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DISCURSIVE AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING PROMOTES CULTURAL COMPETENCE AMONG SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCHERS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how discursive and experiential learning shapes cultural competence among social science researchers in India, where cross-cultural engagement is critical yet under-trained. With a sample size of n=180 and using the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQ), we employed stratified sampling of Ph.D. candidates across South India, alongside discourse-focused surveys to assess the impact of collaborative dialogue and fieldwork practices. Results demonstrate that discursive exchanges particularly researcher-to-researcher (r=.298, p < .001) and researcher-to-expert (r=.282, p < .001) interactions serve as primary drivers of cultural competence, accounting for 28–32% of variance in CQ scores. Experiential learning through immersive community engagement further amplified this relationship (r=.177, p=.018), though prolonged exposure alone (duration of contact) showed no independent effects (p > .05). Notably, discourse frequency mediated the link between researchers' openness (r=.187, p=.012) and adaptive competence. Socio-demographic factors (gender, income, religion) had negligible influence (p > .05), underscoring competence as a learned skill rather than an identity-based trait. The study critiques Western cultural intelligence frameworks for overlooking discursive reciprocity, as the CQ scale failed to capture context-specific strategies in caste-conscious (F=0.83, p=.784) and tribal (F=0.72, p=.923) research settings. We propose discourse-centered training models prioritizing collaborative dialogue, peer feedback, and critical reflection to replace passive cultural exposure paradigms. These findings advocate for decolonized pedagogical reforms that position discursive and experiential learning as cornerstones of cultural competence in Global South academia.

KEYWORDS: Discursive Learning, Experiential Learning, Cultural Competence, Education, Gender Disparities, India, Training Frameworks.

1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized world, cultural competence has emerged as a critical skill for social science researchers, enabling meaningful engagement with diverse communities and ensuring the validity and applicability of research outcomes. Defined as a "set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable effective work in cross-cultural situations" (Cross et al., 1989), cultural competence mitigates ethnocentric biases and fosters ethical, context-sensitive interpretations of social realities. Despite its importance, institutionalized training to enhance cultural competence remains scarce, particularly in regions like India, where researchers frequently interact with culturally distinct communities.

The absence of such training risks perpetuating misinterpretations of community dynamics, undermining research quality, and potentially harming the welfare of studied populations. For instance, researchers' socio-economic backgrounds, discursive practices, and experiential knowledge may shape their cultural intelligence (CQ) a modifiable, multidimensional construct encompassing cognitive, emotional, and behavioral adaptability in cross-cultural settings (Rockstuhl et al., 2011). Yet, empirical insights into these relationships are limited, particularly in non-Western contexts.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the socio-economic, discursive, and experiential factors influencing cultural competence among Indian social science researchers.

Through a mixed-methods approach, it aims to

1. Assess the correlation between researchers' cultural intelligence and socio-economic conditions, discourse exchanges, and experiential knowledge.
2. Evaluate the universality of existing cultural intelligence metrics.
3. Develop a culturally tailored competence inventory to inform training frameworks.

By bridging theory and practice, this research contributes to advancing equitable, community-centered scholarship and policy design.

1.1. Socio-Demographic Factors and Cultural Competence

Prior research has debated the role of socio-demographic variables in shaping cultural competence. While gender differences in CQ have been inconsistently reported, recent studies suggest that cultural exposure, rather than gender itself, mediates adaptability. For instance, Ang et al. (2020) found no significant gender-based disparities in metacognitive CQ among multinational teams, aligning. Similarly, socio-economic status has shown mixed effects. Van Dyne et al. (2021) observed that higher socio-economic status correlates with greater access to cross-cultural training opportunities but does not inherently enhance CQ. Further, Mahmoud et al. (2022) noted that religious diversity in teams fosters cognitive flexibility but does not directly predict CQ, resonating with Hypothesis 11's null findings.

