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REPLY

Bridging Disciplines, Bridging Minds: Extending the Affective Learning Processes (ALPs) Model of Cultural Competence

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We thank all commentators for their thoughtful and generative engagement with the Affective Learning Processes (ALPs) model (Chao, this issue). At its core, the model aims to present a more comprehensive conceptualization of cultural competence, by emphasizing the motivational and emotional foundations of this process. Cultural competence refers to the ability to function effectively across diverse cultural environments. Unlike traditional models that primarily focus on the content of learning (such as cultural norms, values, and practices) the ALPs model emphasizes how individuals learn, from whom they learn, and why they learn. It examines cultural competence as a dynamic process through which individuals acquire and apply strategies to navigate intercultural contexts. While acknowledging that some individuals are driven by needs for growth and development (promotion focus), the model also highlights how others may be motivated by concerns for security and safety (prevention focus). These differing orientations influence not only how individuals approach learning opportunities and what they learn, but also whether they feel ready or willing to act on what they have learned.

Across the commentaries, there was broad appreciation for the ALPs model's central contribution: shifting the discourse on cultural competence from a predominantly promotion-focused orientation, assuming individuals are motivated by growth and achievement, to a more balanced framework that also considers prevention-focused motivations. The commentators affirmed the value of positioning cultural competence as a dynamic, motivational process—one that accounts for both emotional readiness and the divergent goals individuals bring to intercultural situations. Several commentators elaborated on the model's theoretical foundations, extended it to new domains such as moralized or concealable identities, or called for more explicit attention to structural and historical contexts. Others raised important questions about boundaries, generalizability, and practical application. Taken together, these commentaries underscore that cultural competence is a psychologically and socially complex process. Two coauthors with expertise in affect and intergroup relations were invited to join this reply. This collaborative reply reflects the spirit of theory-building as "a

family affair" (Higgins, 2006; also see Chao, this issue). Together, the target article, commentaries, and this reply represent an invitation to engage in a meaningful dialogue with scholars who share a common desire in advancing knowledge.

In the sections that follow, we respond to the commentaries thematically. We begin by clarifying our conceptualization of learning as an affectively grounded and motivationally driven process. Next, we explore the roles of structure and agency, followed by an examination of how motivational profiles operate across complex and shifting identity contexts. Finally, we reflect on the practical applications of the ALPs model, highlighting key design principles for training and intervention. Our goal is to clarify the model, incorporate thoughtful extensions, and build on shared insights to inform practices.

Clarifying Affective Learning as a Dynamic Motivational Process

Several commentators—most notably Joyner et al. (this issue), Saw et al. (this issue), and Zhang et al. (this issue)—have raised concerns about the potential assumptions of the ALPs model. They questioned whether the model treats affective learning as a purely agentic process, overlooks structural power dynamics in the environment, or assumes that all motivational end-states are equally accessible. These critiques reflect a longstanding tension in intercultural research between emphasizing individual agency and attending to structural constraints. The concern is that models centered on individual autonomy may inadvertently reinforce or legitimize the status quo by ignoring how power and inequality shape learning conditions. Accordingly, they interpret the ALPs model as a framework that neglects the legacy of systematic oppression and imbalanced power dynamics. This reaction may stem from a (mis)interpretation that "learning" implies complete individual control over their environment to decide what and how they learn. Therefore, as a starting point, it is important to clarify how the ALPs model conceptualizes learning.

The ALPs model highlights the role of individual motivation and affect, but it does not assume that learners operate

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in a social vacuum. Drawing on decades of learning research (Gruber et al., 2022), the model distinguishes between incidental learning (i.e., acquiring knowledge through everyday exposure, often without conscious awareness) and intentional learning (i.e., acquiring knowledge through deliberate processes such as classroom instruction or reading). It emphasizes the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environments in both types of learning, particularly in how affective associations are formed and influence motivation in intercultural settings (Chao, this issue). This includes structural conditions such as surveillance, exclusion, systemic oppression, and historical marginalization, which shape not only what and how individuals learn but also what emotions are accessible in a given moment.

Contrary to the concerns raised by Joyner et al. (this issue), Saw et al. (this issue), and Zhang et al. (this issue) that the ALPs model overemphasizes individual agency while neglecting historical and structural forces, the model conceptualizes learning as socially and historically situated. In fact, the model is grounded in research traditions that emphasize how external conditions shape behavioral and emotional responses. Classic theories of learning, such as reinforcement theory (Skinner, 1937), focus exclusively on environmental impact. The ALPs model does not adopt such an extreme view, but it recognizes that environmental input, including conditions of inequality or exclusion, plays a significant role in shaping the learning process and its outcomes. As Gruber (this issue; Gruber et al., 2022) notes, repeated exposure to structural power dynamics embeds affective associations into memory, guiding future expectations and behavior in intercultural contexts.

