

(NON)PREPARATION TO LIVE IN ANOTHER COUNTRY: CROSS-CULTURAL EXPERIENCES AS PRECURSORS OF TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING AMONG NIGERIAN IMMIGRANTS IN ITALY

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ABSTRACT: Migration is a significant life event that usually triggers cross-cultural preparedness and the need for learning, even transformative learning. This exploratory study answers two research questions: How do Nigerian immigrants describe their preparedness for cross-cultural transition in Italy? What are the indications of transformative learning processes and outcomes in the immigrants' narrations? Emerging results from 6 semi-structured interviews with 6 Nigerian immigrants in Italy are presented. Narratives and themes from the interviews showed evidence of preparation (non-learning and learning) as well as non-preparation for cross-cultural transition among the immigrants. The participants' preparedness was associated with their motivation to emigrate, their cross-cultural experiences and their proficiency in the Italian language. Also, their cross-cultural experiences pointed to different aspects of the processes and outcomes of transformative learning. Disorienting dilemmas of the individual participants were identified. The paper concluded that a further inquiry could show how Nigerian immigrants' cross-cultural transition leads to various outcomes of transformative learning.

Keywords: cross-cultural transition, migration preparedness, disorienting dilemma, perspective transformation, Nigeria-Italy migration, Nigerian immigrants

Introduction

Cross-cultural transition (CCT) is the psychosocial change process that migrants experience when they move from their habitual sociocultural context to another. It happens across the physical-mental-social domain, during the pre-departure, transit, and post-arrival phases of migration. CCT is a universal pre-integration phenomenon among intercultural migrants. The implication is that the initial experiences of immigrants before their immersion in the second culture might have a long-term effect on their integration process. Research has established that migration triggers the need for transformative learning, resulting in a fundamental change in the perspective of the migrant (Bethel et al., 2020; Onosu, 2020; Taylor, 1994). Meanwhile, adults make use of their aspirations and capacities for (non-)migration purposes (de Haas, 2021), suggesting that preparedness – which involves anticipating and responding to uncertain future experiences and outcomes (Carroll, 2010) – essentially relates to CCT. However, the role of migration preparedness in cross-cultural experiences and transformative learning has not gained sufficient research attention.

Hence, this study explores the migration experiences of Nigerian immigrants in Italy with a view to examining their preparedness for cross-cultural transition and identifying

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precursors/indications of transformative learning. Thus, two research questions were developed: How do Nigerian immigrants describe their preparedness for cross-cultural transition in Italy? What are the indications of TL processes and outcomes in the immigrants' narrations? Answering these questions would illuminate our understanding of migration/cross-cultural experiences as having or not having a deterministic connection to perspective transformation. The study explores migration experiences involving the periods before the immigrants departed Nigeria, during transit, and after arrival (during their settling period in Italy). Attention is paid to the two broad dimensions of preparation that are related to non-learning (general preparation such as visa application, shopping, etc.) and learning (acquisition of knowledge, skills, and values). The participants' experiences and preparation are explored in relation to possible connections to the transformative learning. However, determining the extent of perspective transformation among the participants is beyond the scope of this paper.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning leads to perspective transformation by challenging and critically reviewing the taken-for-granted assumptions that underpins one's habits of mind and consequent points of views (Mezirow, 2000). An individual can significantly learn from a fundamental change resulting from their "lived, felt experience" (Hoggan, 2016, p. 71). Transcultural experiences are often strong enough to cause a disorienting dilemma, which may become the basis for intercultural perspective transformation (Taylor, 2017). From its classic 10-phase model (Mezirow, 2000), Transformative learning theory (TLT) has evolved to a multi-strand theory or even a metatheory (Hoggan, 2016; Stuckey et al., 2013). Three dominant strands of transformative learning have emerged: the rational/cognitive, the extrarational, and the social/emancipatory perspectives. Stuckey et al explain:

One is the cognitive/rational perspective... that emphasizes rationality, critical reflection, and ideal conditions for discourse. This is a constructivist and universal view of learning... The second perspective has been called an extrarational perspective... it emphasizes the emotive, imaginal, spiritual, and arts-based facets of learning, those that reach beyond rationality... The third is the social critique perspective... that emphasizes ideological critique, unveiling oppression, and social action in the context of transformative learning. (2013, pp. 213-214)