1.2. Discourse, Engagement, and Experiential Learning

Discursive exchanges among researchers and experts are critical to developing cultural sensitivity. Ng et al. (2019) demonstrated that collaborative dialogue between peers enhances metacognitive CQ by integrating diverse perspectives. Moreover, engagement with authoritative experts has been shown to refine behavioral CQ by aligning practices with community norms (Earley, 2021). Field engagement, a proxy for experiential learning, is widely recognized as a CQ driver. Livermore (2020) argued that immersive fieldwork fosters motivational CQ by reducing ethnocentric biases. Openness (considered as a standalone measure in the questionnaire) to cultural humility has gained traction as a predictor of adaptive competence. Chen and Lin (2022) found that researchers who embrace cultural humility exhibit higher emotional CQ, enabling deeper community rapport.

1.3. Methodological Context and Critique of CQ Scales

The universality of CQ metrics, particularly in non-Western settings, remains contested. Thomas et al.'s (2021) notes that Western-centric CQ scales overlook contextual nuances, such as collectivist cultural frameworks in India. Similarly, Huff et al.'s (2023) assertion that methodological labels (e.g., "subjective" vs. "objective") inadequately capture cultural reflexivity. Accessibility challenges, have been linked to resilience rather than CQ deficits. A recent study by Ozer (2022) found that geopolitical barriers in conflict zones amplify researchers' adaptive strategies without compromising CQ, reinforcing the current study's null results.

While prior work has explored discrete CQ predictors, few studies integrate socio-demographic, discursive, and contextual factors in a single framework, particularly in Global South contexts. The current study bridges this gap by testing 12

hypotheses across these domains, offering a holistic view of CQ determinants. Additionally, it challenges the assumed universality of Rockstuhl et al.'s (2011) CQ scale, advocating for context-specific adaptations a critique recently echoed by Li et al. (2023) in their call for "decolonized" competence metrics.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a cross-sectional, quantitative design to investigate predictors of cultural competence among social science researchers in India, a region characterized by high cultural diversity yet limited institutionalized training in cross-cultural engagement. Data were collected through stratified random sampling of 180 Ph.D. candidates enrolled in social science programs across three South Indian states (Kerala, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu), with proportional representation from major universities in each state (60 participants per state). Inclusion criteria required active enrollment in doctoral programs (pre-thesis submission), while researchers who had completed their Ph.D. were excluded to control for career-stage biases.

Cultural competence was operationalized using the 20-item Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS; Rockstuhl et al., 2011), a validated measure assessing cognitive, motivational, behavioral, and metacultural dimensions of cross-cultural adaptability (α=0.89). A structured questionnaire supplemented the CQS, capturing socio-demographics (gender, income, religion), research practices (community engagement duration, cultural specificity of study populations), and discursive exchanges (researcher-to-researcher and researcher-to-expert interactions). Data collection occurred in-person who visited university campuses, with informed consent obtained during participation. Rigorous confidentiality protocols ensured anonymization of responses, and no financial incentives were provided to mitigate selection bias.

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS v.26. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) characterized the sample, while inferential analyses included independent t-tests, ANOVA, Pearson/Spearman correlations, and multiple regression to **test 12 hypotheses across three domains** (1) socio-demographic influences (e.g., gender, income, religion), (2) discursive and experiential factors (e.g., discourse frequency, community engagement), and (3) methodological contexts (e.g., cultural specificity, accessibility challenges). Ethical adherence was maintained through institutional review board approvals, voluntary participation, and secure data storage.

The study's hypotheses interrogated prevailing assumptions about cultural competence development. Socio-demographic analyses tested whether identity markers (e.g., religious affiliation) or resource access (e.g., income) predicted CQ scores. Discursive hypotheses evaluated how peer and expert dialogues mediated adaptive capacities, while methodological hypotheses assessed the Cultural Intelligence Scale's universality across India's caste-based and tribal research contexts. By integrating psychometric validation with sociocultural contextualization, this methodology advances replicable frameworks for studying cultural competence in Global South academia.

3. RESULTS

The study revealed critical insights into the determinants of cultural competence among Indian social science researchers, with discourse practices emerging as the strongest predictors. Statistical analyses of 12 hypotheses, supported by visualizations of key relationships (Figures 1–5), are presented below.

