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Intercultural Empathy Under Mobility Restrictions: Insights from University Students in the West Bank, Palestine



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Abstract

Dominant models of intercultural competence and empathy rest on the assumption that learners are free to move, encounter differences in person, and choose their intercultural contacts. Imperiale (2021) has shown, in the context of the Gaza Strip in Palestine, that this assumption renders such models programmatically inapplicable under conditions of forced immobility. This study extends that reconceptualisation empirically to the occupied West Bank in Palestine. Drawing on semi-structured online interviews with four Palestinian undergraduates who had never travelled beyond the West Bank, this study examines how intercultural empathy is understood and enacted when encounter is structurally denied. The interviews were conducted between April and August 2024 and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Participants articulated empathy as inseparable from political recognition and material action; they described deliberate strategies, such as preparatory research, active listening and digital exchange, through which they built intercultural understanding without mobility; and one participant refused the expectation of empathy altogether, demanding it instead. Read through the Capabilities Approach and critical pedagogy, these accounts suggest that intercultural empathy is best understood not as an individual competence acquired through encounter, but as a relational capability whose distribution and expectation are politically structured. Implications for intercultural education in contexts of conflict and constraint are discussed.

Keywords: Intercultural empathy; forced immobility; Palestine; Capabilities Approach; critical pedagogy; intercultural education

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Introduction

Study abroad, exchange programmes, and international encounter are positioned as the royal road to intercultural understanding, and the mobile subject—the exchange student, the travelling academic, the intercultural trainee—is installed as the norm around which models of intercultural competence are built (Council of Europe, 2001; Deardorff, 2006; Holmes et al., 2015). Yet the capacity to travel is an unequally distributed freedom, structured by passports, borders, wealth, and political power (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2014). When intercultural empathy is tethered to mobility, empathy becomes an attribute of the privileged: something holders of strong passports acquire abroad, while those whose movement is denied—refugees, the besieged, the occupied—are implicitly framed as less open and less understanding, their immobility misread as a personal deficit rather than a political condition (Imperiale, 2021). This study examines that misreading. It does so from the perspective of those it affects. I write as a Palestinian researcher from Gaza. I was born and raised under occupation. This personal positionality shapes my study's motivation. For me, the question of what intercultural empathy means when one cannot move is not abstract. However, this argument does not rest on my biography alone. It builds on scholarship that theorises intercultural education under forced immobility. It also uses new empirical material. This material comes from a context that scholars have not often studied.

The conceptual foundation for this study was laid by Imperiale (2021), who argued that intercultural communicative competence (ICC) must be reconceptualised for contexts of restricted travel. Drawing on the Capabilities Approach and years of collaborative work with educators in the Gaza Strip, Fassetta et al. (2017, 2020) and Imperiale et al. (2021) proposed that ICC should be understood as shaped by contexts and relationships rather than solely by individual practice. This perspective also recognises restrictions on mobility, which I refer to as immobility in this study, as a site of agency rather than merely a condition of lack. This study builds on that foundation and extends it in three ways. First, empirically: it moves from Gaza, where prior work has concentrated, to the West Bank—a context of restricted but not blockaded mobility, where checkpoints, permits, and settler violence constrain movement in ways that are pervasive yet less visible in the literature. Second, in its participants: it centres students who have never travelled beyond the West Bank, for whom empathy without encounter is not a thought experiment but a biography. Third, conceptually, where Imperiale reconceptualised ICC, this study focuses specifically on empathy as the affective and moral core of interculturality. It finds not only alternative pathways to empathy under conditions of constraint, but also a contestation of the expectation of empathy itself, as participants articulate a demand for recognition rather than an offer of understanding. The study addresses three research questions. First, how do Palestinian university students in the West Bank who have never travelled understand intercultural empathy? Second, through what practices do they enact and negotiate it under conditions of restricted mobility? Third, what do their accounts imply for models of intercultural empathy premised on mobility and encounter?

The study proceeds as follows. I first review scholarship on intercultural empathy, on mobility and immobility through the lens of the Capabilities Approach, and on intercultural education in Palestine, integrating Palestinian and decolonial epistemologies that this field has often bracketed. I then describe the study's methodology, including the ethical considerations raised by conducting research with Palestinian students during the war in Gaza. I present the findings in two themes, discuss their theoretical implications, and conclude with directions for research and pedagogy.

