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# Cross-Cultural Interaction in a Mediated World: Competence, Misreadings and the Conditions for Contact

Elena T. Vasquez[1]

[1] Faculty of Social Sciences, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Spain

Correspondence: Elena T. Vasquez, Faculty of Social Sciences, Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, Spain.

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**Abstract**

Cross-cultural interaction has become routine in education, employment and public life while remaining poorly understood as a process. This article asks what happens when people who interpret the world through different cultural frameworks attempt to cooperate, and what makes such interaction succeed or fail. It reports a comparative secondary analysis synthesising recent empirical work on intercultural competence in virtual and face-to-face teams, survey evidence on reported communication conflict in international education, and institutional data on displacement as a large-scale contact context. Four findings emerge. First, misreading rather than disagreement accounts for most reported difficulty: in international education settings, 45.6 per cent of international students and 37.2 per cent of language teachers report explicit conflicts arising from cultural difference, while 62.3 per cent report implicit misunderstandings that never surface as conflict. Second, mediation changes which cultural differences matter: communication style, scheduling and language become more salient in virtual teams, whereas status cues conveyed through physical presence become less so. Third, competence is multidimensional and trainable, but employers and graduates disagree about which dimensions matter and digital collaboration competence is an addition rather than a substitute. Fourth, the classical conditions for constructive contact remain necessary but are now insufficient without four contemporary additions. The article argues that cross-cultural failure is best understood as a design problem - of settings, media and institutions - rather than as a deficit of individual sensitivity.

**Keywords:** cross-cultural interaction, intercultural competence, cultural dimensions, face negotiation, cultural intelligence, intergroup contact, virtual teams, acculturation, miscommunication

## 1. Introduction

Cross-cultural interaction is no longer a specialist concern. It occurs daily in universities with international cohorts, in distributed project teams, in refugee reception, in platform-mediated public debate, and in the routine negotiation of service encounters. The volume is large: cross-border educational exchange involving a single major sending country has been reported at more than twelve million person-times annually, with language education reaching learners in more than 180 countries (Yilin, 2025). Yet the frequency of contact has not produced a corresponding competence in managing it. Survey evidence from international education reports that 45.6 per cent of international students, 37.2 per cent of language teachers and 31.8 per cent of programme managers have experienced explicit communication conflicts attributable to cultural difference, while 62.3 per cent report implicit misunderstandings that affected communication without ever becoming overt conflict (Yilin, 2025).

The classical literature offers two broad explanations. One treats cultural difference as a set of measurable dimensions along which societies vary, with consequences for behaviour that can be anticipated (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004; Schwartz, 2006). The other treats intercultural encounters as situations in which participants negotiate meaning under uncertainty, with failure attributable to the interaction rather than to the individuals (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Ting-Toomey, 2005). Both traditions have produced durable findings, and both have been criticised - the first for treating cultures as bounded and static, the second for under-specifying the structural conditions that shape encounters.

Three developments require the field to revisit the question. The medium of interaction has shifted: a large and growing share of cross-cultural contact is now virtual, which changes what participants can perceive (Yousef, 2024; Surapto, 2025). The scale of involuntary contact has grown: UNHCR estimates 13.1 million school-aged refugee children worldwide in 2025, of whom 44 per cent are out of school (UNHCR, 2026), producing contact

under conditions of acute inequality. And the informational environment has been reorganised: across 48 markets, platforms now exceed news organisations' own websites as a route to news, so that cultural others are encountered increasingly through intermediaries (Reuters Institute, 2026).

This article makes three contributions. It integrates the traditions into a systems model that locates culture at the level of systems, interaction and institution simultaneously (Figure 1). It assembles recent evidence on where cross-cultural interaction actually fails. And it revises the classical conditions for constructive contact to reflect mediated and involuntary settings.

Section 2 reviews the literature. Section 3 describes the comparative secondary analysis. Section 4 presents findings. Section 5 discusses implications, and Section 6 concludes.

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1 Culture as Measurable Variation*

The dimensional tradition rests on the claim that societies differ systematically along a small number of value dimensions that shape behaviour. Hofstede's (2001) framework - power distance, individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, long-term orientation - remains the most widely used, and the GLOBE study extended it across 62 societies with additional distinctions between values as they are and values as they should be (House et al., 2004). Schwartz (2006) proposed an alternative structure derived from the types of goals a culture prioritises, and Inglehart and Welzel (2005) mapped the shift from survival to self-expression values that accompanies economic development. Triandis (1995) supplied the most influential treatment of individualism-collectivism, distinguishing horizontal and vertical variants.

