

Interpersonal Factors that Foster Emotional Intelligence among Consecrated Women Religious: A Case Study of Morogoro Diocese, Tanzania

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ABSTRACT

Women religious are consecrated to witness the Gospel through a life of sustained communal commitment, yet the interpersonal dimensions of that life remain underexplored as sources of emotional growth. While emotional intelligence (EI) research in Africa is growing, studies in Tanzania remain largely secular in focus, leaving women religious, who navigate uniquely demanding relational environments within community and ministry, as a population that has not yet been studied in this context, creating a clear contextual knowledge gap. This article, which could be the first of its kind in Tanzania, examines how interpersonal relationships within religious community life foster emotional intelligence among women religious in the Morogoro Diocese, drawing on the empathy and social-skills dimensions of Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory. Using a qualitative case study design, data were gathered through fifteen semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions involving 25 participants across seven congregations. Thematic analysis produced three themes: mutual support and empathy, dialogue and conflict resolution, and fraternal charity and emotional integration. Findings show that empathy, respectful dialogue, and fraternal care function as the very relationships through which emotional intelligence is built and sustained, while relational fractures, such as, favouritism, authoritarian communication, and tribalism, actively undermine it. The study repositions interpersonal relationship as a developmental source of emotional competence rather than solely its consequence, with direct implications for religious formation, communal leadership, and the broader literature on relational and servant leadership.

Keywords: emotional intelligence, interpersonal relationships, empathy, dialogue, fraternal charity, women religious, Tanzania

INTRODUCTION

Much of the existing scholarship on emotional intelligence (EI) treats relationships as a consequence of an already-developed capacity: individuals who possess strong emotional intelligence, the reasoning goes, go on to build better relationships. Goleman's (1995) theory offers a more reciprocal reading, identifying empathy and social skill as two of the five core competencies of EI, both of which are, by definition, relational rather than purely internal. Empathy requires another person to be understood; social skill requires another person to be engaged. This raises a question the outcome-oriented literature has largely left unexamined: can sustained relationships themselves function as the developmental mechanism through which emotional intelligence is built, rather than merely its downstream result? This article investigates that question among women religious, whose consecrated life unfolds almost entirely within sustained community relationship.

Several recent studies affirm the strength of the relationship-EI link without settling its direction. In the United States, Sánchez-Ruiz and Hagger (2023), using structural equation modelling with over a thousand university students, found that higher emotional intelligence significantly predicted communication skill, empathy, and adaptability. In Nigeria, Onyimonyi (2025) found strong positive associations between EI competencies such as, self-awareness, regulation, empathy, and social skill; and constructive conflict management strategies such

as collaboration and compromise among academic and non-academic staff. In Kenya, Kamenwa-Waweru, Kamara, and Kyule (2025) found that empathetic leadership positively influenced trust, communication, and relational engagement among NGO employees. In each case, emotional intelligence is treated as the predictor and relational quality as the outcome.

None of these studies, however, were conducted within a community structured, as consecrated religious life is, around sustained and largely non-optional daily relationship; shared meals, common prayer, communal correction, and lifelong fraternal commitment; nor did any examine whether such sustained relational proximity might itself cultivate emotional competence rather than simply reward those who already possess it. Moreover, while EI research in Africa is expanding, existing studies remain concentrated in Nigeria and Kenya; Tanzania represents a significant gap in the regional literature, and women religious within Tanzania constitute a population that has not previously been studied in this context. This article could, to the authors' knowledge, be the first empirical investigation of interpersonal relationship as a source of emotional intelligence among women religious in Tanzania, and one of very few to examine this question within consecrated community life in Sub-Saharan Africa. From the standpoint of Catholic human formation, interpersonal relationship is understood as far more than a functional outcome of maturity; it is treated as one of the primary contexts in which affective maturity is formed, tested, and deepened across a lifetime of shared community life (John Paul II, 1992; CICLSAL, 2017). This article addresses the resulting gap by examining how mutual support, dialogue, and fraternal charity within religious community function as sources, and not only expressions, of emotional intelligence among women religious in Morogoro Diocese.

A further body of literature situates empathy and relational competence within the specific context of leadership and organizational life. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2013), extending Goleman's original theory into leadership practice, argue that emotionally intelligent leadership depends substantially on relationship management, the capacity to build trust, resolve tension, and sustain collaborative engagement through empathic attunement to others. Their account of "resonant" leadership, in which a leader's emotional presence shapes the emotional climate of an entire group, offers a useful lens for understanding how superiors, formators, and animators within religious congregations might similarly shape the relational and emotional tone of community life through their own exercise of empathy and dialogue.