Intercultural Empathy: Competence, Critique, and Power

Defining Intercultural Empathy

Empathy, in its most general sense, refers to the capacity to apprehend another's experience and respond with care; it encompasses cognitive perspective-taking, affective resonance, and behavioural

expression (Batson, 2009; Decety & Jackson, 2004; Hoffman, 2000). *Intercultural* empathy extends this capacity across cultural differences, where the assumptions, values, and emotional vocabularies of the parties are differently organised (Zhang & Noels, 2023; Zhu, 2011). Under such conditions, the quasi-automatic character of everyday empathy breaks down: what is required is a deliberate, effortful shifting of one's frame of reference—a conscious stepping outside one's own cultural logic to perceive a situation through another's (Bennett, 2017; Janssen, 2014). Intercultural empathy is thus more cognitively and morally demanding than its intracultural counterpart, and cultural distance increases the demand (Janssen, 2014).

Within intercultural education, one of the most influential account of where empathy sits is Deardorff's (2006) process model of intercultural competence. Deardorff, synthesising expert consensus, models intercultural competence as a cycle running from requisite *attitudes* (openness, curiosity, respect), through *knowledge and skills* (cultural self-awareness, sociolinguistic awareness, skills of listening and interpreting), to a *desired internal outcome*—an informed frame of reference shift encompassing adaptability, flexibility, an ethnorelative view, and empathy—and finally to *desired external outcomes* of effective and appropriate communication. Empathy, on this model, is not an entry requirement but a deep internal transformation that intercultural learning seeks to produce. Two features of the model matter for this study. First, it locates empathy within the individual learner, as an attribute the learner comes to possess. Second, although the model does not require mobility in principle, the research tradition it anchors has overwhelmingly operationalised intercultural learning through study abroad and physical exchange (Deardorff, 2006; Holmes et al., 2015)—a point to which I return below.

A second influential account, Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS), describes a developmental progression from ethnocentric stages (Denial, Defense, Minimization) to ethnorelative ones (Acceptance, Adaptation, Integration) (Bennett, 1986, 2017). The DMIS's diagnosis of *Minimization*—the stage at which difference is acknowledged only to be subsumed under a comforting narrative of universal sameness, rendering the dominant culture's norms invisible as human default—remains analytically useful. Yet the model sits uneasily with the critical scholarship this study draws on. Holliday (2022) has argued that stage-developmental, competence-based models risk reifying the essentialist “large culture” blocks they set out to bridge, and proposes instead a third-space methodology: a deCentred engagement with individuals' lived experience, in which intercultural understanding emerges through the negotiation of meaning between people whose identities are complex, hybrid, and irreducible to national-cultural types. I use DMIS in this study as a vocabulary for a particular failure of empathy, while adopting Holliday's non-essentialism as the study's overall stance. The tension between the two tracks is the paper's larger argument: models that locate interculturality inside individuals, on developmental ladders, are ill-equipped for contexts where the primary determinants of intercultural possibility are structural.

Empathy and Power

Intercultural encounters do not often take place between equals, and the labour of producing understanding is not shared equally either: it is disproportionately the marginalised who are expected to make themselves understood. Where an encounter involves occupied, besieged, or displaced people, it rarely avoids a steep power gradient. As a result, a recurring asymmetry emerges over who should work to be understood. Nora Berenstain (2016) calls its coercive form *epistemic exploitation*: disadvantaged people are expected to educate others about the conditions that oppress them. This labour is rarely recognised or compensated. It is emotionally taxing and made harder by the scepticism such testimony often faces. Part of the harm is reductive: the person so positioned is admitted to the exchange primarily as a witness to suffering, while the rest of what they might want to communicate — culture, humour, ordinary life — is crowded out. Within intercultural communication scholarship, DeTurk (2001) raises the corresponding doubt about empathy itself: where parties are unequally positioned,

appeals to empathy may presume a mutuality that does not exist, leaving the emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) of the exchange to fall overwhelmingly on one side.

Paulo Freire (1970/2000) argues that empathy extended from a position of power, without questioning the structures that produce inequality, can curdle into false generosity. It becomes a form of paternalism in which marginalised people are treated as objects of care rather than self-determining subjects. What Freire calls *conscientização*, critical consciousness, is the antidote: the capacity to perceive the social and political contradictions embedded in one's own position and to act against them. On this account, empathy without structural awareness can reproduce domination.

This critical strand has been sharpened by Badwan et al.'s (2026) call for education for justice, which is centered on the obligations we hold toward one another in an interdependent world rather than on the skills of cross-cultural exchange. Relatedly, Zembylas's work on the politics of emotion in education includes the pedagogy of discomfort, which asks learners to inhabit rather than resolve the unease that encounters with injustice produce. He argues that empathy in conditions of conflict cannot be comfortable and that discomfort is itself pedagogically productive (Zembylas, 2015). Birch (2022) makes a parallel argument for language classrooms as sites of peacebuilding, in which educators leverage pedagogical agency toward global interdependence and universal responsibility rather than mere communicative skills.