Two refinements matter for the argument of this article. Gelfand and colleagues (2011) showed that societies differ in the strength of social norms and the severity of sanctioning - tightness and looseness - which predicts behaviours ranging from punctuality to tolerance of deviance. And research in cultural psychology demonstrated that self-construal varies systematically, with independent and interdependent selves supporting different patterns of attention, attribution and emotion (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Nisbett et al., 2001). Together these findings support the claim that culture shapes cognition rather than merely preferences.

The tradition has been criticised, fairly, for reification: treating national averages as descriptions of individuals, understating within-society variation, and implying stability across periods in which values demonstrably shift. Henrich, Heine and Norenzayan (2010) made a related point about the sample on which much psychological knowledge rests, noting that findings from Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic samples are among the least representative of the species. The correct response is not to abandon dimensional work but to treat dimensions as probabilistic tendencies rather than as determinants.

### *2.2 Culture as Situated Interpretation*

A second tradition locates the mechanism in the encounter. Gudykunst and Kim (2003) framed intercultural communication as communication between strangers, in which participants lack the shared assumptions that make intricultural communication efficient, and must manage uncertainty and anxiety simultaneously. Ting-Toomey's (2005) face-negotiation theory specified the mechanism of conflict: because face - the claimed sense of self-worth in a relational situation - is central but variably constructed, conflict styles differ systematically, and intercultural conflict typically arises when facework appropriate in one framework threatens face in another. Hall (1976) supplied the distinction between high- and low-context communication that continues to organise practical advice.

This tradition's strength is that it explains why competent, well-intentioned people misread one another: the signals each relies on to interpret the other's behaviour are precisely the signals the other does not produce. Its weakness is that it has tended to individualise failure, treating miscommunication as a deficit of sensitivity rather than as a property of the setting.

### *2.3 Competence, Contact and Acculturation*

A third tradition asks what makes interaction work. Intergroup contact theory specifies the conditions: contact reduces prejudice when it occurs under equal status, with shared goals, intergroup cooperation and institutional support (Allport, 1954), claims supported by a large meta-analysis (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Intercultural competence models describe the capacities required, most influentially Deardorff's (2006) pyramid of attitudes, knowledge and skills and Byram's (2021) model of intercultural communicative competence. Cultural intelligence theory decomposes the capability into metacognitive, cognitive, motivational and behavioural components (Earley & Ang, 2003), and Bennett's developmental model describes progression from denial

through defence and minimisation to acceptance and adaptation (Bennett, 1993).

Acculturation research adds the structural dimension: Berry's (1997) framework distinguishes integration, assimilation, separation and marginalisation as strategies available to individuals, with integration generally associated with better outcomes - but only where the receiving society permits it. Recent empirical work confirms the practical implication: structured, sustained, cooperative interaction produces measurable change in intercultural perception, whereas diversity alone does not (Yilin, 2025; Akar, 2024).

*2.4 Mediation and Platform Intermediaries*

A fourth strand concerns what happens when interaction is mediated. Comparative work on culturally diverse teams finds that virtual and face-to-face settings make different cultural dimensions salient: communication style, scheduling and language become more consequential when interaction is text- and video-based, while status cues conveyed through physical space, dress and posture become less available (Yousef, 2024). Cultural intelligence has been identified as the capability that allows leaders to manage hybrid complexity, with the specific finding that members of high-context cultures are systematically disadvantaged in low-context-dominated virtual environments (Surapto, 2025). Work on digital teams argues that successful cross-cultural groups create explicit operating systems - agreed norms for communication, decision and conflict - rather than relying on cultural convergence (Krupskyi et al., 2025).

Platform intermediaries add a further layer. Across 48 markets, social media and video networks now exceed news organisations' own websites as routes to news (Reuters Institute, 2026), which means that many cross-cultural encounters are framed by systems optimising for engagement rather than comprehension. Research on algorithmic identity shows that platform curation participates in how people present and recognise themselves across borders (Watson et al., 2025; Alkhazaleh et al., 2025), and studies of digital news environments indicate that emotional, low-context formats travel better across cultural boundaries than elaborated ones.