Based on these perspectives, there are four outcomes and fifteen processes as indicated in Table 1. The multiple perspectives are adopted for this study because they offer an eclectic approach for exploring the possible transformative learning among the Nigerian immigrants in Italy. Approaching an inquiry into how Nigerian immigrants in Italy have experienced transformation with multiple lens is necessary for the cross-cultural and intercultural nature of their experiences and the structures that have influenced their migratory and learning experiences. Deploying TLT as a multidimensional process is essential for this study because it focuses on learning in cross-cultural learning and because the study focuses on immigrants with possible varied socioeconomic and migratory biographies.

Table 1

Outcomes and Processes of Transformative Learning

Outcomes	Processes
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Acting differently● Having a deeper self-awareness● Having more open perspectives● Experiencing a deep shift in worldview	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Cognitive/rational<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Critical reflection○ Action○ Experience○ Disorienting dilemma○ Discourse● Beyond rational/extrarational<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Arts based○ Dialogue○ Emotional○ Imaginal○ Spiritual○ Soul work● Social critique<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Ideology critique○ Unveiling oppression○ Empowerment○ Social action

Note. Reprinted from “Developing a survey of transformative learning outcomes and processes based on theoretical principles,” by H. L. Stuckey, E.W. Taylor, & P. Cranton, 2013, *Journal of Transformative Education*, 11(4), p. 217. Copyright 2016 by Stuckey et al.

Methodology

This paper reports an aspect of an on-going exploratory sequential mixed methods whereby the researcher commences with a qualitative research phase and explores the views of participants, analyses the data, and uses the information to build the quantitative phase (Creswell, 2014). The narrative research design is adopted for the QUAL component, involving asking the individual participants to provide stories about their lives (Riessman, 2008). Ten participants were selected in the Veneto Region of Italy using the purposive sampling technique define. The participants (interviewees) were selected based on certain criteria including the year of arrival in Italy, immigration status, occupation, ethnicity, gender, and mode of transportation/entry. All of them moved to Italy when they were 18 or older. They were contacted at Nigerian community meetings, online platforms and by referral.

A semi-structured interview guide was used for the initial exploration of Nigerian immigrants’ preparedness for cross-cultural transition vis-à-vis transformative learning. (The second interview with each participant would deepen into the transformative learning of the participants.). The self-designed “*G2G Semi-Structured Interview Guide*” helped to capture the participants’ migration stories, circumstances surrounding their preparedness

for migration to Italy, their learning experiences/initiatives, and their socio-demographics. The first interview is a precursor to the second interview, which is an in-depth interview, by detailing the context of the participant's migration and identifying their possible transformative learning experiences. This instrument contains about 15 open-ended questions with probes and prompts. Examples of the questions are: How would you describe your life in Nigeria before coming to Italy? What motivated you to leave Nigeria? How did you prepare for moving to and living in Italy? How was the preparation and the relocation like emotionally? What and how did you learn in order to migrate and live in Italy successfully? Describe what it was like when you first landed in Italy. How was the next several days and weeks?

Each participant read the Informed Consent Form and was encouraged to ask questions or express concerns before signing the form and agreeing to the commencement of the data generation session. At the outset of each interview, the researcher and the participant discussed the inquiry's purpose, anonymity, confidentiality, incentive, and logistics (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). All the participants were referred to by pseudonyms in this report. The interviews lasted for between 45 minutes and 60 minutes. The data analyzed in this paper were generated from six semi-structured interviews. Narrative analysis and thematic analysis techniques were used to analyze the data. Thematic analysis technique is useful for highlighting commonalities and differences across a dataset while narrative analysis is helpful in the interpretive analysis of particularity and setting it in more general contexts (Shukla et al, 2014). Data coding and analyses were aided by Atlas.ti.

Findings

Below we present and discuss the emerging results of the analysis of the participants' descriptions and narrations of the circumstances surrounding the participant's immigration to Italy with a view to determining their preparedness for Nigeria-Italy transition and identifying elements of the processes and outcomes of transformative learning such as disorienting dilemma.