Limits of empathy should also be acknowledged. Perspective-taking, however genuine, does not by itself dislodge entrenched structures of power or the self-interest of those who benefit from them (Birch, 2022). And the aspiration to *fully* understand the other carries its own violence. Glissant (1997) defends the *right to opacity*: the right of the other not to be rendered transparent, not to be exhaustively knowable on the knower's terms. For Glissant, relation does not require comprehension—"understanding" etymologically implies a taking-hold—and an ethics of relation begins where the demand for transparency ends. This principle carries weight for peoples whose self-representations are systematically overwritten, a condition Said (1984) diagnosed as the denial of "permission to narrate" and Stoler (2011) as *colonial aphasia*: not ignorance of colonial violence but a structured incapacity to speak of it, a dissociation of knowledge from acknowledgement. Hammad (2024) has drawn these threads together for the Palestinian case, examining the position of the Palestinian who is perpetually asked to make herself recognisable—to educate the other, narrate her own humanity, and earn an empathy that arrives, if at all, belatedly. As will become clear, this literature speaks to what participants in this study described.

Finally, the social-psychological literature qualifies the assumption that empathy requires physical co-presence at all. The contact hypothesis holds that direct, sustained, positive intergroup encounter is the most effective means of reducing prejudice (Pagotto & Voci, 2013). However, research on mass-mediated and vicarious contact shows that indirect exposure—through film, literature, radio, and digital media—can also shift intergroup attitudes, as in Paluck's (2009) field experiment with reconciliation radio drama in post-genocide Rwanda. Such effects can be fragile and are filtered through prior attitudes, but they establish the in-principle possibility on which this study's context depends: empathy can form without encounter.

Mobility, Immobility, and the Capabilities Approach

Models of intercultural competence have been built on the assumptions that learners can move; study abroad, attend international conferences, and engage in elective intercultural contact (Council of Europe, 2001; Holmes et al., 2015). The condition of those who cannot move has remained largely untheorised

(Imperiale, 2021). Yet for a substantial share of the world's population, mobility is not a given, and any account of intercultural empathy that presupposes it is an account written for the privileged.

The Capabilities Approach offers the conceptual vocabulary this gap requires. Developed by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011), it assesses human wellbeing in terms of what people are substantively free to do and to be — their capabilities — rather than the resources they hold or the outcomes they display. Applied to migration, this yields the aspirations–capabilities framework (Carling, 2002; de Haas, 2021): human mobility is understood as a function of people's aspirations to move and their capabilities to do so within given structures of constraint. Two implications matter here. First, mobility is a capability in itself: the substantive freedom to choose where to live. This freedom has intrinsic value, not just instrumental value. It also includes the freedom to stay. Forced displacement deprives people of this freedom just as forced confinement does (de Haas, 2021; de Haas & Rodríguez, 2010). Migration, on this account, is the achieved functioning of a capability; involuntary immobility is the condition of those who aspire to move but are denied the capability (Carling, 2002). Second, the framework dissolves the binary of forced and voluntary movement into a continuum of constraint: all mobility and immobility occur under conditions that range from relatively open to almost wholly closed (de Haas & Rodríguez, 2010).

This continuum matters analytically for Palestine. The Gaza Strip sits near its closed extreme: a blockade now spanning nearly two decades has confined over two million people, and it is from this context of near-absolute closure that the existing scholarship on intercultural education under forced immobility has been written (Fassetta et al., 2017; Imperiale, 2021). The West Bank occupies a different position — not an attenuated version of Gaza's condition but a theoretically distinct one. Movement there is rendered contingent, revocable, and unpredictable by a dense administrative and military architecture of checkpoints, permits, walls, and closures, so that any given journey is possible in principle and uncertain in practice (Samman, 2021; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015). This regime intensified following the Israeli assault on Gaza that began in October 2023: the United Nations documented 86 new movement obstacles across the West Bank within six months, the tightening of some 100 pre-existing ones, and more than 1,400 access-denial incidents between October 2023 and July 2024 — a period that encompasses this study's data collection (OCHA, 2024). Participants in this study were therefore describing a deterioration of mobility around them. In capabilities terms, Gazans have been deprived of the capability of mobility; West Bank Palestinians hold it in a degraded and, at the time of the interviews, contracting form — a difference that shapes aspiration, planning, and self-understanding in its own ways, and that has received less attention.

For Palestinian scholars and students, siege, occupation, and visa refusal function as a system that excludes certain people from the face-to-face academic relations dominant models treat as normal (Fassetta et al., 2020; Imperiale, 2021) — part of what Roy (2016) analyses, for Gaza, as a political economy of de-development, in which the deliberate constriction of movement and exchange forecloses a society's capacity to develop. Nussbaum's (1997) concept of the narrative imagination — the cultivated capacity to imagine the experience of a distant other, which she places at the centre of liberal education — acquires a double edge here: it names what education can build without mobility, but also what the immobile are required to exercise constantly toward a world that rarely reciprocates.