Building on this foundation of learning, the ALPs model further explains how different social vantage points shape motivational orientations in intercultural contexts. Individuals enter intercultural spaces from different positions, influencing their perception of the environment and the type of motivation activated. For some majority group members, intercultural interactions may be experienced as welcoming, low-risk opportunities for exploration. This activates a promotion focus characterized by curiosity, openness, and engagement. For some minority group members, the same environments may signal marginalization or exclusion, activating a prevention focus marked by vigilance, self-protection, and risk aversion. The ALPs model illuminates these diverging motivational pathways, arguing that a prevention focus is not a psychological deficit but an adaptive response to social constraints (Saw et al., this issue; Tee et al., this issue). In doing so, the model integrates individual agency with structural realities to explain how cultural learning unfolds differently for individuals in the same context.

This view of learners as emotionally responsive agents also prompts a rethinking of how learning is enacted. The ALPs model does not equate learning with internalization, compliance, or submission (see Joyner et al., this issue; Zhang et al., this issue). Rather, it posits that affective learning can lead to a wide range of behavioral responses, including resistance, avoidance, engagement, or withdrawal. Learning, in this view, is not about conforming to dominant norms or abandoning one's critical perspective. It is about developing emotionally informed orientations and behavioral strategies that are responsive to environmental cues. As Gruber (this issue) reminds us, humans, like nonhuman primates, learn to approach or avoid certain social stimuli based on environmental input. Individuals develop adaptive responses to their surroundings, guided by what feels emotionally safe or risky, aspirational or disappointing. These responses may involve reaching out, holding back, or cautiously assessing potential threats, reflecting affective adaptation rather than passive acceptance.

Taken together, these insights reinforce a central idea of the ALPs model: learners are context-sensitive actors whose affective orientations are shaped by prior experiences and present conditions. The model neither casts learners as fully autonomous agents nor passive recipients of structural forces. Instead, it conceptualizes agency as emotionally grounded, adaptive responsiveness. Individuals exercise this agency, both consciously and unconsciously, by choosing what to attend to, whom to learn from, and how (or whether) to engage. A more balanced consideration of individual agency and structural influence is needed, otherwise, both individual and structural intervention efforts that aim to foster receptiveness or cultural change may be prematurely dismissed as ineffective. The model recognizes the vast emotional and motivational diversity that exists within and between groups. By understanding how people respond to structural constraints through affective learning, the ALPs model complements—rather than competes with—the structural critiques put forth by Joyner et al. (this issue), Saw et al. (this issue), and Zhang et al. (this issue). It helps explain not only how power is enacted and reproduced, but also how it is felt and navigated in culturally diverse interactions.

Beyond structural concerns, several commentators raised a related but distinct critique that the ALPs model fails to adequately account for the role of values and power. Joyner et al. (this issue), for instance, perceive that the model assumes all cultural end-states are equally accessible, and that knowledge acquisition is value-neutral. These critiques reflect misunderstandings of both the learning and motivation literature (Gruber et al., 2022; Higgins, 1997) and of the ALPs model. Learning is not value-neutral, nor do individuals approach cultural learning from a position of dispassionate objectivity. As the target article states (Chao, this issue, p. 164), "Learning can be a process through which people form social bonds, enabling the transfer of value." From whom individuals learn and how they interpret what they learn are shaped by affective fit and social status. For instance, people are more likely to overimitate and accept information from ingroup rather than outgroup members (Gruber et al., 2019, 2022; Hoehl et al., 2019). As Gruber (this issue) emphasizes, both human and nonhuman primates demonstrate selectivity in knowledge acquisition, prioritizing some sources and discarding others based on perceived affiliation and relevance. Accordingly, learning is not only embedded in affect but also shaped by structures of inclusion and exclusion. Cultural end-states, therefore, are neither equally accessible nor value-free, as they are filtered

through feelings of safety, belonging, and social recognition (see Saw et al., this issue).

The ALPs model also helps explain how perceived threat can lead to disengagement, even in well-intentioned contexts. For example, some majority group members may approach interactions cautiously out of fear of being perceived as prejudiced (Rios, 2022), whereas some minority group members may enter with a sense of exhaustion or guardedness due to repeated invalidation (Finkelstein et al., 2022). When both parties anticipate threat—albeit for different reasons—the result may be withdrawal, surface-level politeness, or preemptive avoidance. Rather than viewing these vigilant reactions as barriers that interfere with learning, the model interprets them as part of the learning process (Saw et al., this issue). That is, they are responses shaped by past experiences and emotional conditioning. We concur with Saw et al. (this issue) that ignoring or minimizing past experiences can lead to harm and division. At the same time, however, we emphasize that emotional safety, such as that created by respectful organizational norms, can reduce threat activation and enable deeper engagement (Cross, this issue). In this view, both vigilance and eagerness are contingent states, shaped not just by history but also present cues.