This leadership-oriented literature is further supported by Northouse (2022), whose influential synthesis of leadership theory identifies relational and servant models of leadership, those oriented toward listening, empowerment, and the growth of followers, as more conducive to trust and psychological safety than authoritarian or transactional models. Although Northouse's work addresses leadership broadly rather than religious life specifically, its emphasis on relational leadership as a determinant of group trust and emotional climate resonates directly with participants' own contrasts, described later in this article, between dialogical and command-based styles of governance within religious communities.

Taken together, this wider leadership and relational literature reinforces the central premise of the present study: that interpersonal competencies such as empathy and dialogue are not confined to private, dyadic relationships but are also exercised, and potentially cultivated or suppressed, within the structured relational life of institutions and communities. This provides additional theoretical grounding for examining religious community, itself a structured relational institution, as a context in which interpersonal relationship may function as a source, and not only an outcome, of emotional intelligence.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative case study design grounded in an interpretivist philosophy, appropriate for exploring how women religious themselves construct meaning from the relational experiences that have shaped their emotional lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The research was situated in the Catholic Diocese of Morogoro, Tanzania, chosen for its concentration of established religious congregations engaged in structured communal formation. A combination of quota and purposive sampling produced a final sample of 25 participants; 3 Major Superiors, 4 Animators, 4 Formators, 10 Perpetual Members, and 4 Experts serving as spiritual directors; drawn from seven congregations, selected for their depth of lived relational experience within community life (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). Data were collected through fifteen semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions comprising ten Perpetual Members, conducted within participants'

own communities, with detailed field notes supplementing audio recordings wherever consent to record was withheld.

Data were analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, from familiarization through to the definition of twelve overarching themes across the wider study, of which three concern interpersonal relationships and form the basis of this article. Interpretations were checked against participants' own understanding through member checking to preserve fidelity to their intended meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility (prolonged engagement and triangulation across interviews and focus groups), transferability (rich contextual description of the setting and sample), dependability (a consistent and documented analytic trail), and confirmability (interpretations grounded directly in verbatim data). Ethical clearance was secured from the University and the Diocese, and confidentiality was maintained throughout using congregational and role-based identifiers rather than participants' names (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

Thematic analysis of data drawn from fifteen semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions across seven religious congregations in Morogoro Diocese yielded three overarching themes concerning the interpersonal dimensions of emotional intelligence among women religious: mutual support and empathy, dialogue and conflict resolution, and fraternal charity and emotional integration. Each theme emerged from the convergence of participant accounts across the five role categories; Major Superiors, Animators, Formators, Perpetual Members, and Experts, and is presented below through a combination of illustrative verbatim excerpts and interpretive commentary that situates participants' experience within the theoretical framework of Goleman's (1995) Emotional Intelligence Theory and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory. Together, the three themes trace a coherent developmental account: that the ordinary, sustained, and largely non-optional relational life of religious community functions not merely as the arena in which already-formed emotional competencies are expressed, but as the primary context in which such competencies are actively built, practised, and deepened over time; or, where relational structures break down, eroded.

Mutual Support and Empathy

With reference to the research question, "Can you describe how relationships with other sisters of your religious community have helped you to grow in empathy and emotional understanding?" Participants consistently linked empathy to relationships marked by respect, acceptance, and genuine mutual concern. An Animator described how the absence of such relationships pushes members outward as she said:

Respect, appreciation in all circumstances and mutual care are to be appreciated. When relationships are good, we seek what is good in others rather than what is negative; If Sisters truly love one another within the community, none will go outside seeking love (Animator, Congregation A).

A Perpetual Member framed empathy as a necessary discipline rather than a natural gift as she stated:

Empathy is what each religious has to learn because without it, there's only hurting one another even unknowingly (Perpetual Member, Congregation C).

Another Perpetual Member connected empathy directly to shared emotional vulnerability as she explained:

We value each other and learn to feel with one another. We share feelings when necessary, helping each other overcome difficulties. In spite of the challenges we face, it is still so pleasing to live together in the community (Perpetual Member, Congregation C).

Beyond these personal accounts, experts observed that hidden divisions, unequal emotional responses, and a lack of reciprocity can weaken empathy and mutual understanding among Sisters, further emphasizing that

empathy requires intentional openness, emotional reciprocity, and conscious effort to overcome biases and relational barriers that may otherwise hinder genuine emotional connection (Expert, Congregation W; Expert, Congregation X).