*2.5 Gaps*

Three gaps motivate the present study. The dimensional, situated and competence traditions are rarely combined, so that explanations of cross-cultural failure tend to be either dispositional or situational rather than both. Evidence on mediated interaction is new and has not been integrated with the classical contact conditions. And the field has not adequately addressed contact under conditions of involuntary displacement, where the classical assumption of equal status plainly does not hold.

Figure 1 sets out the framework used in the remainder of the article. Cultural systems shape interaction processes - attribution, facework, accommodation and identity negotiation - which generate outcomes ranging from mutual understanding to reinforcement of prejudice. Moderators, including the medium of interaction, power asymmetry, language and institutional support, determine which outcome is realised, and outcomes feed back into expectations and into the likelihood of future contact.

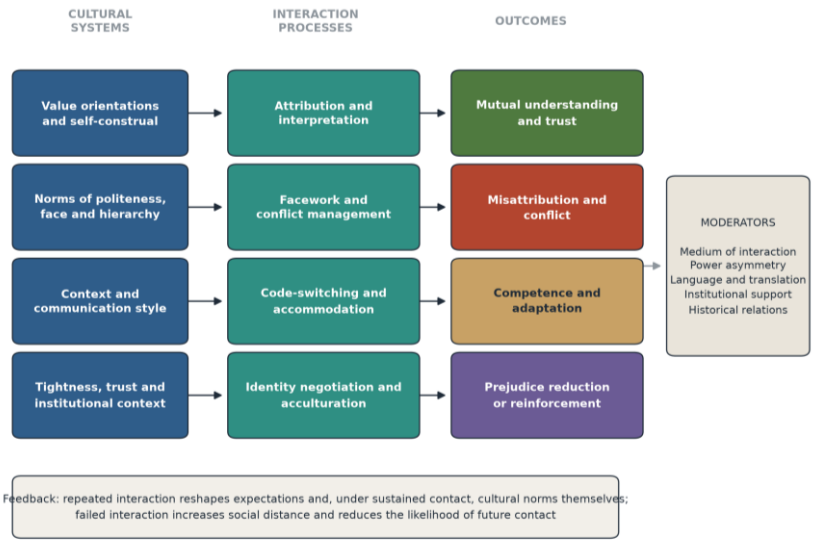



Figure 1. A systems model of cross-cultural interaction

## 3. Method

### *3.1 Design and Evidence Base*

The study is a comparative secondary analysis. Because the phenomena of interest - misreading in intercultural encounters, the effect of mediation, and the conditions under which contact reduces prejudice - are studied in different populations with different instruments, a secondary design was chosen in preference to primary data collection. The design has three components: (a) synthesis of recent empirical studies of intercultural competence in organisational and educational settings; (b) reconstruction of reported conflict and contact conditions from survey and institutional data; and (c) comparison of classical and contemporary accounts of contact conditions. The design is explanatory rather than confirmatory, and no causal estimates are claimed beyond those reported by the primary studies.

Sources were eligible if they (i) reported original data or original empirical analysis of cross-cultural or intercultural interaction; (ii) were published in 2021 or later with priority to 2023-2026; (iii) documented method and sample or data provenance; and (iv) were available in English. Twenty-two sources met the criteria. Table 1 summarises the principal ones.

Table 1. Principal evidence base

| Source | Year | Design and coverage | Contribution |
|---|---|---|---|
| Yilin | 2025 | Case-based empirical analysis; China-Korea, China-US and China-Italy dyads; survey figures from a national sector report | Reported conflict and misunderstanding rates; dimension-based diagnosis (Section 4.1) |
| Yousef | 2024 | Quantitative comparison of intercultural communicative competence in virtual and face-to-face teamwork | Which cultural dimensions change in salience with medium (Section 4.2) |
| Surapto | 2025 | Analysis of cultural intelligence in hybrid global teams | CQ components; disadvantage of high-context members in virtual settings (Section 4.2) |
| Krupskyi, Stasiuk and Kobchenko | 2025 | Analysis of cross-cultural digital teams using e-sport practices | Explicit team operating systems as a design response (Section 5.2) |
| Prouska et al. | 2026 | 102 student and employer interviews; United Kingdom, Belgium, Sweden and Turkey | Competencies demanded and supplied; digital collaboration competence (Section 4.3) |
| Sharipova | 2025 | Comparative analysis of programmes at three universities | Mobility, language provision and lecturer training (Section 4.3) |
| UNHCR | 2026 | Global refugee education statistics | Displacement as a contact context; enrolment and exclusion (Section 4.4) |
| Reuters Institute | 2026 | Survey of approximately 100,000 respondents in 48 markets | Platform mediation of cross-cultural information environments (Section 4.4) |
| Arab Barometer | 2025 | Nationally representative surveys in eight countries | Divergent political and cultural orientations across publics (Section 5.3) |
| Akar | 2024 | Institutional analysis of educational reform in conflict-affected settings | Structured interaction as a precondition for intercultural learning (Section 4.3) |

