



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

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ABSTRACT: Women religious are called to give Gospel witness to the world, not only through their ministry, but also through their very presence. Yet, like all human beings, they are not exempt from the ordinary struggles of emotion, struggles that, left unattended, can quietly weaken the very witness their vocation calls them to give. While there are limited studies done to the phenomenon understudy in religious setting, this study examined personal factors that foster emotional intelligence among consecrated women religious in the Catholic Diocese of Morogoro, Tanzania. A qualitative case study design was adopted, drawing on fifteen semi-structured interviews and two focus group discussions with twenty-five purposively and quota-sampled participants, comprising three Major Superiors, four Animators, four Formators, ten Perpetual Members, and four Experts serving as spiritual directors. Data were analysed thematically. Findings showed that emotional intelligence was fostered through four interrelated personal factors: formative experiences during initial formation, significant personal life experiences, spiritual reflection, and prayer as a means of emotional coping. The study concludes that emotional intelligence among women religious develops progressively through sustained formation, reflective engagement and spiritual commitment, rather than through a single formative event, and that interventions addressing only one of these factors are unlikely to be sufficient without coordinated attention across formation, personal accompaniment, and communal spiritual life.

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INTRODUCTION

Emotional intelligence, understood as the capacity to recognise, understand, regulate and constructively use emotions in oneself and in relation to others, is increasingly recognised as central to healthy interpersonal functioning, psychological well-being and effective leadership across diverse institutional and relational contexts (Goleman, 1995). Its value is especially evident in professions and vocations marked by sustained, high interpersonal demand, such as healthcare, counselling, education and pastoral ministry, where scholars have extensively documented its contribution to relational competence and psychological resilience. Religious life, characterised by lifelong community living, apostolic engagement and structured interpersonal accountability, places comparably high, if not greater, interpersonal demands on the person, making emotional intelligence no less essential within it.

Within consecrated religious life, emotional intelligence assumes particular significance, since women religious are called to live in sustained community, exercise apostolic ministries that require affective maturity and strong relational competence, and pursue lifelong formation toward wholeness of person (John Paul II, 1996). The Catholic Church's own understanding of human formation situates emotional and affective maturity as an essential foundation of consecrated life, not an optional complement to spiritual formation but integral to it (John Paul II, 1992), understood as a lifelong, gradual process through which a person's emotional, psychological, relational and spiritual dimensions are progressively integrated. Within this understanding, personal factors, that is,

the formative experiences, life events, reflective practices and spiritual disciplines that shape an individual from within, occupy a central place in the development of emotional intelligence.

Despite this theological and psychological significance, empirical attention to how personal experiences specifically foster emotional intelligence among women religious remains scarce. A review of the available literature located only two directly comparable empirical studies examining emotional intelligence among women religious: one conducted in Kenya (Mutuku et al., 2021) and one in Nigeria (Udechukwu et al., 2024). There may not be a comparable empirical study conducted within Tanzania; this study may therefore be the first of its kind to examine emotional intelligence among women religious within the Tanzanian ecclesial context, leaving the specific contribution of personal factors substantially unexamined within the wider East African literature.

Beyond religious life specifically, emotional intelligence has been examined across a range of professional and educational settings that offer useful comparative context. Globally, emotional intelligence has been found to increase with advanced training, age and prior leadership experience among medical students in Sweden, underscoring its importance for stress management and professional development (Bitar et al., 2023). Within Africa, a study among case team leaders in health centres in Northwest Ethiopia found emotional intelligence to vary significantly with factors such as education and work experience, with implications for team communication and decision-making (Andargie et al., 2025). In East Africa, research among in-service primary school teachers in Uganda found strong emotional intelligence to be significantly associated with lower turnover intention (Okello et al., 2025). Within Tanzania itself, a study of pre-primary teachers found emotional intelligence to be significantly associated with pedagogical competence, although this and comparable Tanzanian studies remain concentrated in educational and caring professions rather than religious life (Shaffy & Ndijuye, 2025). None of these studies, however, examine emotional intelligence within the sustained, structured, and doctrinally embedded relational context of consecrated religious community life, a gap this study directly addresses. A qualitative case study design was chosen as the most appropriate method for this study, since the research question concerns how personal experiences are subjectively understood and lived by women religious themselves, a question that requires rich, first-person accounts rather than standardised measurement. This design allowed an intensive, holistic investigation of a bounded system, namely women religious communities within the Catholic Diocese of Morogoro, capturing the complexity of participants' formative and personal experiences without manipulating variables. It was against this background that the present study was conducted to examine personal factors that foster emotional intelligence among consecrated women religious in the Morogoro Diocese, Tanzania.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was guided by Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which together provide complementary psychological and contextual perspectives for understanding emotional intelligence within religious life.

Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory (Goleman, 1995) conceptualises emotional intelligence through five components: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. Emotionally intelligent individuals are those capable of recognising their own emotional states, regulating emotional reactions, understanding the emotions of others and sustaining healthy interpersonal relationships. This theory is particularly relevant to the present study because religious life involves continuous emotional discipline, communal living and apostolic engagement, all of which demand emotional self-knowledge and disciplined emotional expression consistent with the Church's own understanding of affective maturity as a foundation of consecrated life (John Paul II, 1992). While the theory has been criticised for conceptual ambiguity and reliance on self-report measures (Mayer et al., 2004), it remains appropriate for this study given its emphasis on emotional development within relational and communal contexts central to religious life. Figure 1 illustrates Goleman's model.



Figure 1: Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Model

Note. Adapted from Goleman (1995).

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) explains human development as arising from continuous interaction between individuals and the multiple environmental systems in which they live, namely the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. This theory is relevant to understanding personal factors because the formative experiences, spiritual practices and personal life events examined in this study do not occur in isolation; they are shaped by the immediate communal and institutional environments in which women religious are formed. From the perspective of Catholic human formation, community life functions as a “school of humanity” in which affective maturity is nurtured through shared life, fraternity, obedience and mission (John Paul II, 1996). Although the theory has been criticised for being largely descriptive, with limited explanation of internal psychological processes and individual agency, it remains valuable for this study because of its comprehensive attention to environmental and contextual influences, complementing Goleman's more individually focused model. Figure 2 illustrates Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model.

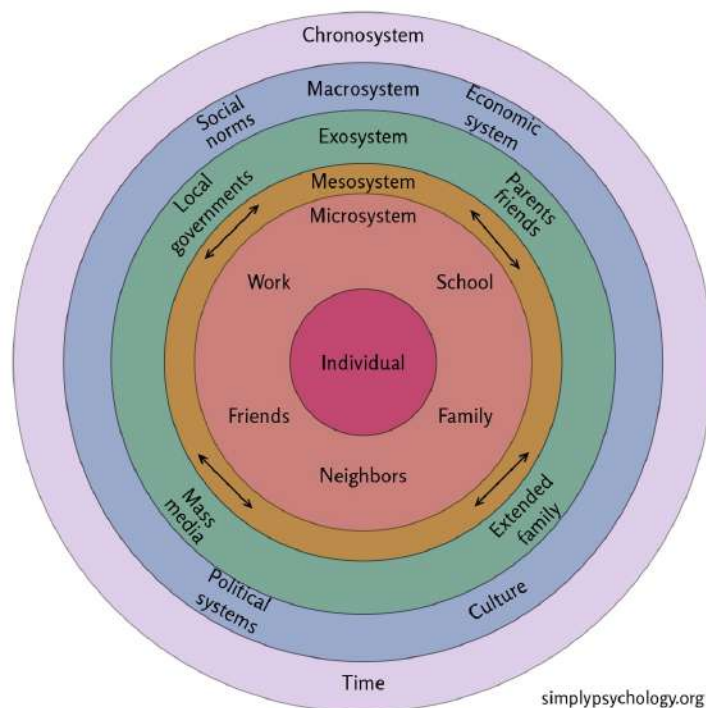


Figure 2: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model

Note. Reproduced from Guy-Evans (2025), Simply Psychology.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to explore participants' lived experiences and perceptions of the personal factors that fostered their emotional intelligence.

This approach was appropriate because it enabled an in-depth understanding of participants' meanings, attitudes and contextual factors influencing their emotional development, and supported the collection of rich descriptive data on formative experiences, personal life events, spiritual reflection and prayer (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Design

A qualitative case study design was employed, grounded in an interpretivist research philosophy and focused on the Catholic Diocese of Morogoro, appropriate for exploring how women religious themselves constructed meaning from the personal experiences that shaped their emotional lives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The design allowed an intensive, holistic investigation of a bounded system, namely women religious communities within the Diocese, capturing the complexity of participants' formative and personal experiences without manipulating variables.

Area of the Study

The study was conducted in the Catholic Diocese of Morogoro, Tanzania, chosen for its concentration of established religious congregations engaged in structured communal formation. The target population comprised women religious belonging to various congregations within the Diocese who were actively engaged in formation-related processes and communal religious life, together with selected male religious experts serving as spiritual directors and formation facilitators. Figure 3 presents the geographical location of Morogoro Region and its constituent districts, within which the Diocese and the participating congregations were situated.