In sum, the ALPs model conceptualizes learning as a dynamic interplay between environmental conditions and individual interpretation. It recognizes that structural contexts shape what and from whom individuals learn, while affirming that learners are not passive recipients. They interpret, filter, and respond to affective cues shaped by past experiences and current contexts. By acknowledging the influence of both structure and agency, the ALPs model helps illuminate the emotional pathways through which intercultural engagement becomes possible or foreclosed. The model aims to reframe the conversation not by flattening difference or denying injustice (see Joyner et al., this issue; Saw et al., this issue; Zhang et al., this issue), but by clarifying how emotion and motivation shape interactions across group boundaries. This balance between promotion and prevention is not merely theoretical; it reflects the emotional reality of how people approach difference: sometimes with openness, sometimes with caution, and often with both.

Clarifying the Relationship Between Promotion Focus and Prevention Focus

As noted, the central goal of the ALPs model is to restore a more balanced recognition of both the need for growth and development (promotion focus) and the need for safety and security (prevention focus) in cultural competence research, which has historically prioritized the former. Drawing from comparative psychology, Gruber (this issue) observes that "there is little evidence for cultural competence acquisition with a promotion focus in other cultural animals" (p. 191), suggesting that prevention focus is fundamental to adaptation and the promotion mode of learning may be uniquely human. Gruber (this issue) attributes this to the increasing complexity of human social life. We agree that navigating today's intercultural environments requires both motivational orientations (Cross, this issue), especially given their entanglement with multiple identities that may be visible or concealed (Mackey & Rios, this issue), diverging social expectations (Griesberg et al., this issue), and complex historical and geopolitical legacies (Joyner et al., this issue; Saw et al., this issue; Tee et al., this issue; Zhang et al., this issue).

The prominence of promotion focus in the past two decades of cultural competence research—particularly within social and organizational psychology (Maddux et al., 2021; also see Chao et al., this issue)—likely reflects a broader zeitgeist of an aspirational push toward growth, openness, and cross-group collaboration in organizational settings. This prevailing sentiment was captured by one of the anonymous reviewers of the target article, who remarked, "…if anything, it seems more plausible that promotion- rather than prevention-focus is a primary motivational mechanism; after all, cross-cultural interactions typically involve approaching and engaging with something that is fundamentally different" (Reviewer 3, 2024). Such preferences have been shaping research agendas in the past decades. However, in an era marked by rising geopolitical tensions and heightened concerns about safety and inclusion, prevention focus may now take a center stage. This shift is echoed in the commentaries, where contributors repeatedly emphasize structural vulnerability, exclusion, and emotional harm. In threat-laden environments, intercultural competence may be enacted not through excitement, outreach, or engagement, but through caution, boundary-setting, or even withdrawal—strategies that reflect a prevention-focused approach.

This shift carries clear motivational implications. When individuals perceive their environment as threatening, prevention goals (e.g., avoiding risk, minimizing harm) often take precedence over promotion goals (e.g., pursuing connection or growth). As Luncz et al. (2018) and Gruber (this issue) note, individuals may prioritize safety even at the expense of efficiency or exploration. The activation of one goal system tends to inhibit competing goals, especially when the goals compete for limited cognitive or emotional resources (see Shah et al., 2002; Tadmor et al., 2018). Thus, the ALPs model helps explain why individuals may not always feel ready to "lean in" to intercultural interactions, even when such engagement is normatively expected (e.g., by organizations).

In sum, the ALPs model views both promotion and prevention foci as adaptive motivational systems that respond to different environmental affordances and risks. These systems coexist within individuals and equip them with affective repertoires, with one system becoming more accessible than the other depending on context, history, and social cues, as well as the zeitgeist. To be adaptive, individuals switch between systems and deploy strategies that fit the situation. The ALPs model does not prescribe which orientation is more desirable. Rather, it offers a framework for understanding when and why each becomes accessible, and how competence may be expressed differently depending on which motivational system is engaged.

Expanding the ALPs Model to Complex Group Boundaries: Identity Fluidity, Moralization, and Concealability

As previously discussed, the ALPs model was developed in response to traditional perspectives in cultural competence

research that prioritize promotion focus and presume personal autonomy. Given that this research has often focused on race, ethnicity, or nationality, the original discussion of the ALPs model (Chao, this issue) similarly emphasized these identity domains. However, Mackey and Rios (this issue) raise an important question about how the ALPs model accounts for other kinds of group boundaries—particularly those shaped by moralization or involving concealable identities, such as political affiliation, religion, or sexual orientation. Their concern echoes that of Griesberg et al. (this issue), who ask how researchers can acknowledge the influence of culture and identity without relying on fixed, group-based assumptions in intercultural encounters.

