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Linguistic Negotiation of Cultural Competence in Social Work: Multicultural Welfare Practice in North Sumatra

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Abstract This study examines how the Indonesian National Work Competency Standards (Standar Kompetensi Kerja Nasional Indonesia, SKKNI) shape the professional identity of social workers operating within multicultural Social Welfare Institutions (Lembaga Kesejahteraan Sosial, LKS) in North Sumatra. While SKKNI aims to standardise professional competence through technocratic indicators of accountability and performance, its implementation occurs within culturally and linguistically diverse welfare environments. Using a qualitative descriptive approach based on survey data from 207 practitioners, interviews, and field observations, this study explores how social workers negotiate intercultural communication, linguistic diversity, and community-based authority structures within a standardised competency framework. The findings show that although practitioners formally adopt SKKNI's procedural standards, they frequently reinterpret them through culturally embedded communicative practices to maintain legitimacy in welfare interactions. This negotiation produces a form of asymmetrical hybridity, where bureaucratic regulations intersect unevenly with local socio-cultural norms. These findings highlight professional competence as an interactional process shaped by sociolinguistic negotiation in multicultural welfare settings.

Keywords: *Cultural competence, Social work, Professional identity, Sociolinguistic interaction, Asymmetrical hybridity*

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1. Introduction

The professionalisation of social work has increasingly been shaped by the global expansion of competency-based frameworks promoted by international professional bodies (Hall, 2013; Staniforth & Connor, 2023). These frameworks aim to standardise ethical conduct, technical proficiency, and accountability mechanisms across diverse national contexts (Francois & Davis, 2022; Gulbas et al., 2021). However, comparative scholarship in postcolonial societies has raised critical concerns regarding the transferability of these models. Western-derived competency frameworks,

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when introduced into non-Western contexts, may generate forms of cultural dissonance by privileging bureaucratic rationality over relational and community-based welfare traditions (Schmid, 2023; Staller & Krumer-Nevo, 2025). From the perspective of indigenization, professional practice should therefore be reconstructed through local epistemologies rather than merely adapted to imported institutional templates. Within this debate, competence is increasingly understood not as a neutral technical category but as an epistemological and political construct embedded within particular cultural and institutional arrangements (Jaya, 2020; Soelton et al., 2020).

In Indonesia, this global competency orientation has been institutionalised through the *Standar Kompetensi Kerja Nasional Indonesia* (SKKNI), a national framework designed to formalise the social service workforce through certification systems, documentation standards, and measurable performance indicators. As a governance instrument, SKKNI reflects a technocratic approach to professional regulation that emphasises standardisation, auditability, and procedural accountability. While such mechanisms strengthen occupational legitimacy and align social work with national labour market regulation, policy-oriented analyses alone provide limited insight into how these competency standards are interpreted and enacted within everyday institutional practice (Wagner et al., 2025; Zaluchu, 2024). In practice, professional competence extends beyond compliance with formal indicators, requiring practitioners to engage with complex configurations of ethnic diversity, linguistic diversity, and culturally specific systems of social authority.

Social Welfare Institutions (*Lembaga Kesejahteraan Sosial*, LKS) constitute the organisational settings in which these national competency standards are operationalised. Previous studies have identified several structural challenges within this implementation process, including bureaucratic rigidity and the limited incorporation of culturally specific competencies within existing assessment guidelines (Azizurrohman et al., 2022; Hutabarat, 2023). Nevertheless, the everyday realities of welfare practice extend beyond procedural compliance with institutional standards. In practice, social workers frequently encounter situations that require culturally sensitive communication, negotiation of social authority, and the mediation of diverse community expectations. This complexity becomes particularly visible in North Sumatra, a region characterised by significant ethnocultural diversity and the continued influence of community-based normative systems in shaping authority, communication, and social legitimacy (Rasyid et al., 2024). Welfare interactions in such contexts are rarely limited to direct exchanges between practitioners and individual clients. Instead, decision-making processes may involve kinship representatives, elders, or other community mediators who participate in negotiating welfare outcomes (Asnar & Sudarman, 2026). Consequently, effective practice depends not only on technical competence but also on the ability to navigate linguistic variation, interpret culturally embedded communicative norms, and adapt interactional strategies to diverse social expectations (Tur et al., 2026). These dynamics position language not merely as a medium of communication but as a central mechanism through which professional authority and trust are constructed.