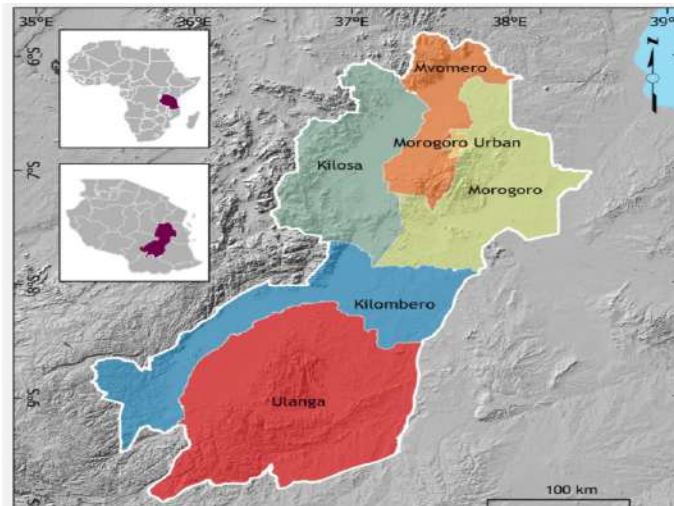


Figure 3: Map of Morogoro Region, Tanzania, Showing the Districts Comprising the Study Area

Note. Reproduced from Kacholi (2019).

Population and Sample Size

Quota and purposive sampling techniques were employed to ensure balanced and information-rich participation (Etikan et al., 2016). A combination of these techniques 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 women's congregations (labelled A–G), selected for their depth of lived relational and formative experience within community life. Experts serving as spiritual directors were drawn from separate men's congregations, distinct from the seven women's congregations under study. Seven participating congregations were sufficient to reach data saturation, since no substantially new themes emerged in the later interviews and focus group discussions, indicating that the sample size was adequate for the depth and scope of this study.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide and a focus group discussion guide, both organised into sections aligned with the study's specific objectives, including personal factors. The interview guide was administered to 15 participants comprising Major Superiors, Animators, Formators and Experts, while the focus group discussion guide was administered to 10 Perpetual Members across two separate sessions of five participants each. Data were collected through audio recording, where consent was granted, and detailed note-taking, capturing verbal responses together with relevant non-verbal cues such as tone of voice and pauses.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed, following the six stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and report writing supported by verbatim quotations. Findings were further validated through member checking to verify the accuracy and credibility of interpreted data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The analysis generated four themes: formative experiences in initial formation, personal experiences, spiritual reflection, and prayer as a means of coping.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness was ensured through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability, as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was strengthened through prolonged engagement, multiple data collection methods and member checking. Transferability was enhanced through detailed description of the study context and procedures. Dependability was maintained through consistent data collection and analysis procedures, while confirmability was established through careful documentation of research procedures, field notes and verbatim transcription, with the researchers remaining conscious of personal bias throughout interpretation.

Ethical Consideration

This study received formal research clearance from the University of Iringa's Office of the Vice Chancellor (Ref. No. UoI/R.2/1/VOL.III/156, 19th March 2026), granted under the government circular empowering university Vice Chancellors to issue clearance on behalf of the Tanzania Commission for Science and Technology (COSTECH) (Ref. No. MPEC/R/10/1, 4th July 1980). The Secretary General of the Catholic Diocese of Morogoro accepted this clearance (26th March 2026) and introduced the researcher to the Religious Vicar, the official responsible for consecrated religious life in the Diocese, who directed the researcher to ten congregations (2nd April 2026). One congregation did not consent and two withdrew after initial engagement, both accepted in accordance with standard ethical protocol governing voluntary participation; the remaining seven women's congregations fully participated.

Written or verbal informed consent was obtained from community animators and individual participants prior to data collection, who were informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their freedom to withdraw without negative consequence, including the intended academic use of the data and its dissemination through the author's dissertation and any subsequent peer-reviewed publication drawn from it. Confidentiality was observed throughout by replacing participants' real names and congregational identities with role-based descriptors and generic congregation identifiers in place of names or other identifying information.

RESULTS

Findings are presented below according to four themes generated through thematic analysis: formative experiences in initial formation, personal experiences, spiritual reflection, and prayer as a means of coping. The findings are also interpreted based on participants' verbatim accounts and Goleman's Emotional Intelligence Theory.

Formative Experiences in Initial Formation

With reference to the research question, "Can you describe significant personal experiences in your religious life that have contributed to your growth in emotional awareness and the responsible management of your emotions?"