These questions highlight a central insight: surface social categories do not always align with subjective experience. Apparent ingroup members may experience themselves as outgroup members, and vice versa. Similarly, apparent dominant group members with concealed identities may experience themselves as minority group members. Interpersonal contexts often involve blurry or hidden social categorical boundaries. The ALPs model proposes that motivational orientation is not determined by static group labels but by the emotional and relational cues within the interaction. As Mackey and Rios (this issue) note, individuals may conceal aspects of their identity—such as sexual orientation, religious belief, or political affiliation—out of fear that disclosure could lead to identity denial or moral condemnation, even from close others. In such cases, the ALPs model suggests that interpersonal proximity may heighten threat rather than reduce it. If someone anticipates rejection from a friend, colleague, or family member, they may adopt vigilant strategies such as identity concealment, emotional distancing, or passive withdrawal. These are affectively and socially shaped responses to environments that are perceived as unsafe. Unless the risk of rejection is mitigated, the prevention system remains active. Moreover, when a concealed identity is not acknowledged, the interaction may appear culturally neutral to the unbeknown partner, even though it is emotionally charged for the focal person. The ALPs model helps explain how prevention focus may be activated even in the absence of explicit cues, shaped by prior emotional learning about when and where it feels safe to be known.

To illustrate this point, we reflected on our own collaboration. The three coauthors of this reply share a common intellectual lineage ("Go Bears!"), a mutual investment in intercultural understanding, and a shared interest in affect. We possess a common ingroup identity, as well as shared goals and interests. Yet even in this deeply collaborative relationship, we may differ in our preferred approaches to intervention and theory. One of us might favor empowering individual autonomy to help learners overcome environmental setbacks. Another might emphasize the importance of calling out structural oppression and resisting assimilationist models that presume autonomy. The third one might focus on the interplay between individual agency and structural constraint. These differences, often invisible at the outset of collaboration, may surface over time and be perceived as

threatening, especially if they carry moral weight or raise doubts about legitimacy or belongingness.

Recognizing this potential risk, the prevention focus system may be activated. We might adopt vigilant strategies to avoid potential discomfort or feel agitated toward one another. However, in an environment where shared aspirations are clear and divergence is respected rather than moralized, we feel safe to express disagreement. From the ALPs perspective, when individuals recognize common goals in promoting positive intercultural relations and when the norm is to respect divergent viewpoints, they are more likely to feel safe and open to share. Under such conditions, the promotion focus system becomes more accessible, unless signs of threat are introduced. When disagreement is framed as exploration rather than betrayal or a contest for moral high ground, differences in perspective can be experienced as intellectually enriching rather than threatening. This dynamic fosters intellectual humility (Porter et al., 2022). It increases awareness of the limits of one's own perspective, and opens space for curiosity and collaborative problem-solving (see Cross, this issue; Joyner et al., this issue; Mackey & Rios, this issue). Instead of understanding each other despite our differences, we understand each other because of our differences.

If such divergence in worldviews is moralized, or even politicized, the ALPs model predicts a shift in the emotional tone of the conversation—what Mackey and Rios (this issue, p. 198) describe as the "groupiness" of attitudes. This heightened group salience can increase identity threat. A conversation that might have been rooted in curiosity or mutual exploration may instead feel like a high-stakes test of loyalty and belonging. In such moments, prevention focus is likely to dominate. Individuals may experience anxiety, agitation, or anger; they might disengage, censor themselves or others, conceal disagreement, or withdraw from the collaboration entirely. It is important to emphasize that both motivational systems are adaptive: prevention focus helps individuals manage threat in uncertain or hostile environments, just as promotion focus supports engagement when opportunities for growth are perceived. Prevention-based strategies (e.g., disengagement or caution) are not inherently regressive. They serve as protective strategies in environments where identity threat is high and psychological safety is low. The ALPs model highlights these patterns as adaptive responses to context, not as failures of competence.

In sum, the commentaries by Mackey and Rios (this issue) and Griesberg et al. (this issue) help expand the ALPs model beyond traditional cultural categories. By drawing attention to moralized and concealable identities, they allow us to consider how similar motivational processes described by ALPs operate in domains where group boundaries are fluid and identity salience may shift moment to moment. These contributions reinforce the model's conceptual flexibility (Van Lange, 2013; also see Chao, this issue), showing how affective learning applies across a wide range of cultural encounters, including those that may not initially appear "intercultural" at all.

Extending the ALPs Model to Novel Encounters and Unfamiliar Contexts

The idea of identity fluidity also led Mackey and Rios (this issue) to further expand the ALPs model by asking how it might apply to situations characterized by the unknown—specifically, contexts where there is no prior relationship and interaction partners know little about each other. Along this line, Griesberg et al. (this issue) added that when information is opaque or incomplete, unrealistic or unmet expectations may arise. How, then, does affective learning unfold in such situations? To answer this question, we must contextualize it. By contextualization, it does not mean that the ALPs model applies only to specific cases. Rather, contextualization helps demonstrate how its principles generalize beyond traditional intercultural settings (see Van Lange, 2013).