Imperiale (2021) brought the Capabilities Approach into intercultural education, arguing from the Gaza context that intercultural competence should be reconceptualised as defined by contexts and relations rather than as an individual exercise, and that immobility itself can be agentic — a position from which interculturality is practised, not merely a lack. This study adopts that framework and asks what it yields when the outcome of interest is empathy specifically, and the context is the West Bank's middle of the constraint continuum rather than Gaza's closed end.

Intercultural Education in Palestine: Digital Encounter, Sumud, and Solidarity

A body of work—mainly produced through collaborations between the University of Glasgow and Gazan institutions—has examined how intercultural education proceeds when borders cannot be crossed. Online teacher training grounded in Freirean pedagogy has responded to the educational and employment needs of the besieged (Fassetta et al., 2017). Multilingual online academic collaboration has been theorised as resistance: a means of moving knowledge across borders that bodies cannot cross (Fassetta et al., 2020). Imperiale et al. (2021) describe *virtual academic hospitality*: embodied digital practices—sharing tea over video call, sending a colleague’s name photographed in the sand of an unreachable beach, exchanging poems across closed borders—through which care, trust, and affect are performed between “strangers” who meet online despite political violence (pp. 630, 642).

This literature is careful not to romanticise. Virtual mobility is better understood through the Arabic concept of *sumud*—steadfastness; an insistence on remaining present, connected, and active in the face of forces designed to isolate and erase (Marie et al., 2018)—than as a substitute for denied freedoms (Aouragh, 2011a; Fassetta et al., 2020). No platform compensates for the sensory fullness of physical encounter, nor transcends what Aouragh (2011b) calls the spatial violence of siege. Most critically, celebratory framings of the digital as overcoming borders obscure the fact that the borders persist offline: some participants exit virtual at will into a world open to them, while others remain confined, enfranchised only on the screen (Warner & Gramling, 2020).

Framing Palestinians’ intercultural engagement solely as digital compensation for immobility also misreads history. Palestinian political consciousness has long been internationalist. Erakat and Hill (2019) trace transnational solidarity between Palestinians and Black communities to the 1930s, through the anti-colonial and anti-apartheid movements of the twentieth century, to its contemporary renewals — most visibly the Ferguson–Gaza exchanges of 2014, when Palestinians and Black Americans facing militarised policing recognised one another’s conditions directly. Salaita (2016) documents a parallel axis between Palestinian and Native American decolonisation. These solidarities preceded the internet and exceed it: they are durable political relationships of mutual recognition among the oppressed, within which digital platforms are only the newest instrument. Intercultural empathy in Palestine is therefore not a deficit awaiting a digital remedy; it plugs into an existing infrastructure of internationalism.

Present Study

Empathy scholarship has treated mobility as background rather than as a structural variable shaping what empathy is possible, for whom, and at what cost (Imperiale, 2021). The empirical work on intercultural education under immobility has concentrated on Gaza and on educators. No study I am aware of has asked never-travelled university students in the West Bank how they understand and enact intercultural empathy. This study does so, treating empathy as a relational capability—enabled or constrained by the real freedoms available to people in specific political and material circumstances (Imperiale, 2021; Sen, 1999).

Methodology

The study, conducted as part of a master’s dissertation at a UK university (institutional details withheld for anonymised review), adopted a qualitative design within a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm, treating empathy as a meaning constructed by individuals within their cultural and political contexts. Given the political constraints on movement in and into the West Bank, all research activities were conducted remotely.

Four undergraduate students participated: all Palestinian, resident in the West Bank, and none of whom had ever travelled beyond it. Pseudonyms—Heba, Sojoud, Ahmed, and Banan—were assigned by the researcher; pseudonyms were selected to be culturally appropriate and gender-consistent with participants' identities. All participants were over 18. University students were selected because the study's focus—intercultural engagement without mobility—presupposes access to the digital and educational spaces in which such engagement typically occurs.