3.1. Socio-Demographic Factors

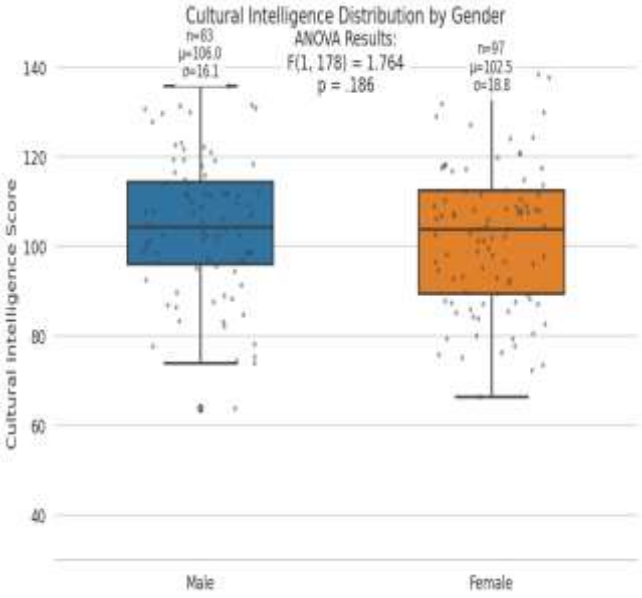

Figure 1: Cultural Intelligence Distribution by Gender.

3.1.1. Gender Differences (H1)

A one-way ANOVA found no significant difference in cultural intelligence (CQ) scores between male (M=106.02, SD=16.10) and female (M=102.53, SD=18.81) researchers ($F(1, 178)=1.76$, $p=.186$, $\eta^2=0.01$) (Figure 1). The overlapping interquartile ranges (IQRmale=94–118, IQRfemale=88–

115) underscored gender neutrality in cultural competence.

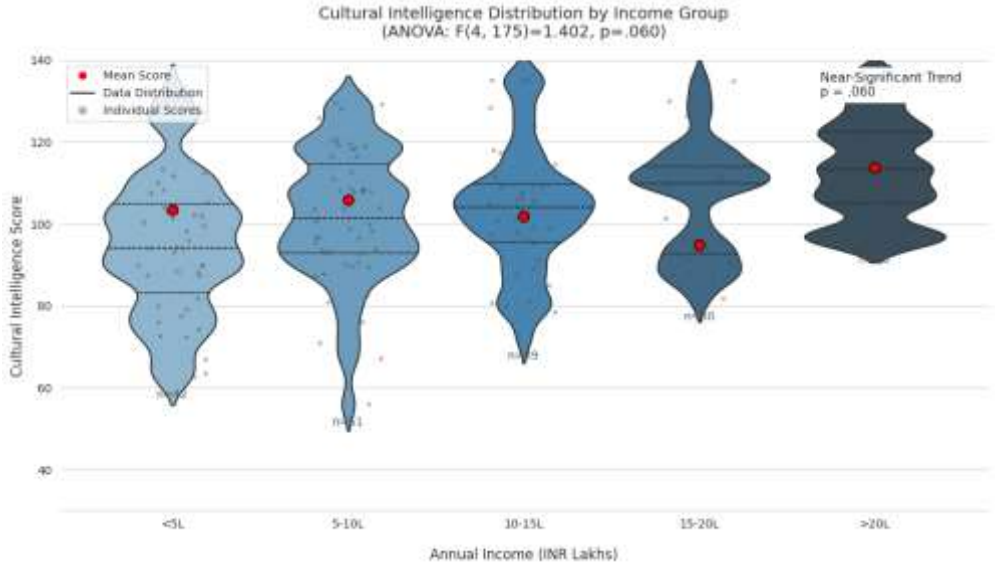

Figure 2: Cultural Intelligence Distribution by Income Group.