The preparedness for cross-cultural transition in Italy

In the participants' narrations, the patterns of preparation and non-preparation of emerged. To begin, the (non)preparation can be broadly categorized into two, general preparation for migration and migration learning.

General preparation for migration

General preparation refers to the universal, non-specific, and even "common sense" activities and processes that the emigrant performed in order to execute their migration plan/aspiration and ensure a successful journey and settling in their new residence. To distinguish this kind of preparation from explicitly educative activities and processes, we refer to it as *non-learning preparation*.

Motivation to leave Nigeria: All the participants had varying reasons for leaving Nigeria and becoming immigrants in Italy. Bimpe, Amaka, and Jackson came to live with their spouses in Italy. Dele and Ajoke came to live with their parents and study at graduate level. These seem to be their immediate motivations. Even though Henry decided to travel abroad after experiencing a traumatic cult clash, he said, “It didn’t motivate me to go out from my nation because home is home” (Henry). The participants’ narrations indicate that their motivations were connected to other factors. For instance, Jackson recounted that travelling to the US was his childhood dream and that travelling abroad was a trail in the community where he grew up, in the Southern Nigeria: “Basically, it was like the way you already grew up. You saw that people come from abroad and they are living better” (Jackson).

Visa application: Normally, in modern migration system, obtaining a visa is a basic requirement for traveling. The participants that travelled by air described how their preparation for travelling to Italy involved the application for visa, all by themselves or with the assistance of a consulting agency. Some of the participant recollected that the process of obtaining visa was tiresome. “Well, it was quite a long journey because the visa that we got was called a family visa” (Dele).

Not doing enough and non-preparation

There were stories of what should have been done better. Ajoke, who came to Italy to live with her family and study for a master’s degree, did not have an easy way to residing in Italy legally. She had obtained an admission at an Italian University she was not granted visa. She decided to obtain a tourist visa to an Italy’s neighboring country (within the Schengen area) with the plan to enter Italy and regularise her visa to a studies visa. She experienced various difficulties beyond her expectation before she got a residence permit. Against this background, Ajoke concluded that she did not prepare effectively for her attempt to study in Italy:

I should have done more, like building up my account that I was going to use for financial support. I just left it at normal earnings, like what I had, I didn’t declare enough to really prove that I could fund myself. I didn’t really convince the consular. (Ajoke)

However, despite the universality of preparing for travelling as an adults, certain circumstances might not permit what a particular migrant would regard as “preparation”. A participant, Henry, narrated how he was deceived and made to embark on a journey of which destination he did not know, even though he wanted to leave Nigeria. Thus, he insisted: “No. There was no preparation”.

That very day I left. I went to Lagos to meet my uncle. So, from there, I was trying to do some internship at the computer village at Lagos. I was living at Ajah with my uncle because he’s, um, he’s a doctor, a nurse. He studied medicine. So, my aim was also to start off my computer life there. So, but it didn’t work as plan. So, I said, okay, uh, we, I have to travel. So, we met some agency. Of which it was my uncle that introduced me to these people. You know, I don’t know them before, but as your uncle, you don’t

have that mindset that maybe your uncle, they will dupe you, something like that. ... And they presented to me some passport. I thought it was original. (Henry)

Henry would later discover that he would travel through the desert to Libya. From Libya he got to Italy by the boat and he was put in prison immediately because he was wrongly accused and convicted of organising and smuggling irregular migrants to Italy. Even though Henry wanted to leave Nigeria and took steps to meet his uncle and an “agency” that could be of help in realising his dream, he was convinced that he did not have any pre-departure preparation because of the manner he was made to travel. This suggests that the participant recognised that being an adult, his migratory agency was taken away from him and he was stripped of the capacity to, at least, the opportunity to make basic preparation for the journey.

Preparing by learning (migration learning)

The participants engaged in intentional and unintentional learning activities at various stages of their migration period. Such learning activities include learning about the Italian culture and civics through books and electronic media. For instance, Bimpe, who had lived in an Eastern European country before going back to live in Nigeria and then in Italy narrated how her previous travel experience was especially useful in her preparation for Italy, especially in the aspect of been mindful of the essential items she would need in Italy. She added, “So definitely I knew I was coming to a new country to have their own bounds, which I just have to obey” (Bimpe). Confined within the four corners of a prison, Henry realized the need to learn about the country he was in. He learned the Italian language, civics, and geography. “When I was in prison, I studied the map of Italy and I saw Padova” (Henry).