Participants widely identified initial formation as the period in which their emotional awareness and self-regulation first took shape, particularly through experiences that helped them understand and integrate personal challenges and emotional struggles as part of their growth (Expert 1, Congregation W; Expert 4, Congregation Z). As Expert 1 narrated:

You can't believe it! I know a person who was so good, so committed yet struggled silently with her sexual feelings. One moment she involved herself with a man working in animal care. You can imagine the hygiene and comfort of a cow man and the surroundings! Everyone was shocked! Attempts to suppress human sexual feelings have cost some religious. (Expert 1, Congregation W)

These responses suggest that emotional maturity develops through formative processes that promote self-awareness, emotional integration and appropriate support, indicating that both past experiences and present formation contexts influence emotional growth among women religious.

Expert 2 illustrated a related but distinct mechanism, recalling the testimony of a Sister who said:

Father, in my formation ministry I am very careful not to hurt formees. I understand what it means to be misunderstood; what it means not knowing the new language and being unable to read during Mass. My formator did not handle me well. Thus I am careful in handling others, and I thank God for the tough experience that I passed through. (Expert 2, Congregation X)

These experiences indicate that both supportive and painful formative encounters contribute to emotional development; while experiences of rejection may leave emotional wounds, they may also foster empathy, sensitivity and a more compassionate approach towards others when adequately integrated.

Expert 4 pointed to a third mechanism entirely, describing a tension many Sisters navigate between cultural family expectations and religious poverty:

It is not as easy as relatives think. Now, think of a sister when she goes home for her holidays, where her parents and relatives expect to get something as a gift from her. On one hand, a sister herself feels the need to do that because it is within the cultural practice. But on the other hand, she is strictly bound to observe religious poverty. (Expert 4, Congregation Z)

These responses suggest that emotional growth in religious life involves learning to navigate competing personal, cultural and vocational expectations, and that adequate accompaniment is important in helping Sisters develop emotional balance and responsible discernment within such situations.

Participants further emphasised the importance of sustained accompaniment and emotional support in helping Sisters cope with personal and emotional challenges during formation and beyond, noting that patient guidance, understanding and appropriate support help prevent isolation and strengthen emotional resilience, particularly during periods of difficulty (Expert 4, Congregation Z).

These findings suggest that emotional growth is strengthened when Sisters experience continuous accompaniment and supportive relationships throughout their formative journey, promoting emotional stability and healthy vocational living.

From the perspective of human formation, the findings reveal that initial formation plays a foundational role in shaping emotional intelligence among women religious. Early formative experiences involving discipline, freedom, accompaniment and emotional support influence the development of self-awareness, emotional regulation and interpersonal maturity.

Personal Experiences

In light of the same research question as in the previous theme, "Can you describe significant personal experiences in your religious life that have contributed to your growth in emotional awareness and the responsible management of your emotions?"

Participants also pointed to significant personal experiences, both affirming and painful, in their own life histories, particularly in the ability to face criticism and learn from relational challenges within community life (Animator 1, Congregation A; Formator 1, Congregation B; FGD A). One participant explained:

To navigate safely through difficulties a sister first needs self-awareness. A religious person will encounter situations that...can wound her emotions. A few years back I was misunderstood...and reported to the authorities. Suddenly a transfer was issued being charged as rude and merciless in dealings with formees. I had no complaints because I know myself and the issues behind. If a Sister knows herself well, can withstand negative criticisms and prove one's maturity, since maturity is shown in how one faces challenges. (Animator 1, Congregation A)

These responses indicate that emotional maturity develops through confronting challenges, accepting correction and learning from difficult experiences; personal struggles and community interactions appear to strengthen resilience, emotional awareness and interpersonal balance.

A further account, describing how being understood, accepted and accompanied during moments of weakness fostered emotional security and inner freedom, complicated this picture still more (Animator 2, Congregation C; FGD B; Expert 3, Congregation Y). As one participant reflected:

I am a person who was always accepted at home and even after joining the congregation. In my mind, I did not know what it means to be misunderstood or rejected until I was rejected and misunderstood. It was a very challenging experience and heartbreaking...but gradually it humbled me, made me realise that all that I had learnt theoretically is now coming into practicality. And I learnt to be all the more open to the view of others; more receptive, positive, neutral, encouraging and free. (Perpetual Member 7, Congregation C)

These findings suggest that compassionate accompaniment and emotionally safe relationships support emotional healing and personal transformation; painful experiences, when accompanied by understanding and support, may foster humility, openness and deeper emotional integration.