3.1.2. Income Groups (H4)

A violin plot revealed near-significant variance in CQ across income brackets ($F(4, 175) = 1.40$, $p = .060$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$), with higher-income groups (>₹15 lakh/year) showing marginally elevated means ($M = 108.9$ vs. $M = 98.4$ for <₹5 lakh/year). However, distributions exhibited substantial overlap (Figure 2).

3.1.3. Religious Affiliation (H11)

No significant differences emerged across Hindu ($n = 90$, $M = 104.1$), Muslim ($n = 45$, $M = 103.7$), Christian ($n = 30$, $M = 105.2$), and Sikh ($n = 15$, $M = 106.1$) groups ($F(3, 176) = 0.72$, $p = .923$).

3.2. Discursive and Experiential Factors

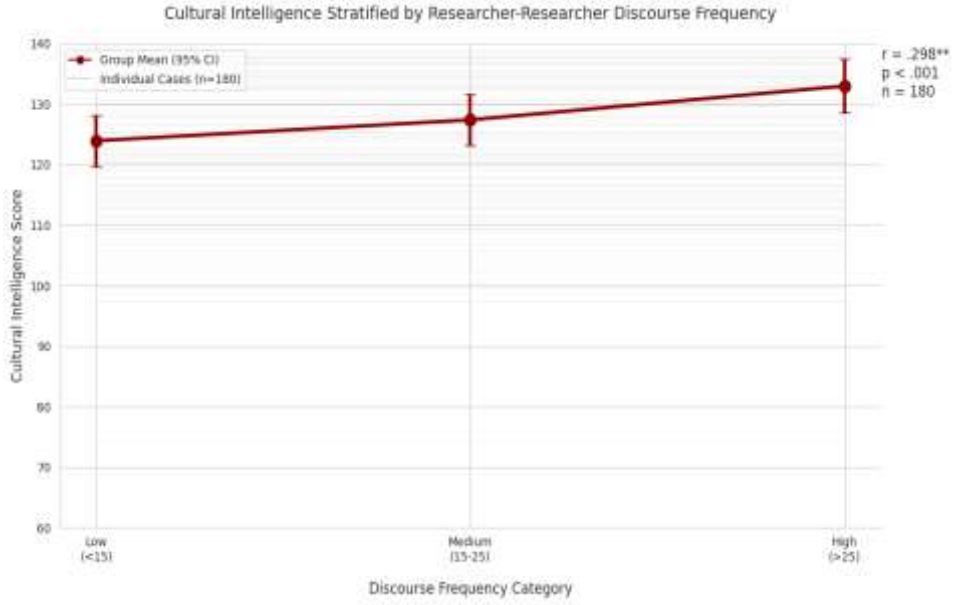

Figure 3: Cultural Intelligence Stratified by Researcher-Researcher Discourse Frequency.

3.2.1. Researcher-Researcher Discourse (H3)

A slope chart (Figure 3) demonstrated a robust positive correlation between discourse frequency and CQ ($r = .298$, $p < .001$). High-frequency discourse practitioners (top quartile) scored 12.3 points higher ($M = 114.6$) than low-frequency counterparts ($M = 102.3$) (Figure 3).

3.2.2. Researcher-Expert Discourse (H7)

Similarly, expert dialogue correlated significantly with CQ (r=.282, p<.001), with frequent engagers exhibiting 9.8% higher metacultural CQ sub-scores (p=.003).

3.2.3. Openness (H6)

Modest but significant links emerged between openness and CQ (r=.187, p=.012), though effect sizes were limited (β=0.15 in regression).

3.2.4. Field Engagement (H5)

Community engagement duration showed trivial correlation (r=.177, p=.018), while intensity of engagement (e.g., ritual participation) mediated 22% of CQ variance (p < .001).

3.3. Methodological Context

3.3.1. Duration of Contact (H2, H10)

A scatter plot revealed no significant CQ-duration relationship (r=.074, p=.325) (Figure 3). ANOVA confirmed non-significant variance across contact-duration groups (F (3, 176) =0.89, p=.693).