The Italian language: Learning or not learning the Italian language was a significant part of the participants’ cross-cultural transition. While some of them began to learn the basics of the language before coming to Italy, they did not attain a reasonable proficiency until they settled in. They acknowledged the centrality of the lingua franca to living successfully in Italy. Amaka started learning Italian in Nigeria; “First I needed to learn the language, I learned on Google and also used YouTube”. Jackson pointedly identified the language issue as a challenge “because everything they do is the Italian language... So I had to buy an Italian dictionary ahead of time, trying to seize the opportunity in Nigeria to kind of prepare myself with little phrases and all that.” (Jackson).

The indications of transformative learning processes and outcomes in the immigrants’ narrations

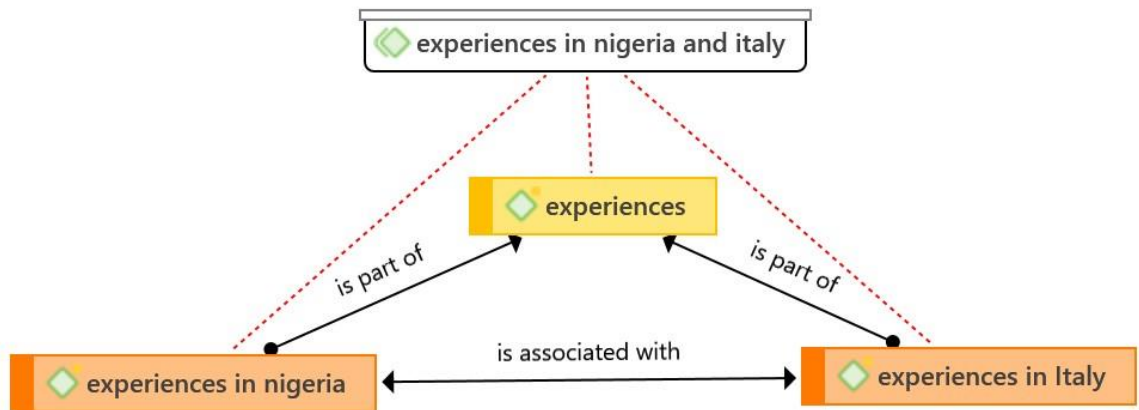
Emerging precursors of transformative learning from the participants narrations include their positive and negative experiences, disorienting dilemmas and some specific transformative processes and outcomes.

Cross-cultural experiences at the center of migration (and transformation)

The participants described various events and issues that depict their transition from Nigeria to Italy. As indicated in Figure 1, the participants' migration experience cuts across events in Nigeria and Italy. The experiences include the benefits of their migration and the challenges they encountered.

Figure 1.

Cross-cultural experiences



The positive: Narrations of the participants showed that migrating from Nigeria to Italy came with lots of benefits such as having a new social network (of friends and families), Henry said, “What I learned in that journey, a little bit with some friends is that a tree can never make a forest”. Jackson recounted his excitement when he joined his wife in Italy: “So, it was a little smooth excitement; we were happy!” Similarly, Ajoke excited to join her family: “I was really excited. Number one, I've changed the environment, my family. I get to sleep, wake up with my brothers in the same house. It was really exciting for me!”

Challenges here and there: Experiences of the participants include the challenges they faced in Nigeria and in Italy. Challenges faced in Nigeria narrated by the participants include insecurity, corrupt system, and the difficulty of obtaining visa. Varied challenges faced in Italy include language barrier, imprisonment, and the weather. “Like moving around, the language barrier, how the environment is, it's different from Lagos where I was coming from” (Ajoke). On the climatic differences, Dele added, “So you can imagine coming from a warm temperate, the weather condition like we have in Nigeria and arriving in here during the lower degrees”.