Despite the growing emphasis on cultural competence in social work literature, existing research remains limited in several respects. First, much of the scholarship focuses on macro-level debates, such as decolonisation and indigenisation (Lin, 2023), or on meso-level institutional reforms, including training systems and policy implementation (Mitchell et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2023). Second, while some studies acknowledge the role of frontline discretion (Stray et al., 2023), there is a lack of empirical attention to the interactional and sociolinguistic processes through which practitioners negotiate ethnic and linguistic diversity in everyday practice. In particular, the role of communicative strategies, discourse norms, and culturally embedded forms of address in shaping welfare interactions remains underexplored. Furthermore, limited attention has been given to how these interactional processes contribute to the formation and transformation of professional identity within multicultural institutional settings. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how national competency standards are negotiated within multicultural welfare institutions in North Sumatra. Rather than treating competence solely as a procedural or administrative category, this study approaches it as an interactional practice shaped by language, culture, and institutional authority. It argues that the encounter between technocratic standardisation and locally embedded welfare norms produces a form of asymmetrical hybridity, in which practitioners simultaneously internalise formal competency requirements while

adapting their practices to culturally grounded systems of meaning and legitimacy. Accordingly, this study investigates three central questions:

1. How SKKNI-defined competencies align with culturally embedded welfare practices;
2. How practitioners negotiate ethnic and linguistic diversity through everyday interactional strategies; and
3. How these negotiation processes shape the reconfiguration of professional identity within multicultural welfare institutions.

By situating professional competence within the interrelated nexus of language, culture, and institutional practice, this article contributes empirically to Indonesian social welfare scholarship while advancing broader discussions on the indigenisation and hybridisation of professional standards in postcolonial societies.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interactional and sociolinguistic understanding of professional competence, viewing competence not simply as a technical or procedural attribute but as something enacted in everyday practice and shaped by language, culture, and institutional contexts. In examining multicultural welfare settings, the study draws on three complementary perspectives, namely communicative competence, cultural competence in social work, and hybridity in professional identity, to better understand how practitioners navigate complex social realities. This perspective also guides the analytical focus of the study, particularly in examining how practitioners employ politeness strategies, engage in code-switching, and frame relationships with clients in everyday practice. Through this approach, the study is able to explore how competence is performed in context, rather than assumed as a fixed set of skills, and how interactional adjustments become central to effective engagement in culturally diverse environments.

2.1. Communicative Competence and Sociolinguistic Interaction

This study adopts an interactional and sociolinguistic perspective in understanding professional competence as a socially situated practice. The concept of communicative competence, initially proposed by Hymes (1972) and further developed in intercultural contexts by Byram (1997), emphasises that effective communication involves not only linguistic accuracy but also the ability to adapt language use to social norms and cultural expectations. From a sociolinguistic perspective, communication functions as a form of social action through which meaning and legitimacy are negotiated (Blommaert, 2010; Rampton, 2006).

In multicultural welfare settings, practitioners must navigate diverse linguistic repertoires and culturally embedded communication norms. Strategies such as tone modulation, code-switching, and indirectness can be understood through the lens of communication accommodation theory (Giles, 1973; Giles & Coupland, 1991) and politeness theory (Leech, 2014). In addition, the use of metaphorical expressions and indirect directives has been identified as a key sociolinguistic strategy in shaping audience interpretation and guiding interaction in public communication contexts (Al-Shboul et al., 2025). These interactional practices play a crucial role in shaping trust and influencing the acceptance of interventions. Furthermore, identity is not treated as fixed but is interactionally constructed through everyday encounters (Goffman, 1959).