Together, these accounts position empathy not as a trait some Sisters simply possess and others lack, but as a capacity actively cultivated, and at times consciously taught, through the ordinary friction and closeness of shared life. The experts' observations extend this picture further, showing that empathy does not arise automatically from proximity alone; where reciprocity is absent or divisions remain hidden, even sustained communal living may fail to produce genuine emotional connection unless it is accompanied by deliberate, intentional relational effort.

Dialogue and Conflict Resolution

Guided by the research question, "In what ways has open and respectful dialogue within your community contributed to your ability to manage emotions, resolve conflicts and grow in affective maturity?" Participants repeatedly described dialogue as the mechanism through which emotional tension is processed rather than allowed to fester. Illustrating this perspective, one Major Superior explained:

Moody and revengeful hearts end in conflict and internal war... To resolve conflicts, we must be able to understand the other and respect her culture, background and upbringing. Abrupt remarks and unguarded words will ignite fire in the life of others which obviously retard the growth of the sisters (Major Superior, Congregation B).

Similar views were expressed by other participants, who emphasized impartial listening, understanding the background of conflicts, and creating safe spaces where Sisters can express themselves without fear. They noted that respectful dialogue enables individuals to disagree constructively, strengthens trust, and supports affective growth (Animator, Congregation C; Formator, Congregation B).

A Formator described the practical effect of naming emotion aloud, saying:

When formees/sisters are free to express themselves openly, for example to say, 'I felt hurt when you made that comment'... they name the emotion instead of hiding it. Naming the emotion takes the pressure off, so they learn to pause, speak and take a breath before their feelings turn into reactions (Formator, Congregation C).

In a related way, another Formator linked dialogue with confidentiality, emotional support, encouragement, and confidence-building, explaining that environments characterized by empathetic listening and trust help Sisters become more aware of their emotional dispositions and develop healthier ways of relating to others (Formator, Congregation F).

An Expert, by contrast, described what happens where dialogue is absent as he shared his experience:

In two or three communities I realized, there is no dialogue. No dialogue. Only command, command, command, command... It hurts indeed. Sisters are humiliated with such commands. It does not bring sisters together but keep them far apart from the leader especially and even from one another (Expert, Congregation Y).

Read together, these accounts trace dialogue's full range of effect: as a preventive discipline against communal harm, as a concrete emotional-regulation technique taught within formation, and, in its absence, as a source of humiliation and relational fracture. The contrast between these accounts and the last is instructive; it is not dialogue in the abstract that fosters emotional intelligence, but its deliberate, respectful practice; where dialogue is replaced by command, the same community structure that could have built emotional competence instead erodes it.

Fraternal Charity and Emotional Integration

In relation to the research question, “How has the practice of fraternal charity in daily community life influenced your emotional integration and the depth of your relationships within religious life?” Participants described fraternal charity less as an abstract virtue than as a set of ordinary, repeated actions that made community feel emotionally safe. Illustrating this perspective, an Expert explained its theological grounding directly saying:

We love God, but also we need to love the neighbour. And who is the neighbour in the community? The fellow Sisters... fraternal charity opens the horizon to welcome the other (Expert, Congregation X).

An Animator emphasized its concrete, daily character saying:

We do small acts of kindness and the community becomes a safe place where everyone feels at home. By practicing forgiveness daily makes our relationships strong (Animator, Congregation C).

Similar practical expressions of love were highlighted by other participants, including forgiveness, respect for others, encouragement, shared activities, quality time, cooperation, and mutual assistance. Such practices were perceived to strengthen empathy, self-esteem, interpersonal skills, and community unity (Formator, Congregation E; Perpetual Member, Congregation A; Perpetual Member, Congregation C).

The importance of practical care was further emphasized through a vivid illustration of charity's emotional weight in small gestures. As the same Expert explained:

When one Sister is sick in the room and another sister brings her something to drink... it's not the question of duty; it is the question of fraternal love... fraternal charity strengthens the emotional bond and you feel that I am real at home” (Expert, Congregation X).

Likewise, other participants associated caring for the sick, comforting those who grieve, and forgiving mistakes with emotional growth and deeper interpersonal relationships, noting that supportive environments encourage emotional development, whereas indifference and lack of concern may contribute to emotional stagnation and relational deterioration (Major Superior, Congregation A).

These accounts converge on a single insight: fraternal charity's emotional power lies precisely in its ordinariness. It is not the scale of an act of care but its consistency and freely-given quality; the tea brought not from duty but from love; that appears to build the sense of emotional safety participants associate with genuine community belonging.