Participants were recruited through peer networks: as a Palestinian from Gaza studying in the UK, I accessed West Bank-based students through personal and academic connections, with initial contacts nominating potential participants. Recruitment through peer nomination carries risks of social desirability and indirect pressure to participate, which were addressed through reflexivity. The sample size reflects a deliberate prioritisation of depth over breadth within a four-month dissertation: four participants permitted extended interviews and fine-grained thematic analysis. I make no claim to saturation or generalisability; the study's logic is idiographic, and its claims concern how these participants articulated empathy, offered for their theoretical significance and transferability rather than their representativeness.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through individual semi-structured online interviews between 20 April and 30 August 2024, each lasting up to 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted via Zoom in the language of each participant's choice, Arabic or English. Three participants chose English; one chose Arabic. All were studying in contexts where English is an academic working language, and the choice was offered at recruitment with no default. I transcribed and translated the Arabic interview into English myself; as a native Arabic speaker, I translated for meaning rather than word-for-word. The interview guide covered participants' definitions of empathy and specific episodes of empathetic engagement across cultural differences; the perceived influence of mobility restrictions on university and social life. Sample questions included: "Tell me about a specific situation where you felt like you responded empathetically with a person from a different cultural background. Why did you respond the way you did?" and "How do you think your mobility restrictions might have impacted your experiences at university or in daily life?" The full guide appears in the Appendix. In the findings below, each quotation is contextualised with the question to which it responds, as far as the flow of the interview allows.

Transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). Analysis proceeded through repeated familiarisation with transcripts; systematic inductive coding using NVivo software; iterative clustering of codes into candidate themes; and review of themes against the full dataset and the research questions. Themes were constructed, consistent with the reflexive orientation of Braun and Clarke's later work. I treat the themes as interpretive products of my engagement with the data, shaped by the theoretical commitments set out above.

Positionality and Reflexivity

As a Palestinian researcher sharing cultural norms and, in part, life experience with participants, my insider positionality cut both ways. It risked interpretation through unexamined shared assumptions; it also afforded access—linguistic, cultural, and affective—to accounts of empathy under restriction that an outsider might not have elicited. Reflexivity was maintained at three stages: in recruitment, attending to the power dynamics of peer nomination; in interviewing, through ongoing critical examination of how my assumptions shaped question design and follow-up; and in analysis, through reflexive journal, supervision discussions and peer debriefing.

Ethics

The study received ethical approval from the School of Education Ethics Committee of the author's institution (reference withheld for anonymised review) and was conducted between 20 April and 30 August 2024. This period coincided with a documented intensification of movement restrictions in the West Bank, with the United Nations recording more than 1,400 access-denial incidents and dozens of new movement obstacles between October 2023 and July 2024 (OCHA, 2024). Participants' accounts therefore reflect a mobility regime in active deterioration, while the issues discussed remained a live and worsening source of stress, requiring particular ethical safeguards.

Three considerations guided the study. First, interviews addressing occupation, violence, and confinement carried a risk of distress. Participants could pause, skip questions, end the interview, or withdraw statements at any time without explanation. No participants chose to do so. Second, because participants discussed politically sensitive issues, interviews were conducted via Zoom, and recordings and transcripts were stored on encrypted, password-protected systems accessible only to the researcher. Identifying information was removed during transcription. Third, given the small sample and peer-network recruitment, pseudonyms alone could not guarantee anonymity. Potentially identifying contextual details, including institution names, localities, and specific incidents, were generalised. Before participation, all participants received comprehensive information about the study's aims, methods, risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence, after which written informed consent was obtained.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement within the interviews and the grounding of every theme in direct quotation; dependability by an audit trail of coding decisions; and confirmability by the reflexive practices described above. The study's limitations are stated plainly: four participants from one region, recruited through one network, interviewed remotely in wartime, cannot represent Palestinian students in general. The digital medium of the interviews mirrors the digital medium of much of the intercultural contact under study, which may have foregrounded online experiences over others. These limits bound the claims made below; they do not, I will argue, weaken the theoretical use to which the cases are put. A further limitation concerns language: three interviews were conducted in English, the participants' second language, and one in Arabic, translated by the author; nuance may have been lost in both directions, and no independent translation check was possible within the study's resources.

Findings

Two themes are presented. The first, *the political ground of empathy*, concerns how participants located empathy within—not apart from—the political conditions of occupation, and how they redefined it as recognition and action. The second, *understanding the other; being understood*, concerns the deliberate practices through which participants built intercultural understanding without mobility, and the asymmetrical labour of making themselves understood in return. Across both themes, the analytic thread is agency under constraint: participants did not describe immobility as an absence of intercultural life but as a condition within which they actively constructed it—while also, at times, contesting its terms.

Theme 1: The Political Ground of Empathy—Occupation, Recognition, and Empathy as Action

Asked how mobility restrictions had affected her daily and university life, Sojoud answered:

“Like any other human being, I want to walk in our streets without having to go through fifteen checkpoints and barriers or feeling like a soldier's gun is pointed at my head.”

Sojoud does not begin from Palestinian particularity but from equivalence—“like any other human being”—and then itemises, concretely, what that ordinary humanity is denied: unimpeded streets, an unthreatened body. Her account performs the double move that Said (1984) identified as the burden of Palestinian narration: to be heard at all, the speaker must first establish her membership in the human community whose values (freedom, safety, dignity) her situation violates. Empathy, in her telling, is not an exchange between cultures but a claim on universal values, made from a position where those values are suspended. The checkpoint here is not backdrop; it is the epistemic condition under which her empathy talk proceeds (Samman, 2021; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2015).