2.2. Cultural Competence in Social Work

Cultural competence is conceptualised as the ability to engage effectively with culturally diverse communities through context-sensitive and adaptive practices. This perspective aligns with intercultural communication frameworks that emphasise the integration of linguistic and cultural knowledge in interaction (Byram, 1997; Kramsch, 1998). In this study, cultural competence is embedded within the Knowledge–Skills–Attitudes (KSA) framework (SKKNI social work competency indicators), but it is understood as enacted through situated practice rather than merely possessed as an individual attribute.

In sociolinguistic terms, cultural diversity involves not only demographic variation but also differences in communicative norms, value systems, and social organisation (Blommaert, 2010). Therefore, standardised competency frameworks such as SKKNI must be interpreted and adapted within specific cultural contexts. Empirical studies in Indonesian social work and related human service contexts consistently highlight a gap between formal competency standards and on-the-ground realities, underscoring the need for contextually grounded competence that reflects local practice, cultural norms, and resource constraints (Nugroho et al., 2022; Pardede & Dewanti, 2022; Purwati et al., 2025; Thamrin et al., 2024). Across these studies, there is a recurring observation that institutional frameworks such as training systems, supervision mechanisms, and policy guidelines tend to prioritise standardized and decontextualized competencies, often overlooking the adaptive strategies employed by frontline practitioners in responding to diverse client needs and limited resources (Purwati et al., 2025; Sikki & Ali, 2024).

Further empirical evidence from adjacent fields reinforces this structural misalignment. For instance, research on higher education curriculum development in Indonesia reveals tensions between maintaining disciplinary rigor and integrating stakeholder perspectives to better reflect labour market demands and sociocultural realities (Hidayah et al., 2021). Similarly, studies in language education and teacher preparation demonstrate that culturally responsive and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)-oriented approaches require a reconceptualization of knowledge and competence frameworks to align with Indonesia's pluralistic and multilingual context (Sakhiyya et al., 2018; Zein et al., 2020). Collectively, these findings suggest that professional competence cannot be treated as a universal or static construct but must be continuously negotiated and adapted within specific socio-cultural settings.

2.3. Professional Identity and Hybridity

Professional identity in Indonesian social work and related practice domains emerges as a dynamic, hybrid construct forged at the intersection of formal institutional standards and locally embedded cultural systems. Building on the notion that identity is socially constructed and reshaped through interaction, discourse, and positioning (Goffman, 1959; Hall, 1996) and the street-level bureaucracy lens that foregrounds frontline discretion within policy contexts (Lipsky, 1980), the empirical Indonesian literature consistently shows practitioners negotiating competing demands, from mandated competencies and accreditation regimes to community expectations, resource constraints, and diverse client contexts. This hybridity is evident in studies that document frontline workers translating abstract professional standards into situated practices, adapting to local sociocultural realities, and leveraging informal networks and mentoring to bridge gaps between policy rhetoric and day-to-day service delivery (Aldrich & Rudman, 2019; Johansson, 2024; Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018; Thomann et al., 2023).

Reviews of street-level practice across public management, social policy, and social work further indicate that professionalism and discretion are renegotiated in hybrid systems where market, state, and civil society pressures converge, producing nuanced identity formations among social workers, health professionals, and educators alike (Marienfeldt, 2024; Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018; Thomann et al., 2018; Thomann et al., 2023). Empirical syntheses in Indonesian higher education and teacher preparation likewise reveal tensions between maintaining a "scientific core" and incorporating stakeholder voices to reflect local realities, signaling identity work that orients professionals toward culturally responsive, contextually grounded practice rather than universal, decontextualized norms (Hidayah et al., 2021; Sakhiyya et al., 2018; Tobing et al., 2023; Zein et al., 2020). Collectively, these strands converge on the view that professional identity is a perpetually evolving, hybridized project a negotiation mediated by policy frameworks, organizational cultures, and cultural expectations requiring structural supports such as participatory curriculum design, localized assessment, and practitioner-informed competency development to sustain legitimacy and effectiveness in practice (Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018; Thomann et al., 2018).