DISCUSSION

The findings across all three themes converge on a single reframing of the relationship between interpersonal experience and emotional intelligence: rather than relationships functioning merely as the product of an individual's pre-existing emotional competence, this study shows relationships themselves operating as the developmental mechanism through which empathy, emotional regulation, and social skill are built among women religious. This reframing engages directly with Goleman's (1995) theory, in which empathy and social skill are treated as core competencies of emotional intelligence; the present findings suggest that within sustained communal life, these competencies are not simply expressed relationally but are substantially formed relationally.

This developmental reading of interpersonal relationship is further consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, particularly its account of the microsystem, the immediate, sustained relational environment in which daily interaction shapes behaviour, values, and emotional response. Within Bronfenbrenner's framework, community life constitutes precisely this kind of microsystem for women religious: a bounded, repeated, and emotionally significant context of interaction through which patience, self-

control, and relational understanding are gradually learned rather than simply expressed. Read alongside Goleman's (1995) competency model, this suggests that the present findings describe not two separate processes but a single developmental pathway, in which the ecological structure of community life provides the sustained relational exposure through which specific emotional competencies, particularly empathy and social skill, are progressively formed.

The finding on mutual support and empathy corroborates Kamenwa-Waweru, Kamara, and Kyule (2025), who found that empathetic engagement strengthened trust and relational engagement among NGO employees in Kenya. However, where Kamenwa-Waweru et al. examined empathy chiefly as a leadership competency exercised downward within an organizational hierarchy, the present findings show empathy operating horizontally and reciprocally among peers in daily communal life, and, notably, as something participants described being consciously taught rather than assumed as an innate trait; a distinction with direct implications for how formation programmes might approach empathy training.

The finding on dialogue and conflict resolution corroborates Sánchez-Ruiz and Hagger (2023), who found that higher emotional intelligence predicted stronger communication skills and adaptability among university students, and Udechukwu, Ehusani, and Gichimu (2024), who found that emotional intelligence was significantly associated with psychological well-being among women religious in Nigeria. The present study extends both in an important respect: where these studies measured dialogue and communication as correlates or predictors of already-established emotional intelligence, the present findings show open dialogue actively constructing emotional regulation in real time, illustrated most clearly by the Formator's account of naming emotion aloud as a technique that interrupts impulsive reaction before it occurs. The study also corroborates Onyimanyi (2025), who found strong associations between emotional intelligence competencies and constructive conflict management strategies among staff in Nigeria; the present findings add that where authoritarian, command-based communication replaces dialogue, as described by one Expert, the same communal structure that could foster emotional competence instead produces humiliation and relational withdrawal, indicating that community life is not automatically formative but depends on the relational quality within it.

This finding is further illuminated by Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee's (2013) account of resonant leadership, which holds that a leader's own emotional and relational conduct shapes the emotional climate of the wider group. The present findings lend empirical support to this proposition within a religious context: participants' descriptions of leaders who listen, accompany, and correct with respect were consistently associated with trust and emotional openness, whereas the command-based leadership described by one Expert was associated with humiliation and relational withdrawal. This pattern aligns directly with Greenleaf's (1977) foundational account of servant leadership, in which listening and empathy are positioned not as supplementary leadership qualities but as the leader's primary ethical obligations; obligations whose fulfilment or neglect shapes the entire relational climate of the community served. Van Dierendonck (2011), in the most comprehensive academic review of servant leadership to date, found that servant leaders' empowerment of followers, expressed through humility, authenticity, and interpersonal acceptance, was consistently associated with follower well-being, trust, and collaborative engagement across diverse organisational contexts.

The present findings extend this servant leadership literature into the specific context of consecrated religious life, showing that the same relational dynamics; empathic attunement, dialogical communication, and humble accompanying, that servant leadership theory associates with follower flourishing in secular organisations appear equally, and perhaps more intensively, operative within the structured communal life of religious congregations. This pattern is consistent with Northouse's (2022) distinction between relational or servant leadership, oriented toward followers' growth and voice, and more authoritarian models that prioritize control; the present study extends this leadership literature into consecrated religious life by showing that the same relational dynamic shapes not only followers' trust in their leaders but the broader emotional competence of the community as a whole.