### *3.2 Procedures and Limitations*

Two procedures were applied. For the empirical synthesis, each study was coded for setting, sample, constructs, measure of intercultural outcome and reported findings, then coded again for which element of the Figure 1 model it addresses. For the reconstruction of reported conflict, published survey figures were assembled by respondent role without constructing a composite index, since the roles reflect different exposures. Coding was applied to published findings rather than to raw data.

Four limitations should be stated. Several of the principal sources are small-scale or case-based, which limits generalisation. The survey figures on reported conflict come from a single national sector report and cannot be assumed to transfer across education systems. Most evidence concerns educated populations in organisational or educational settings rather than everyday public interaction. And the analysis cannot separate the effect of cultural difference from the effect of language proficiency, which co-varies with it in nearly every study reviewed.

## 4. Findings

### *4.1 Misreading, Not Disagreement*

The first finding concerns the character of cross-cultural difficulty. In international education settings, 45.6 per cent of international students, 37.2 per cent of language teachers and 31.8 per cent of programme managers reported explicit communication conflicts attributable to cultural difference, while 62.3 per cent reported having experienced implicit misunderstandings that affected communication effectiveness without surfacing as conflict (Yilin, 2025). Figure 2 presents the pattern. The gap between the two kinds of figure is the finding: the majority of cross-cultural difficulty never becomes visible as disagreement.




Source: compiled from Yilin (2025), reporting survey figures from the 2024 China International Education Development Report. The first three bars report explicit conflicts; the fourth reports implicit misunderstandings among all respondents.

Figure 2. Reported intercultural communication problems in international education

This matters because implicit misunderstanding is invisible to correction. An explicit conflict can be negotiated, mediated and resolved; a misreading that both parties take as understood cannot be, and it accumulates. Case evidence indicates that the underlying mechanism is dimension-based misattribution rather than divergent values: differences in power distance shape whether a student questions a teacher directly; differences in individualism and collectivism shape whether a routine inquiry is read as care or as intrusion; and differences in uncertainty avoidance shape whether deadline flexibility is read as adaptability or as unreliability (Yilin, 2025). In each case the behaviour is unambiguous within its own framework and misread within the other.

A second-order finding follows. Because misreading is silent, participants' confidence in their own understanding is a poor guide to its accuracy. This is consistent with the cultural psychology literature, which shows that attribution patterns themselves differ by self-construal (Nisbett et al., 2001; Markus & Kitayama, 1991): the same behaviour is explained dispositionally by participants from one cultural framework and situationally by participants from another, so that even the diagnosis of a problem is culturally patterned.

### *4.2 Mediation Changes Which Differences Matter*

The second finding is that the medium of interaction redistributes the salience of cultural differences rather than removing them. Comparative quantitative work on culturally diverse teams found that communication style differences, time-zone and scheduling conflicts, and language barriers become more salient in virtual settings, whereas status hierarchy cues conveyed through physical space, dress and body language become less so - with the important qualification that the differences are managed less well in virtual settings, because the informal channels through which face-to-face teams resolve them are unavailable (Yousef, 2024). Figure 3 presents the direction of change.