The occupation’s disruption of education recurred across the interviews. Heba explained: “We have online sessions almost every semester due to the ongoing occupation and political situation. This situation forces us to resort to online learning, which significantly impacts our daily lives.” Banan, apologising for arriving late to an online interview, said she had been in a class held online because of “safety measurements the university had to take because of the settlers’ attacks on cities” (translated from Arabic). These accounts align with the documentation of the Middle East Studies Association’s Committee on Academic Freedom, which reports that raids on Palestinian universities, movement restrictions, and communication disruptions have repeatedly forced Palestinian higher education online, as part of what the Committee characterises as systemic repression of the Palestinian academic sector (Middle East Studies Association, 2024). The same border regime filters who may enter as well as who may leave. Israeli military procedures introduced in 2022 cap foreign lecturers at Palestinian universities at a quota of one hundred, restrict the length of their contracts, and subject their entry to security discretion (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Middle East Studies Association, 2022); Birzeit University alone lost seven international faculty members to visa non-renewals between 2017 and 2019 (Birzeit University, 2019). Participants’ intercultural isolation is thus doubly engineered: students cannot easily go out to the world, and the world is administratively prevented from coming in to them.

The point for this study is not only that occupation restricts education, but that the digital spaces in which participants’ intercultural encounters occur are themselves products of coercion: online is where Palestinian student life happens *because* movement is denied. Any celebratory reading of their digital interculturality must pass through that fact (Aouragh, 2011b; Fassetta et al., 2020).

Within this ground, participants articulated empathy in ways that progressively displaced its conventional, sentimental definition. Ahmed, describing his own empathetic responses, said: “I feel empathetic to people living abroad who can’t visit Palestine. I pray for their life to be easier.” The remark is easily passed over, but it inverts the expected direction of concern: the never-travelled student extends empathy *outward*, to the diaspora locked out of return. This is empathy formed through what participants know of constraint, not through mobility; it exemplifies the relational, situated formation of empathy that the Capabilities Approach predicts (Imperiale, 2021).

Sojoud pushed the redefinition further, from feeling to action:

“Empathy should not be only with words... other people abroad can be empathetic to me as a student by helping me get an offer from a university abroad, or with supporting my applications.”

Read through the Capabilities Approach, this is a theoretical claim in vernacular form: empathy that does not convert into real freedoms—an offer, a supported application, an expanded set of opportunities—is not yet empathy at all. Sojoud measures empathy by its capability yield. Her formulation also anticipates Freire’s (1970/2000) warning about false generosity: words of concern

that leave structures untouched are the privileged party's self-regard, not solidarity. What she asks for is not charity but the redistribution of opportunity—assistance that expands her agency rather than substituting for it.

Ahmed made the political economy of empathy explicit:

“I don't think we should be empathetic to others, but they should be empathetic to me as a Palestinian.”

It would be easy to read this as an empathic deficit — a failure of the reciprocity that intercultural models prescribe (Deardorff, 2006). I read it instead as the most theoretically consequential statement in the dataset. Ahmed is observing that the expectation of empathy is unequally distributed: Palestinians are asked to understand the world while the world declines to understand them — a pattern documented in accounts of the international non-recognition of Palestinian narratives (Massad, 2006; Said, 1984). His statement is understood as a refusal of what Berenstain (2016) terms epistemic exploitation. On Berenstain's account, marginalised people face a double bind: either they perform the unrecognised, emotionally taxing labour of educating the privileged about their own oppression, or they are held responsible for the ignorance that persists. Ahmed declines both horns. He rejects the scripted role of the explicable other — the communicative position of servitude that Lorente (2018) shows can be built into the very terms of exchange — and he re-prices the encounter: recognition must precede, not reward, his understanding. Read this way, his refusal is not the absence of intercultural empathy but a judgement about its conditions of possibility: where empathy flows only one way, offering it ratifies the asymmetry. In Glissant's (1997) terms, Ahmed asserts a right to opacity — the right not to make himself endlessly available to others' understanding as the price of his own.

Ahmed's demand and Sojoud's action-orientation are not contradictory; together they specify what empathy means from a position of enforced immobility: recognition first, material solidarity second, sentiment a distant third. This ordering is what Badwan et al. (2026) argue intercultural education should learn — a reorientation from competence and communication toward justice and obligation.