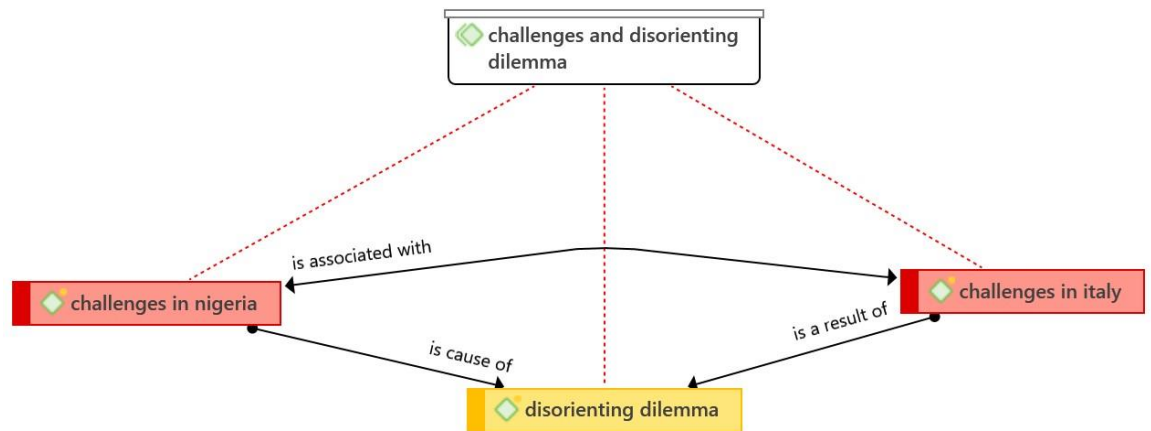
Identifying their disorienting dilemmas

Henry mentioned a cult clash he witnessed around his workplace that led to the death three persons, including a pregnant woman. He was smuggled through the desert, lived a hard life in Libya, risked his life on the sea and was incarcerated as soon as he landed in Italy.

Henry, experienced extreme situations before, during and after moving to Italy, describing them as “the survival of the fittest”, “slavery in another accent”, “trouble to trouble” and “prison to palace”. Amaka, referred to the difficulty of leaving her mother in Nigeria and coming to live with a new family in a non-English speaking country. Dele had not completed his first degree before he left Nigeria to reside in Italy. He expressed difficulties of emotional imbalance and lack of focus because had to jungle the two countries for some years before he settled in Italy. Ajoke faced uncertainties when she got to Italy to change her Schengen tourist visa to studies visa. She faced the reality of going back to Nigeria or staying in Italy as an illegal resident. Bimpe mentioned when she was on her application to come to Italy with her son to live with her husband, she lost her sister. She said it was difficult for her to leave her bereaved mother, but she and her child needed the company of her husband. Jackson narrated that although he was excited to meet her wife when he got to Italy, the excitement soon vanished due to financial challenge, the lack of structure that could enable him to get a job with his newly obtained BSc degree. Rather, he became a beggar. He was frustrated because he felt that as a man, he had the responsibility to provide for his family. As Figure 2 shows, these disorienting dilemmas are connected to the cross-cultural challenges that the participants narrated.

Figure 2.

Disorienting dilemmas



Indications of processes for transformative learning

There were quotations that match the codes named after the processes of transformative learning. Below are sample excerpts that suggests how the participants dealt with their experiences and disorienting dilemma to benefit from their situations.

Cognitive/Rational:

Action: “Let me go and build up my life. Let me try to do something that will give me, that will feed me later in the future. So that was why, I started doing the work I’m doing now” (Henry).

Reflection: “I was thinking about the language... I knew that that would be a challenge” (Dele). “I began to ask some questions: why my first experience in Europe is in prison?” (Henry).

Extrarational:

Spiritual: “But you know, spiritually, when I pray, I feel relieved more, that I'm not alone in this journey” (Ajoke).

Dialogue/Support: Henry emphasised the role of communal support thus:

... Sometimes when we see ourselves in another place in a very difficult time, you see that there is love of being from one nation. ... So, there were also people that were eager to tell me what I needed to hear at that particular moment. So, we become like a family... We had to live together. We had to do that at that particular moment to survive because some people were with no money, no water, but some were with water, they didn't have money.