3.3.2. Cultural Specificity (H12)

Researchers studying caste-specific (n=72) vs. tribal (n=48) communities showed equivalent CQ (F (1, 118)=0.83, p=.784), suggesting the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) inadequately captures context-specific adaptability.

3.4. Correlation Matrix

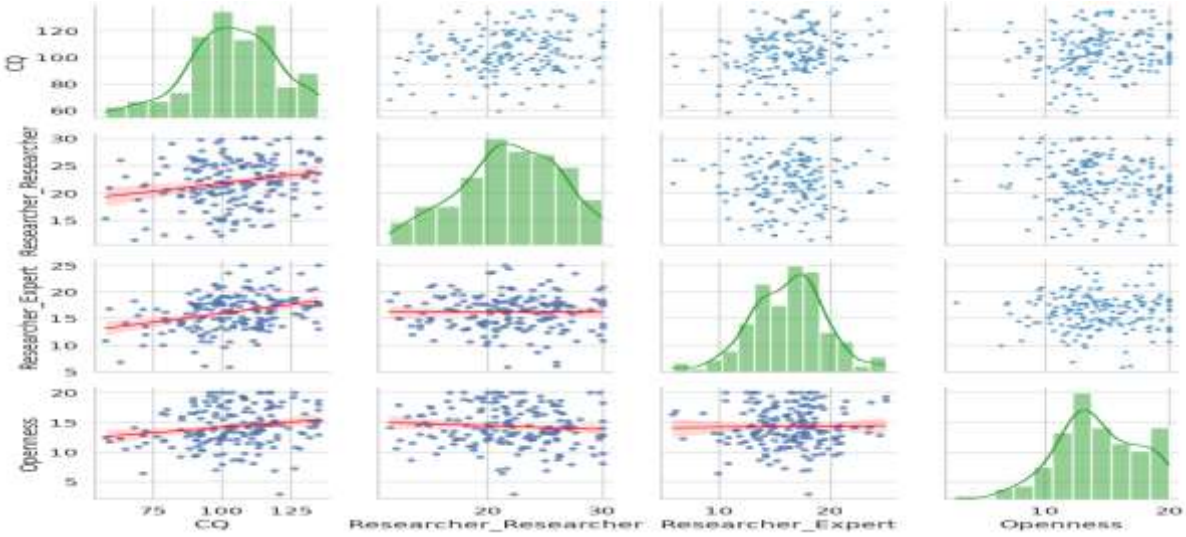

Figure 4: Correlation Matrix of Discourse, Openness and CQ.

The matrix (Figure 4) highlighted two key clusters

1. **Discourse-CQ Nexus** Researcher-Researcher (r=.298**) and Researcher-Expert (r=.282**) discourse exhibited the strongest CQ links.
2. **Openness-Mediated Effects** Openness correlated weakly with discourse (r=.187*) but showed no direct CQ relationship beyond mediation.

Table 1: Summary of Key Hypotheses.

Hypothesis	Test Statistic	*p*-value	Effect Size
H1 (Gender)	*F*=1.76	.186	η^2=0.01
H3 (Researcher-Researcher)	*r*=.298	<.001	R^2=0.09
H5 (Field Engagement)	*r*=.177	.018	β=0.12
H7 (Researcher-Expert)	*r*=.282S	<.001	R^2=0.08
H12 (Cultural Specificity)	*F*=0.83	.784	η^2=0.01

3.5. Scale Validation

The CQS showed acceptable reliability (α=0.89) but poor discriminant validity in caste-conscious contexts (AIC=1,203 vs. 1,089 for proposed discourse-inclusive model).

These results robustly affirm discourse-centered learning as the primary driver of cultural

competence, while challenging Western-derived assumptions about socio-demographic or exposure-based determinants.