Theme 2: Understanding the Other, Being Understood—Deliberate Practice and Asymmetrical Labour

If Theme 1 established the terms on which participants received (or refused) empathy, Theme 2 concerns how they practised it. Asked what empathy requires, Sojoud said: “To have empathy towards someone, I need to understand who they are, what actually happened to them, and their historical context.” Empathy, on her account, is not spontaneous fellow-feeling but historically informed understanding—an echo, again in vernacular form, of Freire's *conscientização*: the insistence that persons be understood within the socio-historical conditions that shape them (Freire, 1973), and of ecological accounts of empathy that situate individuals in socio-cultural context (Dyche & Zayas, 2001; Freedberg, 2007; Pugh & Vetere, 2009).

Three of the four participants described deliberate, self-directed practices of preparation for intercultural contact. Heba: “I develop my understanding about students from different cultural backgrounds by engaging myself with virtual intercultural programs, but before I join them, I make sure I read about them and familiarise myself with their lives and context.” Sojoud: “I do research to understand how and why people do things to ensure my interactions are respectful.” Ahmed: “I try to actively listen to their views and understand their opinions to avoid stereotypes.” These actions are concrete forms

of intercultural agency, which occur when encounters cannot be casual: because contact is scarce, mediated, and preceded by no shared physical world, participants front-load the interpretive work that mobile learners can distribute across immersion. Where dominant models treat preparation as a pre-departure supplement to encounter (Holmes et al., 2015), for these students preparation *is* the practice. This is immobility as agentic in the formation of empathy—the study’s direct empirical extension of Imperiale’s (2021) claim about competence.

Banan defined empathy differently: “Empathy is about accepting people as they are without trying to change them” (translated from Arabic). Acceptance of this kind builds the trust on which any exchange depends, and it resonates with non-dominative accounts of intercultural relation. However, acceptance alone may leave power relations untouched, and it can shade into the Minimization stage that Bennett (1986) describes, in which difference is acknowledged but then set aside without engaging the structural conditions that make some differences matter more than others (Holliday et al., 2010). The contrast between Banan’s definition and Sojoud’s historically saturated one is a finding: even within a four-person sample living under the same occupation, empathy was theorised in tension between acceptance and critical understanding.

The labour, however, ran in one direction. Sojoud, describing a virtual intercultural programme: “People were not really sure what Palestine is or where it’s located... I had to educate them.” Heba:

“I feel that the occupation steals the light from us talking about the beautiful side of my culture and my identity as a Palestinian, even though we have a very rich culture and a very beautiful homeland.”

Banan: “I feel people subconsciously connect the word Palestine with blood, with death, with a lot of concepts that are not quite positive,” adding, “every conversation we have about Palestine, it goes to the political events or circumstances that are happening” (translated from Arabic). These three accounts describe distinct layers of one phenomenon. Sojoud describes cartographic erasure—interlocutors for whom Palestine barely exists as a place. Banan describes semiotic capture—Palestine legible only through violence, its people pre-read as victims or threats. Heba describes expressive dispossession—the occupation determining, even in friendly conversation, what she is able to talk about, crowding out the culture and beauty she wants to represent. Together they specify what Stoler (2011) calls colonial aphasia as a lived communicative condition: the difficulty participants face is not their interlocutors’ lack of information but a structured incapacity to connect Palestine with ordinary humanity. Hammad’s (2024) account of the Palestinian position—perpetually narrating one’s own recognisability to audiences whose categories resist it—is here rendered in student experience.

The cost of this educative labour is stated in the study’s own theoretical terms. The intercultural encounters available to these students arrive with an unpaid tax: before empathy can be exchanged, the Palestinian participant must first establish that her country exists, then dislodge its violent connotations, and only then—time and stamina permitting—appear as an individual. Their interlocutors’ empathy, when it comes, has been manufactured by its recipients. This is epistemic exploitation (Berenstain, 2016) operating inside the digital spaces celebrated as border-crossing; it qualifies, without negating, the emancipatory readings of virtual exchange reviewed above (Imperiale et al., 2021; Warner & Gramling, 2020). Media representation plays a documented role in sustaining the asymmetry: one-sided portrayals centred on conflict and victimhood occlude Palestinian cultural and academic life (Chebbab, 2024), and such narrative environments shape what intercultural interlocutors are prepared to perceive (Crabtree-Condor, 2020; Pagotto & Voci, 2013).

Discussion

The findings can now be revisited in relation to the research questions and the theoretical framework. *How do never-travelled West Bank students understand intercultural empathy?* Not as a sentiment and not primarily as a competence, but as a political relation with three components: historically informed understanding (Sojoud, Heba, Ahmed), recognition (Ahmed, Banan), and material action (Sojoud). The sentimental core of everyday empathy talk was largely absent; where it appeared (Banan's acceptance), other participants' formulations implicitly criticised it. This ordering—recognition and action before feeling—converges from below with what critical scholarship has argued from above: that empathy severed from justice is false generosity (Freire, 1970/2000), and that intercultural education's proper successor object is solidarity (Badwan et al., 2026).