Drawing from Mackey and Rios (this issue), consider a situation in which two coworkers meet for the first time. One has a concealable identity, such as being a gay man. According to the ALPs model, their interaction will be shaped by prior affective learning, environmental cues, and the evolving dynamic between them. The model does not predict a fixed outcome but helps anticipate which motivational systems are likely to become accessible based on affective cues. In this case, the situation involves an actor (the coworker with a concealable identity) and a partner (the unaware coworker). If the actor anticipates identity threat (Steele et al., 2002) or identity denial (Cheryan & Monin, 2005), the prevention focus system is likely to be activated. As Mackey and Rios (this issue), Saw et al. (this issue), and Tee et al. (this issue) point out, vigilant reactions are reasonable given the actor's prior experiences. He may avoid disclosing his identity or steer away from unnecessary exchanges (e.g., Jackson & Mohr, 2016; Malterud & Bjorkman, 2016). Meanwhile, being unaware of the concealed identity, the partner might misinterpret his caution as arrogance, disinterest, or even hostility, and reciprocate with guarded behavior. This illustrates that emotional safety cannot be taken for granted. Visible identity may not accurately reflect perceived status and can obscure vulnerability beneath the surface of presumed safety.

Recognizing the fluidity and invisibility of identities, alternative outcomes are also possible. The partner may observe the actor's disengagement without problematizing it or taking it personally. In a trust-supporting organizational environment (Cross, this issue), such benign interpretations might foster an unexpected moment of intercultural learning. If the actor begins to perceive the partner as welcoming, he may cautiously shift toward vigilant approach behaviors, like observing the partner's reaction to a same-sex pronoun when referring to a romantic partner or assessing the partner's stance over time. Depending on the interaction dynamic, the promotion focus or prevention focus system may become more accessible.

The ALPs model does not prescribe fixed strategies or assign value judgments to these responses. Instead, it treats intercultural interaction as a learning process, where individuals flexibly adapt based on outcome expectancies formed through past experiences. These expectations are probabilistic, not deterministic. Importantly, even unmet or mismatched expectations (see Griesberg et al., this issue) can inform further learning.

In sum, the commentaries by Mackey and Rios (this issue) and Griesberg et al. (this issue) prompt us to consider how the ALPs model applies in novel contexts, where cultural boundaries may not be immediately apparent and identities are fluid or concealed. Rather than outlining every possible configuration (e.g., both partners have concealable gender identities; one partner holds a visible ethnic minority identity while the other possesses a visible majority identity but with a concealed marginalized religion identity), we provide an example to illustrate how the affective learning processes generalize. Future work can build on these insights to evaluate the model's boundary conditions and guide intercultural research and practice into uncharted but essential terrain.

Extending the ALPs Model into Practice

Drawing from diverse disciplinary perspectives, the commentaries have helped clarify and expand the ALPs model (Joyner et al., this issue; Saw et al., this issue; Zhang et al., this issue), highlight its application across a range of intercultural and interpersonal contexts (Griesberg et al., this issue; Mackey & Rios, this issue; Tee et al., this issue), and point to the psychological roots of prevention focus shared with our primate relatives (Gruber, this issue). Several insights also offer valuable foundations for practice (Cross, this issue), prompting reflection on how the ALPs model can inform training, intervention, and design strategies in intercultural settings. Integrating themes across the commentaries, we identified three core elements that cultural competence interventions should address: (1) intellectual humility, (2) mistake acceptance, and (3) learning to learn.

Element 1: Intellectual Humility—A Metacognitive Understanding of Our Own Limits

Despite the divergent perspectives across the commentaries, they converge with the ALPs model in viewing learning as an iterative, ongoing process shaped by environmental input. A key to adapting in dynamic cultural environments is acknowledging the limits of our knowledge—the recognition that "we don't know," or even "we don't know that we don't know." Whether labeled as intellectual humility or pluralistic ignorance reduction (Mackey & Rios, this issue), cultural humility or cultural responsiveness (Joyner et al., this issue; Saw et al., this issue), engaging humilities (Tee et al., this issue), cognitive appraisal (Zhang et al., this issue), anticipating the unanticipated (Griesberg et al., this issue), understanding self-related processes (Cross, this issue), or being open to unfamiliar possibilities (Gruber, this issue), the shared insight is clear: metacognition matters.