2.4. Integrative Analytical Framework

The integration of communicative competence, cultural competence, and hybridity theory provides a coherent analytical framework for examining how professional competence is enacted in multicultural

welfare settings. Rather than treating these perspectives as separate domains, this study positions them as interconnected layers of analysis (Mitchell et al., 2021).

Communicative competence operates at the micro level of interaction, focusing on how language and discourse shape everyday welfare encounters. Cultural competence functions at the meso level, capturing how practitioners interpret and adapt to culturally embedded norms and social structures (Wang et al., 2023). Hybridity theory operates at the macro-interpretive level, explaining how these interactional and contextual processes contribute to the formation of hybrid professional identities within institutional frameworks (Akhyar et al., 2025). Together, these perspectives allow for a multidimensional analysis of competence as an interactional, cultural, and institutional phenomenon. This integrated framework not only provides conceptual grounding but also guides the analytical process by linking specific dimensions of the data to corresponding theoretical constructs. For instance, interactional strategies identified in the data are interpreted through communicative competence, culturally adaptive practices are analysed through the lens of cultural competence, and identity negotiations are examined using hybridity theory.

3. Methodology

This study employed a descriptive–prescriptive qualitative research design. The descriptive dimension aimed to examine how SKKNI is implemented by social work practitioners in multicultural service environments in North Sumatra. The prescriptive dimension aims to formulate context-sensitive recommendations to strengthen culturally adaptive competency practices.

Although a structured questionnaire was utilized, the analysis relied on descriptive percentage distributions to summarize general tendencies in competency implementation. These descriptive summaries were used to support qualitative interpretation rather than to generate inferential statistical claims. Accordingly, the study does not adopt a mixed-methods design, but a qualitative approach supplemented by descriptive statistical summaries for analytical clarity. Given that the study's argument centers on ethnolinguistic plurality, particular attention was paid to how institutional and contextual diversity within the sample was accounted for analytically. The study examined variations across institutional type, geographic location, and reported multicultural service experiences.

3.1. Participants

This research was conducted in Sumatera Utara, a province known for its multiethnic community composition, such as Batak Toba, Mandailing, Karo, Melayu, Nias, Javanese, Minangkabau, and Chinese. This sociocultural heterogeneity provides a relevant context for examining the adaptability of nationally standardized social work competencies in multicultural practice environments.

About 207 participants are social work practitioners affiliated with LKS. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure substantive exposure to competency implementation in diverse service contexts is captured as per the following criteria: (1) active involvement in direct service delivery, (2) a minimum of one year of field experience, and (3) formal affiliation with a registered LKS.

To account for institutional diversity, respondents were drawn from LKS operating in different service domains (e.g., child welfare, disability services, poverty alleviation, rehabilitation) and from varied geographic settings. While the study does not statistically disaggregate findings by ethnicity or linguistic background, analytical attention was given to how practitioners described culturally specific cases, language negotiation, and community-based interaction norms. This approach allows examination of pluralistic practice environments without reducing competence to fixed ethnic categories.

In addition to the survey sample, a total of 20 qualitative informants were recruited separately through purposive and snowball sampling to provide in-depth insights into competency implementation processes across diverse institutional and cultural contexts. Sampling was continued until thematic saturation was achieved. These included heads of LKS institutions, senior practitioners, and actors directly involved in competency implementation processes. The inclusion of both managerial and

frontline perspectives strengthened contextual depth and allowed examination of institutional variation in governance and practice.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Survey

A survey instrument was developed based on SKKNI social work competency indicators, focusing on three core dimensions: Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSA) (see Appendix). While SKKNI formally organises competence within this tripartite structure, this study extends the framework by treating communicative competence in multicultural settings as inherently cross-cutting across all three domains. In this sense, knowledge, skills, and attitudes are not treated as separate categories, but as interrelated components that are enacted through everyday interaction.