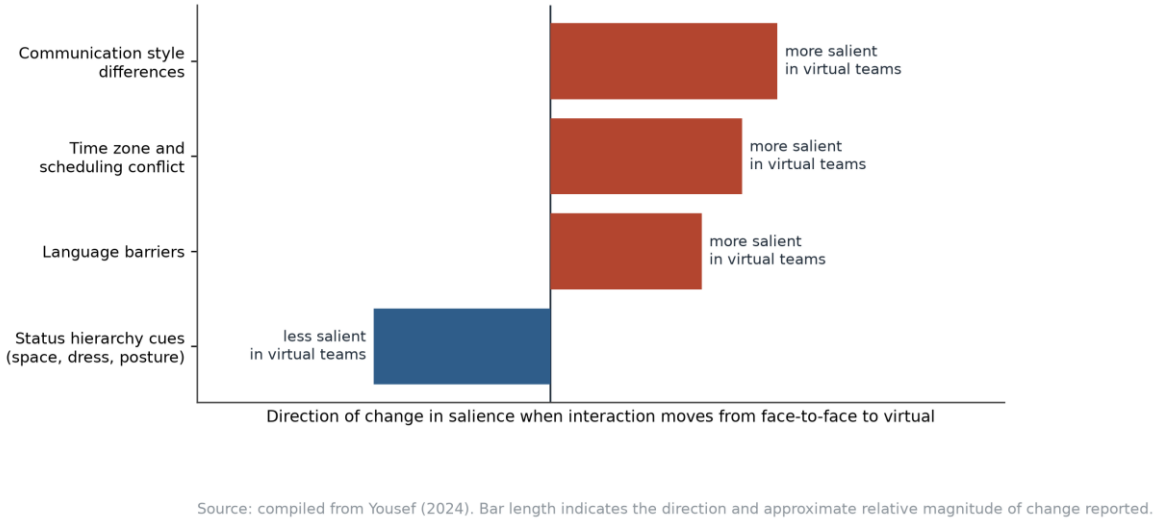



Figure 3. Which cultural dimensions become more or less salient in virtual teamwork

Two consequences follow. The first is compensatory: because informal repair is unavailable, virtual cross-cultural teams must make cultural management explicit or lose it entirely, and teams that did so outperformed those that assumed cultural management would happen naturally (Yousef, 2024). The second is distributive: high-context members, whose meaning is conveyed through relationship and circumstance, are systematically disadvantaged in virtual environments dominated by explicit low-context norms, producing inclusion problems that standard diversity interventions do not address (Surapto, 2025). Mediation is therefore not neutral with respect to culture - it advantages participants whose communicative style matches the medium.

The finding extends beyond organisations. Where cross-cultural encounter is mediated by platforms, the formats that travel best are those requiring least contextual knowledge: across 48 markets, platforms now exceed news organisations' own websites as routes to news, and online video is the dominant news format, with growth concentrated on third-party platforms (Reuters Institute, 2026). Content that requires local context to interpret circulates less well than content that does not, which systematically distorts what cultural outsiders learn about one another.

*4.3 Competence: Multidimensional, Trainable, Contested*

The third finding concerns competence. Recent cross-national work identifies seven competencies demanded of graduates in multicultural workplaces - cultural empathy, cognitive flexibility, conscientiousness, social initiative, emotional stability, open-mindedness and tolerance of ambiguity - and adds digital competence for intercultural collaboration as an eighth, arguing that employers and graduates disagree about which are most important and that curricula are misaligned with demand (Prouska et al., 2026). The structure maps onto established models: attitudes and empathy correspond to Deardorff's (2006) attitudinal base, knowledge of norms to cognitive cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003), and behavioural adaptation to Bennett's (1993) later stages.

Table 2 sets out the framework as reported, arranged by the competence type it implies. Three features deserve emphasis. The affective and cognitive components - empathy, open-mindedness and tolerance of ambiguity - correspond closely to the attitudinal base that Deardorff (2006) places at the foundation of the competence pyramid. The behavioural components - social initiative and conscientiousness - are the ones most readily observed by employers and the ones least often taught explicitly. And the eighth component, digital competence for intercultural collaboration, is the one that existing models did not anticipate.