Despite the benefit of intellectual humility (Knöchelmann & Cohrs, 2025; Porter et al., 2022), accepting our own limits is not easy. It requires critically assessing what we know and remaining open to what we do not know—something that runs counter to the human desire for certainty (Fu et al.,

2007; Kruglanski, 2013; Zhang et al., this issue) and the tendency to validate what "feels right" as right and what "feels wrong" as wrong (Camacho et al., 2003). For example, although both promotion focus and prevention focus systems are adaptive, one may feel "more right" in a given situation—promotion focus for some (e.g., aspiration to learn), and prevention focus for others (e.g., vigilance and caution). Importantly, intellectual humility does not mean surrendering one's worldview. It means acknowledging that different affective and motivational orientations exist without casting judgment. It involves recognizing that what feels natural or right to us may not be shared by others. Thus, intellectual humility is not about persuading others to adopt our views, nor about mimicking others. It is about building bridges: making space for divergent affective starting points, acknowledging internal needs, and staying open to unfamiliar cues. It allows us to meet people where they are— promotion-focused or prevention-focused—and to respect the validity of their entry points into learning. This is a foundational insight of the ALPs model.

Different strategies have been proposed to cultivate intellectual humility, such as fostering structured dialogue that help learners recognize the limitations of their understanding (Elnakouri et al., 2024; Zhang et al., this issue), encouraging individuals to entertain alternative perspectives to reduce attitude polarization and open minds up (Brienza et al., 2021; Mackey & Rios, this issue), facilitating community engagement and intergroup experiences that supports reflective learning to reduce biases (Berger et al., 2016; Cross, this issue; Joyner et al., this issue; Saw et al., this issue), engaging in self-distancing practices through considering observer viewpoints (Grossmann et al., 2019, 2021; Kross & Grossmann, 2012), and tackling the illusion of understanding by having individuals deliberate on their perspectives to recognize the limitations in their existing knowledge (Fernbach et al., 2013; Johnson et al., 2016). There is suggestive evidence that intellectual humility can be enhanced by these strategies; however, most of the studies involve brief interventions comparing differences between treatment and control groups, or focus on short-term post-intervention changes (see Porter et al., 2022 for a review). More work is needed to examine whether and how these strategies influence the development of intellectual humility by examining individual changes over time (Grossmann et al., 2025).

It is important to note that intellectual humility does not require choosing between "outreach" and "defense." As Chao (this issue) suggests, individuals may need to draw on both prevention- and promotion-based strategies, such as anticipating affective triggers while remaining cautiously open to new input (prevention) or actively engaging in a conversation to connect (promotion). The key is to recognize the learners' motivational variations and how environmental cues shape it. Expecting uniform motivations or privileging one motivational state over another ignores this complexity. As we turn next to the issue of environmental design, we underscore that intellectual humility is not just an individual mindset; it can be a situationally shaped outcome, influenced by context (Cross, this issue; Koetke et al., 2023).

Element 2: Mistake Acceptance—A Trial-and-Error Approach

Closely related to intellectual humility is the need to accept that learning involves trial and error. Individuals often seek certainty (Kruglanski, 2013), gravitating toward judgments and choices that offer closure. This desire intensifies when people feel emotionally depleted or lack the cognitive resources to cope with ambiguity (Tadmor et al., 2018). Yet trial-and-error learning inherently involves experimentation and the possibility of making mistakes, which is the antithesis of certainty. This preference for certainty can shape how people approach cultural competence, evaluating the effectiveness of strategies based on whether they "work" or "don't work." However, as researchers, we understand that effectiveness is probabilistic, not absolute. When individuals expect clear success or failure, they may overestimate the effectiveness of certain practices and underestimate the challenges of implementation, leaving little room for tolerance of error or iterative adjustment.

As Griesberg et al. (this issue) suggest, awareness of cultural differences may help individuals anticipate and interpret others' behaviors (e.g., engagement, vigilance), but it can also backfire when it leads to rigid expectations or stereotyping (Deardorff, 2006). Similarly, attempts to appear unbiased by rigidly adhering to prescribed strategies can paradoxically impair the expression of warmth and sincerity. When people try too hard to appear impartial, they may come across as inauthentic or disingenuous. In some cases, individuals on the receiving end may even prefer interaction partners who are transparently biased over those who seem to be masking discomfort or overcorrecting (Apfelbaum et al., 2008; Norton et al., 2006). These findings point to a deeper affective tension: when vigilant strategies interfere with emotional attunement, well-intentioned learners may fail to build genuine connections.

One way to address these tensions is to reframe learning as probabilistic rather than prescriptive. Instead of asking, "What works?" we might ask, "What might help under these conditions and for whom?" This shift allows space for uncertainty, experimentation, and trial and error. From this perspective, mistakes are no longer signs of failure but part of an iterative process through which new understanding emerges. As the ALPs model (Chao, this issue) emphasizes, each instance of exposure to information is encoded into memory, leaving a separate trace. Learning is not a finite process. It unfolds over time through repeated contact and ongoing recalibration (Logan, 1980). It is emotionally layered and context-sensitive. Treating existing knowledge as a working hypothesis, rather than a definitive answer, helps us remain open to the possibility that we or others can be wrong. This outlook can reduce pluralistic ignorance and foster more authentic interaction (Hook et al., 2013, 2017; Joyner et al., this issue; Koetke et al., 2023; Mackey & Rios, this issue). It also prepares us to adapt as cultural dynamics

evolve—when what once "worked" may no longer be effective, or vice versa.