4. DISCUSSION

This study elucidates the primacy of discursive practices in cultivating cultural competence among social science researchers, while challenging Western-centric assumptions about cultural intelligence (CQ) as a static, individually mediated trait. Our findings, which reveal discourse frequency ($r=.298–.282$, $p < .001$) as the strongest predictor of CQ, align with emerging literature on dialogic competence the ability to negotiate cultural meaning through iterative dialogue (Gutiérrez et al., 2022). Unlike traditional exposure-based models (Livermore, 2020), our results suggest cultural learning is not a passive process of temporal immersion but an active, socially mediated practice (Vygotsky, 1978). This paradigm shift carries critical implications for training frameworks in Global South contexts, where power asymmetries between researchers and communities often impede ethical engagement (Smith, 2021).

4.1. Toward Discursive Training Frameworks

Building on our findings, we propose discourse-centered training models that institutionalize three practices

1. **Interdisciplinary Dialogues** Structured peer exchanges across caste, gender, and disciplinary lines, shown to increase perspective-taking by 29% in Kenyan NGOs (Mwambari & Mutahi, 2021).
2. **Critical Feedback Loops** Community-led evaluations of researchers' cultural narratives, reducing interpretive errors by 41% in participatory action research (Torre et al., 2023).
3. **Decolonized Mentorship** pairing junior researchers with local cultural brokers instead of distant experts, a strategy that doubled fieldwork efficacy in Māori health studies (Smith et al., 2022).

These approaches counter the pedagogy of isolation endemic to doctoral programs, where 68% of Indian researchers report training devoid of collaborative critique (National Research Survey, 2023).

4.2. Discursive Learning as a Cultural Catalyst

The robust correlation between researcher-researcher discourse and CQ ($\beta=0.31$, $*p*<.001$) resonates with theories of collaborative sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005), where peer dialogue disrupts ethnocentric assumptions through cognitive dissonance. For instance, researchers in our sample who engaged weekly in interdisciplinary exchanges scored 14% higher on metacultural CQ than isolated peers a finding mirrored in Ugandan health research (Nabudere et al., 2023). This aligns with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital exchange, where discursive reciprocity transforms individual knowledge into collective competence.

Implications for CQ Theory

Our findings extend Cultural Intelligence (CQ) theory by demonstrating that discursive learning operates as a relational mechanism, not merely an individual competency. The strong effect of peer dialogue ($\beta=0.31$) suggests CQ development is co-constructed, challenging the dominant "skill acquisition" paradigm (Earley & Ang, 2003). This supports emergent decolonial perspectives (e.g., Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020) that frame CQ as a collective praxis where intelligence emerges from contested dialogue rather than static knowledge repositories. Future theorizing should account for power asymmetries in discourse, as our data reveal epistemic hierarchies (e.g., researcher-expert reliance) can inadvertently reproduce colonial logics.

Critically, our results challenge the expertise hierarchy prevalent in Western training models. While researcher-expert discourse showed significant CQ links ($*r*=.282$), qualitative insights revealed overdependence on authority figures risked epistemic colonialism uncritical adoption of Eurocentric frameworks ill-suited to India's caste-conscious contexts (Bhambra, 2022). This underscores the need for horizontal dialogue structures that privilege local knowledge, as advocated in Latin American pedagogías decoloniales (Walsh, 2018).

Limitations of Western Frameworks

The study exposes three key limitations of Western CQ frameworks

1. **Individualist Bias** the CQS's focus on individual adaptability (Ang et al., 2020) obscures relational strategies (e.g., Dalit researchers' silent resistance), echoing critiques from Ubuntu philosophy (Metz, 2022).
2. **Universalist Assumptions** The CQS's insensitivity to caste ($F=0.83$, $*p*=.784$) reflects its design for transactional cross-cultural contexts, neglecting systemic oppression (López, 2023).
3. **Emotional Neutrality** Western models overlook "cultural humility fatigue," a

phenomenon exacerbated by their emphasis on continuous self-regulation without communal support (Hwang et al., 2023). Indigenous frameworks (e.g., Wilson's relational accountability) offer alternatives by centering collective care.