Table 2. An intercultural competencies framework for multicultural workplaces

| Competency | Type | Why it matters in cross-cultural settings |
|---|---|---|
| Cultural empathy | Affective | Enables accurate reading of another's intentions where signals differ |
| Cognitive flexibility | Cognitive | Allows revision of interpretation when initial attributions fail |
| Open-mindedness | Affective | Sustains engagement where initial reactions are negative |
| Tolerance of ambiguity | Affective | Permits continued work before shared meaning is established |
| Conscientiousness | Behavioural | Provides reliability that is legible across cultural frameworks |
| Social initiative | Behavioural | Generates the contact through which competence develops |
| Emotional stability | Affective | Sustains performance during misreading and repair |
| Digital competence for intercultural collaboration | Digital | Compensates for the loss of informal repair in mediated settings |

Two qualifications are important. First, the addition of digital collaboration competence is an addition, not a substitute: the capacities required for virtual cross-cultural work are the classical ones plus an awareness of how the medium distorts, which is why cultural intelligence rather than technical skill is identified as the decisive leadership capability in hybrid settings (Surapto, 2025). Second, competence develops through structured experience rather than through instruction or exposure. Comparative analysis of university programmes finds that academic mobility and direct exposure advance both language proficiency and intercultural adaptation more than classroom provision alone (Sharipova, 2025), and institutional analysis of education in conflict-affected settings finds that intercultural learning requires deliberately structured interaction rather than proximity (Akar, 2024). The implication is that curricula should be designed around structured contact rather than around cultural content.

*4.4 Contact Under Inequality*

The fourth finding is that the classical conditions for constructive contact often do not hold in the largest contemporary contact settings. Displacement produces sustained cross-cultural contact at scale: UNHCR estimates 13.1 million school-aged refugee children worldwide in 2025, of whom 44 per cent are out of school, while refugee tertiary enrolment reached 11 per cent against a 15 per cent target (UNHCR, 2026). Figure 4 presents the scale. Contact of this kind occurs without equal status, without shared superordinate goals, and frequently without institutional support - the three conditions most strongly associated with prejudice reduction (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

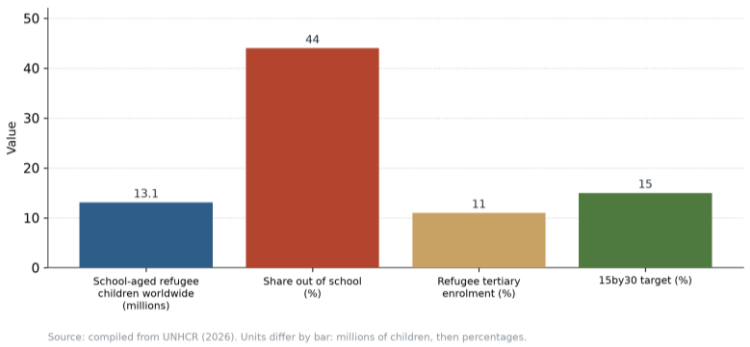



Figure 4. Displacement as a cross-cultural contact context, 2025

The demand for cross-cultural competence is also unevenly distributed across development contexts, which complicates any universal prescription. In African economies, infrastructure and fiscal capacity rather than skills supply are identified as the binding constraint on the cross-border exchange through which contact occurs (OECD, 2025a); in Latin America and the Caribbean, the constraint is productive structure and coordination, with public spending on productive development policies far below the OECD average (OECD, 2025b). In the Middle East and North Africa, several middle-income systems have experienced real-term declines in per-capita human development spending as population growth and inflation outrun nominal budgets (World Bank, 2025), while emergency conditions place tens of millions of children outside the systems in which structured contact would occur (UNICEF, 2026). In each context, the practical content of intercultural competence differs - and so does the institutional work required before contact can be constructive at all.

Evidence from other domains confirms that proximity without structure does not produce intercultural learning. Qualitative work on educational reform in conflict-affected settings shows that political gridlock can block the structured interaction through which citizenship and equity orientations develop (Akar, 2024), and research on parental strategy in crisis settings shows that where trust in public provision collapses, families sort themselves in ways that reduce rather than increase cross-cultural contact (Al Khalili, 2025). The general point is that contact is a setting property, not an individual experience: what determines whether it reduces or reinforces distance is how the setting is organised.

Where contact does occur across publics with different cultural and political orientations, the divergence is substantial and not converging. Comparative survey work across Middle Eastern societies records publics that combine strong local attachments with deep dissatisfaction with institutions and declining support for liberal democratic models (Arab Barometer, 2025), while European and North American data record declining intensity of national identification, especially among younger cohorts (Gallup, 2025; YouGov, 2025). Cross-cultural interaction in the coming decade will therefore take place between publics whose orientations are themselves in flux.

