challenge students' existing perspectives and promote critical thinking, to lead to an "elaboration, confirmation, or creation of a scheme" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 108). Exposing students to diverse perspectives while studying abroad or in education in general is crucial for fostering reflection and avoiding mindless learning and a focus on closed-ended answers. Reflective research projects are an effective strategy for this purpose. For example, in this study, a student's perception of ultra-orthodox communities as antithetical to feminism was challenged by exposing them to a self-described Haredi feminist. Faculty members should familiarize themselves with student views and create situations that appear paradoxical to those views.

In faculty-led programs, instructors who possess deep knowledge of the local context, beyond their specific content area, serve as effective mentors for encouraging student reflection on their positionality. However, an even more powerful approach to foster critical self-reflection and challenge biases is for faculty members to be approachable, open, and available outside the classroom. Engaging with students in a vulnerable manner and acknowledging that faculty members don't need to have all the answers, can have a significant impact.

When collecting data on TL and STSA, it is valuable to go beyond asking participants about their perceived intercultural competence development. Conducting interviews a few months after their return and prompting them to provide specific examples of how they have changed encourages deeper reflection. This approach helps unpack different forms of change and assesses whether the change is enduring or influenced by the euphoria of returning home and societal expectations of study abroad experiences.

The key takeaway is to consider how we can effectively prepare students for the changes they may experience while studying abroad.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study has four main limitations: limited generalizability due to a small sample size. Second, self-reported data may be influenced by participant selectivity and social desirability bias. Third, recall bias could occur as participants' stories may focus on specific aspects, overlooking others due to "meanings are situated" (Ezzy, 2002, p. 81). However, the instructor's interview and participant stories aid understanding change in various contexts. Fourth, my involvement in the STSA program introduces potential bias, which was mitigated by bracketing, reflection, triangulation, and member-checks (Yin, 2017). The study's timeframe (about six to eight months post-STSA) restricts long-term change assessment, suggesting a need for later-stage data collection, especially with the ever-evolving situation in Israel. Future research could explore STSA program effects on subsequent study abroad experiences.

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