Others similarly emphasised that learning from past experiences and responding constructively to challenges contribute to emotional wisdom and responsible emotional behaviour (FGD B; Expert 1, Congregation W; Expert 2, Congregation X), and the same participant later added:

Personally, I feel that I have grown emotionally by learning from past mistakes, understanding my own feelings and those of others, developing self-awareness, increasing patience and moderation in the things I want to do, especially by becoming wiser and building good relationships with other people. Clearly, history is a great teacher. (Perpetual Member 7, Congregation C)

These responses suggest that emotional growth depends largely on how individuals interpret and internalise their experiences; personal history and social realities may either strengthen or hinder emotional integration depending on the extent to which they are reflected upon and constructively processed.

The findings demonstrate that emotional maturity among women religious is deeply connected to lived personal experiences and the manner in which such experiences are processed within formation and community life. Human formation therefore requires supportive environments where Sisters can reflect openly on their experiences and receive compassionate accompaniment.

Spiritual Reflection

Guided by the research question, "In what ways have reflective practices, such as personal reflection, self-examination, journaling or life review, helped you to develop affective maturity and exercise responsible freedom in your life as a woman religious?" Participants and experts emphasised that reflective practices become emotionally transformative when they are freely embraced and undertaken with personal responsibility rather than as routine obligations (Major Superior 1, Congregation A; Major Superior 2, Congregation B; Expert 1, Congregation W; Expert 2, Congregation X). A Major Superior described how reflective practices fostered maturity most effectively when self-initiated:

Spiritual reflections, for example, examination of conscience and the annual retreats, have enabled the sisters to introspect themselves and feel the areas of growth. Through these practices...sisters' sense of maturity takes a step higher. Personal reflection helps the sisters to be other-centred as well as to look into the areas of growth. I have experienced that when they review their life on their own, they grow to be more integrated religious than when we tell them what they have to do. (Major Superior 2, Congregation B)

These views suggest that reflective practices foster emotional growth most effectively when they are accompanied by personal commitment, honest self-examination and supportive guidance, strengthening self-awareness, emotional maturity and responsible freedom within religious life.

Participants further associated silence, contemplation, discernment and regular spiritual exercises with emotional depth and inner stability (Animator 2, Congregation C; Animator 3, Congregation D; Formator 3, Congregation E). An Animator put the stakes of neglecting reflection more plainly:

An unreflective life is not worth living. Those who practice silence, reflection, contemplation, etc. produce the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Those who do not practise live depending on what the day brings; no depth, no stability, only blah-blah...It is not practised by all but, many do. I too do to some extent. (Animator 2, Congregation C)

These responses indicate that reflective spirituality strengthens discernment, emotional stability and inner depth; through silence, contemplation and spiritual evaluation, Sisters become better equipped to interpret experiences meaningfully and respond to life situations with greater emotional balance.

From lived experience and professional observation, participants associated reflective spirituality with emotional awareness, patience and healthier interpersonal relationships (FGD A; FGD B; Expert 3, Congregation Y). A further participant described the mechanism in more granular terms:

From my experience, through reflection, a Sister gradually becomes aware of her emotions such as joy, anger, jealousy or fear and understands their source and why she experiences such feelings within herself. Reflection helps a religious Sister to pause before acting instead of being driven by impulsive anger. For example, before responding angrily to a certain issue, she restrains herself, reflects and chooses a wiser response. (Perpetual Member 2, Congregation A)

These findings suggest that reflective spirituality enhances emotional awareness, patience and responsible emotional responses; through reflection and spiritual engagement, women religious become more capable of understanding their emotions, regulating reactions and sustaining healthy relationships within community life.

The findings imply that reflective spirituality is an important dimension of human formation because it nurtures self-awareness, emotional regulation and responsible freedom among women religious. Through discernment, reflection and self-examination, Sisters gradually develop the capacity to understand emotional experiences and respond to situations with greater maturity and inner balance.

Prayer as a Means of Coping

In response to the research question, “How has your spiritual engagement, for example personal prayer, meditation on Scripture, or spiritual direction, influenced your emotional integration and your ability to form healthy and meaningful relationships?”

Participants generally converged on the idea that authentic prayer produces visible emotional fruits such as peace, humility and self-control, while a lack of interior engagement limits its transformative effect. A Major Superior and an Animator similarly emphasised that prayer must be intentional and truthful to be emotionally effective (Major Superior 1, Congregation A; Animator 1, Congregation A). In the same line, another Major Superior and a Formator highlighted that Scripture-based and communal prayer strengthen emotional integration, enabling Sisters to respond to difficulties with calmness rather than impulsivity (Major Superior 2, Congregation B; Formator 2, Congregation C).