*4.5 Synthesis*

Table 3 brings the findings together against the elements of the framework. The synthesis they support is that cross-cultural failure is over-determined by individual-sensitivity explanations and under-determined by design explanations. Participants misread one another because cultural frameworks differ; but whether misreading accumulates into conflict, whether it is corrected, and whether it reduces or increases social distance depends on properties of the setting - its medium, its duration, its structure and its institutional support.

Table 3. Findings by element of the framework

| **Framework element** | **Finding** | **Principal evidence** | **Confidence** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Interaction processes | Implicit misunderstanding exceeds overt conflict; misreading is systematically dimension-based | Yilin (2025); Nisbett et al. (2001) | Moderate |
| Medium of interaction | Virtual settings raise the salience of style, scheduling and language and lower that of status cues; informal repair is lost | Yousef (2024); Surapto (2025) | Moderate |
| Competence | Multidimensional and trainable; digital collaboration is an added dimension; structured experience outperforms instruction | Prouska et al. (2026); Sharipova (2025); Earley and Ang (2003) | Moderate |
| Contact conditions | Classical conditions frequently absent in displacement and platform settings; proximity alone is insufficient | UNHCR (2026); Akar (2024); Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) | Moderate |
| Institutional support | Determines whether contact reduces prejudice; where absent, contact can reinforce distance | Allport (1954); Al Khalili (2025); Akar (2024) | High |

## 5. Discussion

### *5.1 From Sensitivity to Design*

The findings support a shift in emphasis from individual sensitivity to environmental design. This is not a rejection of competence training, which has demonstrated effects; it is a claim about relative leverage. Competence is costly to build, unevenly distributed and dependent on motivation, whereas settings can be arranged once and benefit everyone who enters them. Where cross-cultural interaction fails repeatedly in the same institution, the economical hypothesis is a design defect rather than a deficit of sensitivity among the participants.

The reframing also resolves a persistent tension in the literature. Dimensional accounts imply that failure is predictable and therefore avoidable through knowledge; situated accounts imply that it is emergent and therefore manageable only through process. Both are right about different things: dimensions make failure probable by shaping what participants expect, while settings determine whether that probability is realised and whether the resulting misreading is corrected. A design-oriented field needs both.

### *5.2 Revising the Contact Conditions*

The classical conditions - equal status, shared goals, cooperation and institutional support - remain the best available account of when contact reduces prejudice (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). The evidence reviewed here suggests four additions required by contemporary settings, set out in Figure 5.

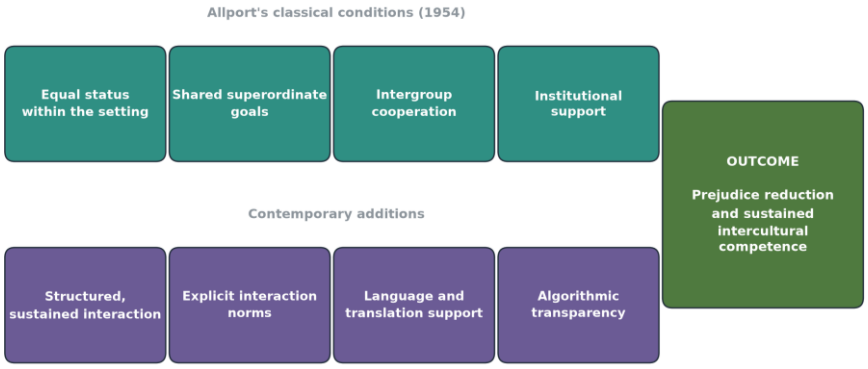



Figure 5. Conditions for constructive cross-cultural contact: classical and contemporary

First, contact must be structured and sustained rather than incidental: the competence literature consistently finds that designed, repeated, goal-oriented interaction produces change where exposure does not (Akar, 2024; Yilin, 2025). Second, interaction norms should be made explicit: research on digital cross-cultural teams finds that successful groups agree operating systems for communication, decision and conflict rather than assuming convergence (Krupskyi et al., 2025). Third, language and translation support should be treated as infrastructure rather than as an individual responsibility, since language proficiency co-varies with nearly every measured intercultural outcome (Sharipova, 2025). Fourth, where encounter is algorithmically mediated, transparency about curation is a contact condition, because the framing of the other is determined by systems whose optimisation objective is engagement rather than comprehension (Reuters Institute, 2026; Watson et al., 2025).