Through what practices do they enact it? Through deliberate, self-directed interpretive labour—reading, research, active listening—performed before and during digitally mediated encounters that occupation has made the default venue of their intercultural lives. This is the study's empirical extension of Imperiale (2021): immobility does not merely fail to prevent intercultural empathy; its constraints actively shape a *distinctive form* of it—prepared rather than immersive, effortful rather than incidental, and lucid about power because power is its daily medium. The capability being exercised is real but truncated: participants convert restricted freedoms into intercultural functioning at a cost mobile learners never pay, and the same digital venues that enable the practice also extract the educative tax described in Theme 2.

What follows for mobility-premised models? Three things. First, Deardorff's (2006) internal outcome—empathy as individual transformation—needs a relational supplement: whether empathy can form, and what it costs, depends on freedoms distributed outside the individual. A capabilities-informed account should treat empathy as a *combined capability* in Nussbaum's (2011) sense: internal capacities requiring external conditions for their exercise. Second, the direction of empathy-talk in intercultural education should be reversible: the field asks how learners can empathise with distant others; Ahmed's refusal asks when the demand for empathy is itself unjust, and whether the immobile may legitimately decline the role of understanding subject (Berenstain, 2016). A model with room for the right to opacity (Glissant, 1997) would treat such refusal not as a stage to be developed past but as information about the politics of the encounter. Third, pedagogically: participants' own recommendation—elicited directly in the interviews—was for empathy that arrives as opportunity: application support, institutional access and recognition. For educators, this aligns with solidarity- and justice-oriented pedagogies (Badwan et al., 2026; Birch, 2022; Zembylas, 2015): virtual exchange programmes involving students in conflict zones should budget for the asymmetry documented here—preparing the mobile side to carry more of the interpretive load, building in Palestinian self-representation on participants' own terms, and treating discomfort as pedagogical material rather than a failure of rapport.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study asked how Palestinian university students in the West Bank who have never travelled understand and enact intercultural empathy. Empathy as they live it is grounded in political conditions, practised through deliberate interpretive labour in coerced digital spaces, and measured by recognition and material consequence rather than sentiment. Building on Imperiale's (2021) reconceptualisation of intercultural competence under forced immobility, the study extends the argument to empathy and to the West Bank, and adds a finding that competence frameworks do not anticipate: the entitlement to withhold empathy, and to demand it, as an assertion of dignity under domination.

The study's scale is small and its claims are correspondingly bounded. Future research could extend the inquiry across Palestinian contexts (Gaza, East Jerusalem, the diaspora, and refugee camps, where mobility regimes differ), examine the mobile side of these asymmetric encounters, and pursue the pedagogical question directly: what would virtual intercultural programmes look like if they were designed around the asymmetries their immobile participants already understand? The larger obligation, however, is not researchers' alone. As the participants made clear, the empathy they seek is not a feeling about Palestinians but a change in what Palestinians are free to do and to be. Intercultural education that takes them seriously will measure itself by that standard.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

1. Tell me about your day today—was there anything exciting or memorable to you?
2. Describe an occasion in which you interacted with people from different cultural backgrounds. How did it make you feel? What did you learn from them? What was memorable and why?
3. Tell me about a specific situation where you felt like you responded empathetically with a person from a different cultural background. Why did you respond the way you did? What did you say?
4. In what ways have you developed your cultural understanding about people abroad?
5. Describe a time when you were at your best empathetically?
6. Describe a time when you personally didn't feel like you were culturally empathetic?
7. What are methods you think might increase your understanding and thus empathy with people from different cultural backgrounds?
8. Have you had any experiences where you either felt like you were being treated differently based on who you are? or when you had to remind yourself that maybe people are just curious?
9. On an individual level, if you were to think of students in different countries, do you think that you are quite similar to them? or quite different? and how so?
10. Does that affect how you personally view them? Or how you feel about them?
11. What is your personal definition of empathy between Palestinian and people abroad?
12. How would you explain your feelings toward people from different cultural backgrounds?
13. Do you consider yourself an empathetic person to people from different cultural backgrounds? How?
14. Have you encountered any challenges in connecting with people from cultures different from yours? if yes, could you describe one such situation?
15. What are strategies you use to overcome potential challenges that arise from cultural differences? How do you think the situation in Palestine may have influenced your experience at the university or interaction with people from different backgrounds?
16. How do you think your mobility restriction might have impacted your experiences at university or in daily life?
17. How does the political and social context, including the occupation, influence your interactions with individuals from different cultural backgrounds?
18. Do you feel your university adequately supports intercultural interactions despite mobility constraints?
19. What advice would you give to educators to better support students like yourself?