From the focus group discussion, both the Animator and the Perpetual Member underscored that prayer fosters inner peace, reconciliation and the ability to recognise God's presence in others, which strengthens compassion and emotional balance within community life (Perpetual Member 2, Congregation A; Animator 3, Congregation D). Experts further affirmed that authentic prayer produces observable fruits such as patience, humility and emotional stability, and that neglect of prayer may contribute to emotional exhaustion and weakened psychological resilience (Expert 3, Congregation Y; Expert 4, Congregation Z). This near-unanimous agreement across a sample drawn from seven distinct congregations is worth noting, since it is not the kind of agreement easily produced by leading questions or a single shared institutional script.

From a human formation perspective, prayer emerges as a stabilising spiritual resource that supports emotional integration, resilience and responsible relational living. It enables women religious to process emotional struggles meaningfully, regulate emotional reactions, and sustain inner balance in both personal and communal life.

Taken together, these four themes give rise to an emergent model illustrating how personal factors foster emotional intelligence among women religious, as presented in Figure 4.

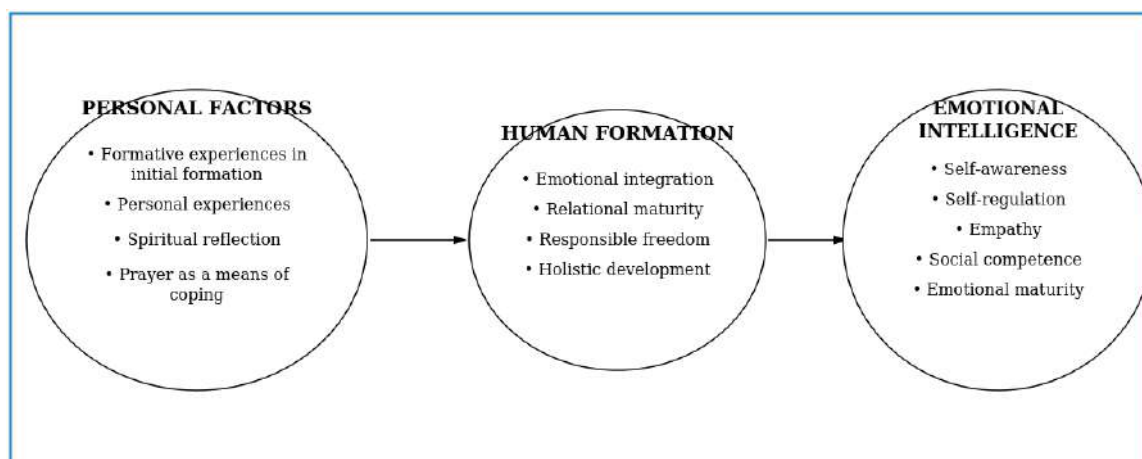


Figure 4. Emergent Model of Personal Factors that Foster Emotional Intelligence among Women Religious in Morogoro Diocese

Note. Adapted by the researcher from the emergent model of factors that foster emotional intelligence among women religious in the Morogoro Diocese, developed from study findings, 2026.

DISCUSSION

Thomas et al. (2024) found that emotional intelligence among United States university students did not reduce dropout intention directly, but only indirectly through the value students placed on their own studies. The present findings resist any comparably indirect, self-interested reading of motivation: one account of prolonged, silently carried personal struggle during formation persisted despite evident commitment to vocation, suggesting that what was absent was not motivation but a formative space safe enough for struggle to be voiced before it became destructive. Formation communities, these findings suggest, are not only sites of instruction; they are also sites where suppressed rather than integrated struggles can surface in ways that damage rather than build emotional competence.

A further finding describes a mechanism that Thomas et al.'s value-mediated model does not anticipate: emotional intelligence transmitted forward as a corrective response to its own historical absence, rather than as a downstream effect of how much one values one's own formation. This pushes the developmental account beyond a linear acquisition model, in which competence is added incrementally, toward a cyclical one, in which unresolved formative pain, when reflected upon rather than repeated, becomes the very material from which relational sensitivity for others is later built.

The tension between family gift-giving expectations and religious poverty documented in this study exposes a limitation in trait-based models such as Goleman's (1995), which locate self-regulation primarily within the individual psyche without adequately accounting for competing normative systems an individual must reconcile simultaneously. A woman religious facing this situation is not simply regulating a single emotion; she is arbitrating between two entire moral obligations, kinship duty and religious poverty, neither of which she authored and both of which she must satisfy imperfectly. Emotional intelligence within religious life, these findings argue, must therefore be theorised as a socially and doctrinally embedded competence rather than a psychological trait residing within the person alone.