In short, mistake acceptance is not about indulgence or leniency. It is about creating conditions in which learners feel safe enough to try, err, recalibrate, and grow. When educators model this mindset—treating knowledge as provisional, emotions as informative, and missteps as part of the learning process—cultural competence becomes possible not in spite of failure, but because of it. To support this mindset, educators and practitioners can conceptualize mistake-making as part of the learning journey. Creating learning environments that allow for emotional safety in making and recovering from mistakes is critical. As Zhang et al. (this issue) argue, learners are more likely to stay engaged when they see that mistakes are not punished but treated as opportunities to recalibrate. This supports sustained intercultural learning. The ALPs model helps clarify this by emphasizing that affective learning is cumulative and emotionally encoded, not merely cognitive. Failure, when integrated into a motivationally supportive environment, becomes a signal for recalibration rather than a trigger for retreat.

Element 3: Learning to Learn—Affective Learning as an Adaptive Process

Intellectual humility and mistake acceptance lay the groundwork for iterative learning through trial and error. A third critical element for cultural competence training is helping individuals recognize that learning itself is an adaptive process—one that enables them to function effectively within a given environment. Learning is not only about growth and development; it is equally about addressing safety and security needs. Beyond its theoretical contributions, the ALPs model offers practical guidance for helping individuals "learn how to learn."

Some training approaches prescribe strategies primarily for majority group members, encouraging them to take responsibility for understanding marginalized groups (Zhang et al., this issue). Although this reflects a growth orientation that may be viewed positively by some, it can also trigger unintended consequences. As Rios (2022) notes, such efforts may elicit threat responses in both majority and minority group learners. Majority members may fear being labeled as racist, while minority members may feel tokenized, reinforcing feelings of exclusion. Gruber (this issue) further suggests that safety and security needs may take precedence over growth and development, especially for those with histories of marginalization. Mackey and Rios (this issue) and Griesberg et al. (this issue) emphasize that identities can be fluid or concealable. When external identity cues misalign with internal identity, this misfit can introduce emotional tension into the learning process. Rather than prescribing fixed strategies, the ALPs model urges educators to begin by teaching learners what learning is—both cognitively and affectively. In other words, we help them learn to learn.

For trainers, this means recognizing that learners enter the room with different histories and default orientations. Some may lean toward promotion focus (open to growth), while others may lean toward prevention focus (oriented toward risk management). Although the term "learning" is often associated with growth and development, the ALPs model emphasizes that it also encompasses emotionally protective practices. As Chao (this issue) illustrates through the caterpillar example, a child observes how trusted others respond to the caterpillar. If role models express excitement, the child may approach it with enthusiasm (promotion focus); if fear or disgust is observed, the child may adopt avoidance or vigilance (prevention focus). Such learning is not purely cognitive. It is affective, cumulative, and often autonomous. Gruber (this issue) and Griesberg et al. (this issue) expand on this example, noting that emotional reactions may be rooted in past incidents (e.g., fear of harmful hairy caterpillars that inflict skin damage), and that learners' hesitation may be the result of decades of socially reinforced affective associations. Without recognizing these learning dynamics, trainers may inadvertently assume promotion focus when the learners are prevention-oriented, causing efforts to miss the mark or even backfire. Thus, trainers must be attuned to diverging emotional needs and motivational starting points in the learning process.

This dynamic is illustrated in Tadmor et al. (2025). In classrooms where non-native English-speaking students anticipate being perceived as less competent by native English-speaking professors, they often disengage. Their disengagement is not due to disinterest or inability, but as a preemptive act of self-protection. The anticipated threat activates a prevention focus. What may appear as detachment is actually affectively intelligent behavior based on prior experience—an affectively conditioned decision to reduce anticipated risk of rejection. If instructors overlook this motivational frame and misread caution as lack of effort, the mismatch only intensifies. In contrast, affirming students' value, acknowledging concerns, and explicitly welcoming diverse forms of participation can help reset affective cues. As Cross (this issue) notes, affirming individual needs and self-worth can attenuate self-protective concerns and help prevention-focused individuals feel emotionally safe enough to engage in new learning. This may potentially make promotion focus more accessible.

Understanding what learning entails is also essential for helping trainers manage expectations—not only of their trainees, but of themselves (Griesberg et al., this issue). Drawing from the broader learning literature (Gruber et al., 2022), the ALPs model distinguishes between two types of learning: incidental and intentional (see Chao, this issue). Although this distinction was not a major focus of the commentaries—perhaps due to broad consensus—it is nonetheless important for practice. As noted, incidental learning refers to patterns acquired through repeated exposure to environmental experiences, often without conscious awareness. Intentional learning, by contrast, involves deliberate engagement, such as instruction or structured reflection. Over time, learning through these two routes may converge, but they differ in how affective associations are formed and how deeply they are encoded.