The finding on fraternal charity corroborates Mutuku, Asatsa, and Adibo (2021), whose study among women religious in Kenya emphasized the importance of emotionally supportive relationships for adjustment within community life. The present study extends this work by identifying the specific relational mechanism at work:

not general communal support in the abstract, but small, freely-given, repeated acts of concrete care, whose emotional significance participants located precisely in their voluntary rather than dutiful character. This finding also resonates with Parker et al. (2021), whose fifteen-year longitudinal study found emotional intelligence associated with the quality of interpersonal relationships over time; while Parker et al. treated emotional intelligence largely as a stable disposition that shapes relationship quality, the present findings suggest the reverse causal direction is equally plausible within religious life: that sustained, freely-given relational care itself cultivates the emotional stability and security later recognizable as emotional intelligence.

Considered together with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, these findings suggest that the religious community functions as a microsystem of unusual density and duration; daily, sustained, and largely non-voluntary in its proximity; within which emotional competencies that might elsewhere develop slowly or unevenly are instead continuously exercised, tested, and reinforced. This positions the present study's central contribution clearly: whereas the reviewed literature largely treats interpersonal relationship as an outcome of emotional intelligence, the findings here indicate that, at least within consecrated community life, relationship functions equally, and perhaps primarily, as its source.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations of this study warrant explicit acknowledgement. First, the sample is drawn entirely from women religious congregations within a single Catholic diocese in Tanzania, and the unique structural, cultural, and theological character of consecrated religious life necessarily boundaries the direct generalisability of these findings. The non-optional nature of communal proximity, the explicitly formational purpose of community life, and the shared spiritual framework within which participants interpret their relational experience are features unlikely to be replicated in most secular organisational settings. Readers applying these findings beyond religious contexts should therefore exercise caution and attend carefully to the structural differences between consecrated community life and other forms of institutional or professional community.

Second, as a cross-sectional qualitative study, the research captures participants' accounts of relational experience at a single point in time; it cannot establish the causal direction between interpersonal relationship and emotional intelligence with the rigour that longitudinal observation would permit.

Third, while the study could be the first of its kind in Tanzania and one of few in Sub-Saharan Africa examining this question within consecrated life, the findings from seven congregations in one diocese cannot be assumed to represent the full diversity of women religious communities across Tanzania or the wider region. Future research employing longitudinal or mixed-methods designs, and encompassing a wider geographical and congregational range, would help to establish more precisely the developmental relationship between sustained interpersonal relationship and emotional intelligence identified in this qualitative account, and to examine the extent to which the relational dynamics described here may carry transferable implications for other community-based or institutional settings.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has shown that interpersonal relationships within religious community; mutual empathy, respectful dialogue, and fraternal charity expressed through ordinary daily acts of care, function not merely as evidence of emotional intelligence already possessed, but as the active means through which emotional intelligence is built among women religious over time. Equally, the study found that where relational structures break down, through authoritarian command, favouritism, or tribalism, the same communal proximity that could build emotional competence instead produces humiliation, withdrawal, and relational fracture.

Based on the findings, the following concrete recommendations are offered:

For religious formation programmes: Empathy should be treated as an explicitly teachable relational skill rather than an assumed dispositional trait, integrated into initial and ongoing formation through structured exercises in perspective-taking, active listening, and emotional naming-practices consistent with the

formational approach described by participants. Formators should deliberately create safe relational spaces in which formees are regularly invited to name and share their emotional experience, building the habit of emotional literacy as a communal rather than purely private practice.

For Major Superiors and Animators: Congregational governance structures should embed dialogical communication as a non-negotiable standard, replacing command-based directives with regular community forums, open-door accompaniment practices, and conflict-resolution protocols that invite sisters to disagree constructively and to raise concerns without fear of humiliation. Superiors should receive specific formation in servant and relational leadership, drawing on Greenleaf's (1977) principle that listening and empathy are the leader's primary obligations, so that their governance style actively models and reinforces the emotional competencies the wider community is being asked to develop.

For communities as a whole: Small, freely-given, consistent acts of fraternal care should be treated as a deliberate formation practice in their own right, not as an incidental by-product of formal community life. Communities might intentionally schedule acts of mutual care; visiting the sick, marking personal milestones, expressing gratitude, as structurally embedded communal practices rather than leaving them to individual initiative.

These recommendations carry relevance beyond consecrated life: any community-based organisation whose effectiveness depends on sustained interpersonal engagement, including schools, healthcare teams, and NGOs, may find in these findings a transferable argument for treating empathy, dialogue, and relational care as core institutional competencies worthy of deliberate cultivation. Future research employing longitudinal or mixed-methods designs is recommended to examine more precisely the causal direction between sustained interpersonal relationship and emotional intelligence identified in this qualitative account, and to test whether the relational dynamics described here produce comparable outcomes in other cultural and institutional contexts.

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