Drawing on sociolinguistic theory and the concept of communicative competence (Hymes, 1972), linguistic mediation was operationalised across the KSA dimensions. Knowledge refers to awareness of culturally specific norms and interactional expectations; skills refer to the ability to adapt communication strategies in practice; and attitudes refer to reflexive orientation and sensitivity toward cultural and relational contexts. To make this operationalisation explicit, each survey item was categorised according to its dominant KSA dimension.

The survey consisted of six sections, each designed to capture a different aspect of professional competence in culturally plural welfare contexts. Section A examined practitioners' understanding and perceived applicability of SKKNI standards, particularly in relation to cultural diversity and field realities. Section B focused on linguistic adaptation in cross-ethnic interactions, capturing how practitioners adjust language use in practice. Section C explored the integration of local cultural values into intervention strategies, including the use of kinship systems and community-based norms. Section D addressed religious sensitivity as part of professional engagement, while Section E examined how certification shapes practitioners' sense of professional identity. Finally, Section F investigated how practitioners negotiate hybrid identities when balancing formal institutional expectations with local cultural demands.

The survey employed standardised three-point Likert-type response formats adapted to the nature of each construct. Perceptual items were measured using an agreement scale (Agree, Neutral, Disagree), while behavioural items were assessed using frequency-based scales (Often, Sometimes, Rarely). Although response labels differed, all items represented ordinal gradations of intensity or frequency, ensuring comparability across indicators. The instrument underwent expert validation and internal consistency testing, yielding a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient above 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability. Survey findings were analysed using descriptive percentage distributions and interpreted alongside qualitative data to retain contextual nuance, particularly in relation to cultural negotiation, linguistic mediation, and community-based authority structures.

3.2.2. Interview

The study employed a semi-structured interview guide designed to explore communicative practices in multicultural social work contexts. The interview questions were theoretically informed by the dimensions of communicative competence and linguistic mediation, particularly focusing on how knowledge, skills, and attitudes are enacted in real interactional settings. Sample interview questions included:

1. "Can you describe a situation where you adjusted your tone or communication style when working with a client from a different ethnic or linguistic background?"
2. "What forms of address or linguistic strategies do you use when interacting with elders or individuals in positions of cultural authority?"
3. "Have you experienced a misunderstanding due to differences in directness or indirectness? How did you manage the situation?"
4. "How do you communicate sensitive issues in culturally or religiously diverse family settings?"

3.2.3. Observation

The observation instrument comprised a structured checklist and field-note template used during visits to select LKS institutions, including two rural institutions and one urban site. Observations focused on practitioner–client interactions, communication patterns, forms of address, tone modulation, application of competency standards, and culturally embedded negotiation practices.

3.3. Procedure

The research was conducted in sequential stages. First, regulatory document analysis was undertaken to establish the normative competency framework. Documents analyzed included Law No. 14/2019 on Social Workers, Minister of Social Affairs Regulation No. 14/2020, and the SKKNI for Social Work. These documents provided the institutional benchmark against which field practices were interpreted.

Second, the survey was distributed to 207 practitioners across selected LKS institutions. Descriptive percentage distributions were generated to identify general trends across knowledge, skills, and attitudes dimensions. These summaries were not treated as inferential findings but as contextual indicators supporting qualitative interpretation. Third, semi-structured interviews and field observations were conducted with selected informants as the basis for thematic discourse analysis. The qualitative data were analysed following the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2014), which involves an iterative process of data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing, and verification. The coding procedure was carried out systematically to identify related patterns:

1. Tone modulation (direct vs. indirect speech)
2. Lexical adaptation and code-switching
3. Kinship-based address forms and authority acknowledgment
4. Religious framing strategies
5. Tensions between procedural compliance and relational negotiation

Analytical categories were derived from the sociolinguistic framework of communicative competence, as outlined in the theoretical framework, with particular emphasis on how knowledge, skills, and attitudes are enacted in interactional contexts. This approach enabled the analysis to focus on discourse-level practices as empirically grounded interactional phenomena rather than abstract normative statements. Particular attention was given to variations emerging across institutional contexts and reported multicultural case experiences. Rather than aggregating responses into a single homogeneous narrative, the analysis highlighted recurring themes alongside context-specific patterns, especially in cases involving culturally sensitive interactions.