Social critique:

Unveiling oppression: “[In Nigeria] it's only the rich people that have access to the police and the mobile police, the soldiers” (Henry).

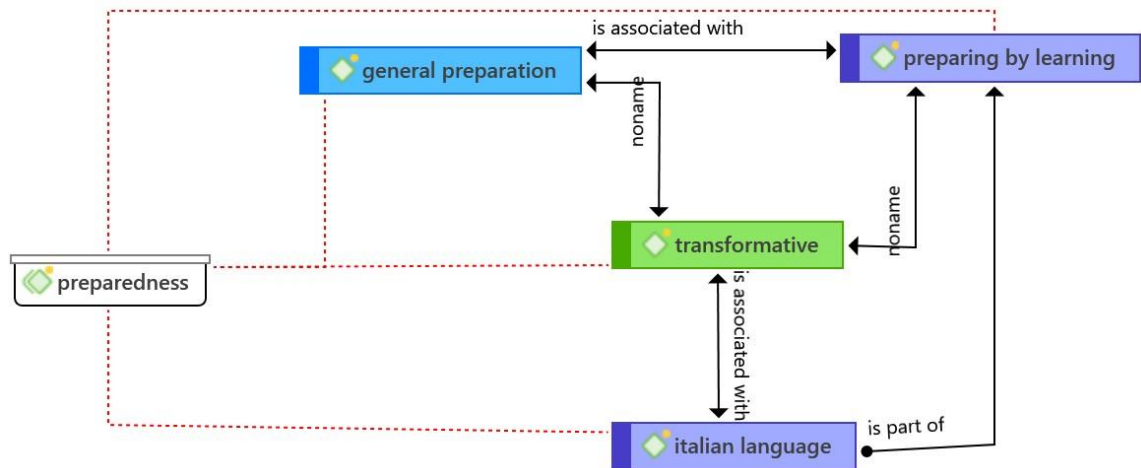
Empowerment: “My calling is to share a better perspective with people if they could... I wanted to go before... And I know that people who don't have that change of the mindset cannot also stay here” (Jackson).

Possible transformative learning outcomes

Findings showed that the Nigerian immigrants' (non)preparation for cross-cultural transition culminates in perspective transformation. As Figure 3 indicates, different aspects of the cross-cultural preparedness of the participants relate to transformative learning.

Figure 3.

Cross-cultural preparedness and transformative learning



The participants’ narrations and reflections showed instances of certain transformative learning outcomes. For examples:

Acting differently: “But the prison also prepared me to know some rules and regulation, what to do and what not to do, because there are rules and regulation on how to live in outside society when you go out” (Henry).

Shift in worldview: “So, I change my values. There will be a redirection of purpose” (Dele).

Openness: “I’m now seeing the other side of what I was not seeing before” (Jackson).

Deeper self-awareness: “One of the things I also learned is that life is easier when you smile a lot” (Amaka).

Discussion and Conclusion

Narratives and themes from the interviews showed evidence of preparation (non-learning and learning) among most of the participants as well as a trace of non-preparation for cross-cultural transition. The participants’ preparedness was associated with their motivation to emigrate, their cross-cultural experiences and their level of proficiency in the Italian language. Even though most of the participants demonstrated their migratory agency/capability (de Haas, 2021) in form of migration preparedness, each participant still experienced a disorienting dilemma traceable to their unique situation and expectation. While the results confirmed that migrants often become transformed after a cultural immersion (Bethel et al., 2020; Onosu, 2020; Taylor, 1994), the results also showed that the experiences that migrants have faced in their home/sending society are equally central

to the triggering of disorienting dilemma. Disorienting dilemmas of the individual immigrants were identified, suggesting a connection to the challenges that the participants faced across Nigeria and Italy. Also, their cross-cultural experiences pointed to different aspects of the processes and outcomes of transformative learning (Stuckey et al, 2014; Hoggan, 2016).

This paper was delimited to presenting emerging results in an on-going study. While it has indicated cross-cultural precursors of transformative learning, it has not analyzed how the Nigerian immigrants underwent transformative learning process. A further inquiry could show how Nigerian immigrants' cross-cultural transition leads to various outcomes of transformative learning.

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