Taken together, these accounts do not merely echo Thomas et al.'s finding that emotional intelligence's influence on important outcomes runs indirectly rather than directly; they extend it by relocating the mediating factor itself away from an individual's task value and toward the adequacy of institutional accompaniment, a context quite unlike the individualist, achievement-oriented setting of a university degree programme. Where Thomas et al. found the pathway from emotional intelligence to reduced dropout intention running through how much a student valued their coursework, the present findings suggest a different mediator deserves equal consideration within religious formation: the quality of accompaniment a Sister receives may itself determine whether her emotional intelligence translates into resilience, rather than her own valuation of religious life doing so alone.

Ardenghi et al. (2022) found that emotional intelligence mediates the relationship between attachment security and empathy among Italian medical students, with more secure attachment predicting higher emotional intelligence. The findings of this study are consistent with a mediating role for emotional competence but relocate its source: here, the relevant capacity was forged retrospectively, through surviving an experience of being misjudged by the very authority structure meant to protect the individual, rather than through pre-existing attachment security, a considerably more demanding route to emotional competence than secure attachment measured before adulthood.

One finding directly challenges the assumption, common in attachment-based literature, that a secure early history is a prerequisite for developing openness and empathy (De Sanctis & Mesurado, 2022). This account reported the opposite trajectory: security was disrupted rather than reinforced, and it was precisely that disruption, not its absence, that produced growth. Against any straightforward assumption that unconditional acceptance alone cultivates maturity, this finding suggests that rupture, when accompanied rather than abandoned, may be equally generative of emotional depth.

Parker et al. (2021) found trait emotional intelligence to be relatively stable across a fifteen-year longitudinal window, implying a dispositional rather than developmental character. A related finding, that history itself functions as a teacher, resists this implication: what is described is not a stable trait expressing itself consistently over time but an active, ongoing labour of reinterpretation, a discipline repeated rather than a personality trait. The present study therefore contests a purely trait-based account of emotional intelligence within religious life and argues instead for a developmental account in which emotional intelligence is continuously re-earned rather than simply expressed. Considered together, these findings suggest that personal experience functions as raw material rather than as a determinant of outcome: the same category of event, rejection, misunderstanding, correction, can either erode or build emotional intelligence depending entirely on whether it is met with reflective accompaniment.

This finding sits uneasily beside Dogham et al.'s (2025) claim that reflective thinking correlates positively with emotional self-control among nursing students in Egypt, since correlational designs of that kind cannot establish which specific conditions cause growth or under which conditions reflection fails to do so. The present findings are more exacting: reflection is generative only when self-initiated rather than externally imposed, a qualification entirely invisible to a correlational design such as Dogham et al.'s. One finding, that an unreflective life produces "no depth, no stability," amounts to a direct challenge to any formation model that treats spiritual exercises as optional supplements to religious life rather than as its structural precondition. In Goleman's (1995) model, self-awareness is one competency among five; this account suggests that, within consecrated life, self-awareness is not one competency among several but the precondition without which the remaining four cannot function at all.

The mechanism described in the findings, a deliberate pause inserted between provocation and response, is considerably more granular than Goleman himself supplies, and goes further than Łowicki and Zajenkowski's (Łowicki & Zajenkowski, 2017) claim that religiosity correlates with emotional understanding in a general Polish adult population. What that correlational study cannot show, this qualitative account can: not merely that religious engagement and emotional intelligence co-occur, but the specific reflective mechanisms through which one appears to produce the other, a stronger and more practically useful claim than correlation alone.

Gannamraju and Chembrolu (2025) theorise spiritual emotional intelligence as a largely individually cultivated capacity, developed chiefly through private practice. The present findings complicate that individualist framing: participants described prayer's emotional benefit as inseparable from its communal expression, shared Scripture reflection, communal recitation, and mutual accountability for its neglect. This suggests that Gannamraju and Chembrolu's model, while valuable, requires modification when applied to structured community life: prayer's emotional utility here is not solely a private technology of the self but a communally reinforced practice whose neglect is noticed and named by others.

The findings also complicate Mutuku et al.'s (2021) Kenyan study, which treats emotional intelligence primarily as a predictor of successful adjustment to community living. The present data raise the more provocative possibility that the causal arrow may run at least partly in the opposite direction: sustained participation in communal prayer routines may itself generate the emotional intelligence that Mutuku et al. treat as a prior, independent variable. Longitudinal designs would be required to settle this question definitively, but the present findings at minimum establish that the relationship deserves to be tested as bidirectional rather than assumed to run only one way.