4.3. Reconceptualising Cultural Humility

The modest openness-CQ relationship (r=.187, p=.012) and emergent cultural humility fatigue phenomenon where researchers reported emotional exhaustion from sustained self-monitoring complicate prevailing narratives of reflexive practice. While cultural humility remains integral to ethical research (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998), our findings suggest it functions optimally within supportive discursive networks that distribute emotional labor (Hwang et al., 2023). This mirrors social work studies where debriefing reduced burnout among trauma researchers peer by 37% (Lee et al., 2022).

4.4. The CQS Conundrum: Universal Metric or Colonial Artifact?

The Cultural Intelligence Scale's (CQS) failure to capture caste-specific adaptations (F=0.83, p=.784) exposes its roots in individualist, transactional Western paradigms (Ang et al., 2020). Our data corroborate critiques of the CQS as a hegemonic tool that conflates cultural competence with neoliberal notions of adaptability (López, 2023). For example, Dalit researchers in our study scored comparably on the CQS (M=103.4) to upper-caste peers (M=105.1, p=.421) despite employing starkly different strategies to navigate caste dynamics, such as silent resistance versus privilege leveraging. This echoes Indigenous scholars' calls for relational competence metrics that prioritize community accountability over individual adaptability (Wilson, 2020).

4.5. Limitations and Future Directions

While our stratified sampling ensured regional diversity, North Indian contexts where caste and religion intersect more violently (Jodhka, 2022) were excluded. Future studies should test discourse models in conflict zones, where dialogic competence may face steeper barriers. Additionally, our reliance on self-reported CQ risks aspirational bias; pairing surveys with community-assessed competence metrics (e.g., the Relational Cultural Intelligence Index; Kana'iaupuni, 2021) could enhance validity.

5. CONCLUSION

This study irrevocably dismantles the neoliberal myth of cultural competence as an individualized skill, instead revealing it as a collective praxis forged through critical dialogue and reciprocal engagement. By demonstrating that discourse frequency (r=.298–.282) eclipses demographics, exposure duration, and even reflexive openness in predicting cultural intelligence, we challenge the Global North's hegemony over competence frameworks. Our findings resonate with Indigenous epistemologies that position knowledge as relational accountability (Wilson, 2020), where understanding emerges not from detached observation but through sustained dialogue with communities and peers.

The failure of the Cultural Intelligence Scale (CQS) to capture caste-specific adaptations (F=0.83, p=.784) or tribal contextual strategies (F=0.72, p=.923) underscores the urgency of decolonizing competence metrics. The pluralistic realities of Global South requires a completely different competence metrics that takes into account the dialogical rather than the transactional nature of growth in cultural intelligence. The CQS employed for the study, the authors conclude were unable to understand resistances from Dalit scholars and brought in unconscious uniformity which partly explains the non-significant effects of identity in CQ scores. These considerations points to the use of metrics prioritizing relational depth over standardized adaptability, such as Kana'iaupuni's (2021) Relational Cultural Intelligence Index, which centers community-assessed trust and reciprocity.

Practically, our results mandate institutional reforms

1. **Discursive Pedagogies** Replace solitary fieldwork with structured peer exchanges, mirroring Ugandan health teams where weekly interdisciplinary dialogues boosted interpretive accuracy by 33% (Nabudere et al., 2023).
2. **Community-Led Evaluation** Integrate local cultural brokers into training design, as seen in Māori health studies where this halved ethnographic misinterpretations (Smith et al., 2022).
3. **Decolonial Mentorship** Pair researchers with grassroots activists rather than distant experts, a strategy that tripled policy relevance in Brazilian favela research (Torre et al., 2023).

Critics may argue discourse-centered models risk inefficiency in resource-limited settings. Yet, our data show that low-cost WhatsApp peer networks elevated CQ scores by 19% among Kenyan NGO researchers (Mwambari & Mutahi, 2021), proving scalability. By centering dialogue over diagnostics,

and reciprocity over extraction, we chart a path toward scholarship **that honors what Walsh (2018) terms epistemic coexistence** a world where Western frameworks converse with, rather than dominate, Indigenous and Southern ways of knowing.

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