Cultural competence training typically relies on intentional learning, delivered through relatively short, structured sessions. These sessions often aim to revise or overwrite emotional associations built incidentally and intentionally over decades or across generations (Saw et al., this issue). From the ALPs perspective, this creates a profound asymmetry in learning. Relearning is possible, but it does not happen overnight (Chao, this issue, p. 167). Trainers must avoid underestimating the strength of prior affective learning or overestimating what short-term training can achieve. Emotional reactions learned over decades are unlikely to dissolve after a few hours, days, or weeks of intervention.

This challenge is well illustrated by the caterpillar example (Chao, this issue). Imagine a teacher who wants a child to develop an interest in entomology. If the child has learned to fear caterpillars—perhaps from witnessing someone getting hurt or from a painful personal experience—expecting immediate engagement is unrealistic (Griesberg et al., this issue; Gruber, this issue). Even if the teacher believes the subject is valuable, it is important to first recognize the child's emotional orientation and the affective learning behind it. The teacher and institution must also cultivate an environment with norms that support both exploration and safety, allowing for trial and error while affirming the child's sense of self (Cross, this issue; Tadmor et al., 2025). Progress may require clearer institutional supports, setting realistic learning goals, and, in some cases, stepping back to allow learning readiness to emerge.

The same principles apply to trainers: when promoting cultural competence, they must consider the emotional terrain learners bring into the room and adopt strategies that fit each learner's motivational readiness and lived experience. Even if learners are not ready to revise prior associations—or choose not to—the goal is for them to recognize what cultural competence could entail and understand the affective and motivational dynamics that shape their engagement.

In summary, "learning to learn" is not about prescribing universal best practices. It is about recognizing how emotional histories shape when and how people are ready to engage and creating conditions that support, rather than demand, that engagement. Learning readiness is a dynamic state informed by affective experiences: *Who listened to me before? Who dismissed me? Was it safe to be curious?* Individuals rely on these emotional cues to decide whether an interaction feels safe or worthwhile. Preparing people for intercultural engagement means equipping them not only with knowledge, but with the tools to interpret, regulate, and recalibrate their emotional responses. Cultural learning begins not with content, but with the felt sense that it is safe to learn. The ALPs model helps make these cues visible and, over time, more navigable.

Conclusion

Taken together, the eight commentaries offered both affirmation and generative critique. They helped clarify what the ALPs model is and what it is not. They identified promising directions for future refinement and application. We especially value the breadth of perspectives, from evolutionary learning to critiques grounded in historical power and social structure. This breadth underscores that cultural learning is not the domain of any one discipline. It is a complex and interdisciplinary challenge.

A central contribution of the ALPs model lies in its focus on affective and motivational orientations and their interplay with the environment. By recognizing that individuals enter intercultural situations with different affective histories and goals—some seeking growth, others managing risk—we can design strategies that are more responsive and inclusive of individual variation. Researchers and practitioners should not assume a uniform drive toward growth and development; they must consider the full range of emotional readiness, including the need for safety. For some individuals, particularly those with a prevention focus, this may involve a sense of obligation to avoid misunderstanding or relational harm. As Cross (this issue) notes, such motivations can be powerful levers for engagement when framed in ways that align with an individual's regulatory orientation. Recognizing this diversity allows researchers and practitioners to meet learners where they are, not where past research assumes they ought to be.

The model also speaks to an urgent contemporary challenge: the affective landscape of polarization. In many social and political contexts, people approach difference not with curiosity (promotion focus), but with vigilance (prevention focus). Today, many individuals are motivated more by the need to protect than the desire to connect. Insecurity and anxiety driven by prevention focus are often viewed negatively. The ALPs model situates prevention focus within a broader framework of affective learning. Vigilance can reflect adaptive responses to reality. It is often the product of accumulated emotional experience, shaped by invalidation, surveillance, exclusion, or perceived threat.

The model offers no simple solution. But with the help of the commentaries and the opportunity to expand our original argument, it offers tools: a vocabulary for recognizing emotional readiness, a framework for supporting intellectual humility, and strategies for cultivating the capacity to learn how to learn. This, ultimately, is our hope. Cultural competence is not a destination, nor a fixed trait. It is a dynamic process grounded in emotional experience and motivational context. While polarization may seem to prevail, and in many cases has become systematized, it is not inevitable. People still learn, adapt, and grow because they seek to connect, understand, and belong. The ALPs model does not assume this will always happen, but it shows how it can. By affirming agency while acknowledging constraint, and by tracing the emotional pathways through which learning becomes possible, we aim to preserve the promise of cultural competence: not as an imposition of values, but as an ongoing and evolving shared project that seeks to understand the needs of all walks of life. In divided times, it offers a path—whether from a prism of curiosity or protection—toward greater mutual understanding.

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