Beyond this empirical literature, these findings also resonate strongly with the Church's own theology of human formation. The Second Vatican Council taught that religious formation should foster the full development of the human person, enabling a more effective response to vocation and mission (Second Vatican Council, 1965), and the present findings support this vision directly: emotional intelligence developed here not through isolated technique but through the very substance of formation, community living, spiritual reflection, and the integration of personal history, precisely the terrain formation is intended to cultivate. CICLSAL (2017) further teaches that human formation constitutes the foundation upon which every other dimension of formation is built, enabling self-knowledge, emotional balance and responsible freedom, a claim this study's formative-experiences theme substantiates directly, since supportive accompaniment during initial formation was consistently identified as the origin point from which later emotional maturity grew.

Similarly, John Paul II's (1992) insistence that authentic formation must produce an integrated personality capable of emotional balance and responsible freedom finds concrete confirmation in this study's spiritual-reflection and prayer findings, where reflective and prayerful practices were shown not merely to accompany emotional growth but to generate it. The findings on personal experience extend this theological claim further still: Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life's (CICLSAL) teaching that formation must help consecrated persons integrate their personal history, emotions and relationships is here shown to apply even to painful and disruptive experiences, rejection, misunderstanding, correction, which the findings suggest can become genuine sites of formation precisely because, and not despite, their difficulty. Emotional intelligence, understood theologically in this light, is not a secular competency imported into religious life from outside, but an authentic expression of the very human formation the Church itself has long demanded.

Considered together, both the empirical and theological dimensions of these four themes resist a simple additive reading in which formation, experience, reflection and prayer function as four separate ingredients contributing independently to a single outcome. The findings instead support a more integrated argument: personal factors operate as a single developmental economy in which each theme supplies what the others cannot. Formation supplies the structure without which experience cannot be safely processed; experience supplies the raw material without which reflection has nothing to work on; reflection supplies the interpretive method without which prayer risks remaining devotional performance rather than emotional practice; and prayer supplies the communal accountability without which private reflection risks becoming self-referential. This integrated reading is not available to studies that examine a single mechanism largely in isolation from the institutional context that, this study argues, is what allows any of these mechanisms to function at all within consecrated religious life.

These findings should be interpreted in light of the study's single-diocese, qualitative design, which limits statistical generalisation. Nonetheless, the case study approach yielded rich, contextually grounded insight into how personal factors operate and interact within this setting. Future research should extend this inquiry to other dioceses in Tanzania, since findings drawn from a single diocese cannot capture the full diversity of congregational cultures and formation practices across the country, and should consider mixed-methods designs, which would allow the patterns identified here to be tested for prevalence and statistical significance across larger samples.

CONCLUSION

Within the bounded case of the Catholic Diocese of Morogoro, this study found that personal factors, namely formative experiences during initial formation, significant personal life experiences, spiritual reflection and prayer, play a critical role in developing self-

awareness, emotional regulation and emotional maturity among women religious. Emotional intelligence develops progressively through reflective engagement with personal experiences and sustained commitment to personal growth, rather than through theoretical instruction alone. Both positive and painful experiences, when accompanied by reflection and supportive relationships, function as developmental resources for emotional maturity, while reflective spirituality and prayer provide stabilising internal resources for emotional coping and relational harmony.

Formation personnel should provide regular, structured accompaniment sessions between formators and members, dedicated specifically to emotional processing rather than academic or spiritual matters alone. Initial formation programmes should introduce concrete tools for reflection, such as guided journals or weekly self-examination templates, rather than leaving reflective practice informal or unstructured. Formators should receive specific training in accompanying members through painful personal experiences, such as rejection, transfer or conflict, so that these experiences are more likely to become occasions for growth rather than lasting wounds. Congregations should also institute regular communal moments that explicitly link shared prayer with brief emotional check-ins, reinforcing the communal and accountable character of prayer identified in this study. Church authorities and formation institutions should continue to emphasise holistic formation that integrates emotional, psychological, relational and spiritual dimensions, thereby promoting the development of mature and emotionally integrated religious persons.

Future studies should employ mixed-methods designs, combining qualitative accounts of the kind gathered here with validated quantitative measures of emotional intelligence, in order to test the relationships identified in this study across larger and more diverse samples. Future studies should also examine the relationship between emotional intelligence and vocational perseverance among consecrated persons, and similar studies should be conducted in other dioceses and religious congregations in Tanzania to broaden comparison and enhance the generalizability of findings beyond the Morogoro Diocese.

AUTHOR NOTE

This article is derived from the first author's dissertation, titled, "Factors that Foster Emotional Intelligence Among Women Religious in Tanzania: A Case of Morogoro Dioceses," submitted to the University of Iringa (2026) in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science in Counselling Psychology.

The manuscript has been reworked from the original thesis text for journal publication and narrowed to the study's personal factors objective. It has not been previously published or submitted elsewhere in its current form. The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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