A further addition deserves separate mention because it is frequently overlooked in organisational settings: the youth dimension. Young people are the population most exposed to both mobility and platform mediation, and international reporting on youth participation argues that they should be treated as co-designers of the institutions in which contact occurs rather than as its beneficiaries (UNESCO, 2026). Where contact is mediated, moreover, the architecture of exposure differs systematically by group: survey evidence shows pronounced differences by age and political identity in the platforms through which people encounter information and one another, so that the population of 'others' a person meets is itself a product of platform sorting rather than of chance (Pew

Research Center, 2025). Making that sorting visible is a precondition for designing contact that crosses it.

### *5.3 Culture Is Not Only National*

A caution is necessary against over-reading the national frame. The dimensional tradition's convenience carries a cost: national averages conceal variation by class, generation, region, religion, migration history and organisational role, and they invite the inference that a counterpart from a given country will behave in a predictable way. Comparative survey evidence complicates the picture further: publics differ internally along lines that cut across national borders, with generational and political cleavages often larger than national ones (Arab Barometer, 2025; Gallup, 2025). Cultural frameworks are real and measurable, but they are probabilistic tendencies within populations, not descriptions of persons.

Three further sources of heterogeneity deserve mention because they routinely confound national-level generalisation. Gender shapes cross-cultural experience profoundly, and legal and economic frameworks condition women's participation in cross-border education and employment differently across regions (ESCWA, 2024). Digital self-presentation varies with the platforms available and with the algorithmic visibility accorded to different cultural styles, so that the 'cultural other' encountered online is already a curated artefact (Elyamany, 2025). Generational cohort cuts across national boundaries: evidence from the United States records a steep generational gradient in national attachment, with younger cohorts markedly less intense in their identification than their elders (More in Common, 2024). And labour-market position structures exposure, with the quality rather than the quantity of cross-cultural contact at work varying systematically by occupational status (ILO, 2025). A framework that ignores these will misattribute to culture what belongs to gender, generation, technology or class.

The practical corollary is that cross-cultural preparation should teach frameworks for questioning assumptions rather than catalogues of national traits. That is the position implicit in Deardorff's (2006) emphasis on attitudes as the base of the competence pyramid and in Bennett's (1993) model, in which earlier stages are characterised precisely by the assumption that difference is either invisible or threatening.

### *5.4 Practical Implications*

Four implications follow for practitioners.

- Design for correction rather than for prevention: because most difficulty is implicit misunderstanding, settings should build in routine checks on shared understanding rather than relying on participants to raise problems.
- Make cultural management explicit in virtual teams: where informal repair is unavailable, agreed norms for communication, decision and conflict substitute for the channels that have been lost.
- Treat language support and translation as infrastructure: provision determines whether structured contact is accessible to all participants or only to the most proficient.
- Do not assume proximity produces learning: contact reduces distance only where status, goals, cooperation and support are arranged; where they are absent, contact can reinforce division.

## 6. Conclusions

Cross-cultural interaction has become routine without becoming easy. This article has argued that the difficulty is systematic rather than accidental and that its primary locus is design rather than disposition. Four findings support the argument: that implicit misreading exceeds overt conflict and is therefore harder to correct; that mediation redistributes which cultural differences matter and systematically advantages participants whose style matches the medium; that competence is multidimensional, trainable and best developed through structured experience; and that the classical conditions for constructive contact are frequently absent in the largest contemporary contact settings, including displacement and platform-mediated encounter.

The article's central claim is that cross-cultural failure should be analysed as a property of settings. Cultural frameworks make misreading probable; institutions, media and organisational arrangements determine whether misreading is detected, corrected and learned from. This claim carries a different practical programme from the one that dominates training markets: rather than making individuals more sensitive, it makes settings more legible, more repairable and more equally structured.

Both the synthesis and the argument are offered with the limitations stated in Section 3.2: several principal sources are small-scale or case-based, the conflict figures derive from a single national sector report, the evidence base is concentrated in educated and organisational populations, and language proficiency cannot be separated from cultural difference in the studies reviewed. The most valuable next investment would be

comparable cross-national measurement of intercultural contact conditions - not of attitudes towards cultural others, which are well documented - but of the structural features of the settings in which contact occurs.

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