3.4. Data Analysis and Reliability Procedures

3.4.1. Quantitative Stage

Quantitative data obtained from the survey were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques to summarise patterns of responses across key indicators of professional competence. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the analysis focused on frequency distributions and percentage-based representations rather than inferential statistical testing. Responses were initially recorded using a Likert-type scale. For analytical clarity and interpretive consistency, responses were subsequently collapsed into three categories: Agree, Neutral, and Disagree. This transformation enabled clearer comparison across indicators while maintaining alignment with the study's interpretive focus.

For items measuring behavioural frequency (e.g., use of communication strategies), responses were categorised into Often, Sometimes, and Rarely, and analysed using percentage distributions. These descriptive results were used to identify dominant patterns of practice and were subsequently integrated with qualitative findings through triangulation. All quantitative results are presented descriptively and are not intended to establish causal relationships but to support the interpretation of interactional and cultural dynamics observed in qualitative data.

3.4.2. Qualitative Stage

Qualitative data were analyzed through a multi-stage coding process that combined deductive and inductive strategies. The initial coding framework was deductively informed by the KSA competency structure embedded in the SKKNI, as well as sociolinguistic constructs of communicative competence. However, subcategories were refined inductively through iterative engagement with field transcripts.

- Coding Stages: The analysis proceeded through three structured stages:

1. *First-cycle coding (open coding)*

Interview transcripts and field notes were analysed line-by-line to identify meaningful interactional units derived from participants' responses to the semi-structured interview questions. The coding process was guided by the conceptual dimensions of communicative competence and linguistic mediation, particularly in relation to knowledge, skills, and attitudes enacted in practice. Codes captured both substantive content (e.g., "consulting the elderlies" "adjusting schedule during Ramadan") and discourse-level features (e.g., "indirect framing," "kinship address form," "religious moral alignment"). At this stage, a total of 47 preliminary codes were generated.

2. *Second-cycle coding (axial categorization)*

Preliminary codes were clustered into broader analytical categories aligned with the KSA model and communicative competence dimensions. For example:

a. "Indirect framing" and "softened refusal" were grouped under pragmatic mitigation strategies (Skills).
b. "Recognition of kinship hierarchy" was grouped under cultural normative awareness (Knowledge).
c. "Avoidance of culturally sensitive confrontation" was grouped under relational sensitivity orientation (Attitudes).

This stage reduced the code set into 14 consolidated analytical categories.

3. *Third-stage integration (selective synthesis)*

Categories were interpreted relationally to identify patterns of adaptive hybridity across bureaucratic and cultural domains. This integrative stage enabled cross-case comparison and the identification of recurring mediation strategies across institutional contexts. An explicit codebook was developed containing code definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and illustrative excerpts. This ensured analytic transparency and conceptual consistency across cases.

- Construction of Categories: Percentages such as 62%, 71%, and 81% were derived from structured survey items corresponding to clearly defined indicators. Likert-scale responses were collapsed into three interpretive categories for descriptive purposes. This simplification was applied to enhance interpretive clarity and to facilitate integration with qualitative thematic categories.

    1. Agree
    2. Neutral
    3. Disagree

For example, the reported 81% agreement that "religion influences intervention acceptance" represents the proportion of respondents selecting either Agree on that specific item. Where percentages refer to "frequent use" of strategies (e.g., 72% frequently mobilise communal cooperation norms), these were derived from categorical frequency responses (Often / Sometimes / Rarely), based on self-reported practice frequency.

- Operational Definition of "Success": In qualitative references to "successful cases," success was operationally defined as cases in which:

    1. The intervention plan was implemented without withdrawal or refusal,

2. There were no formal complaints or resistance recorded, and
3. The practitioner reported sustained client cooperation across at least two follow-up interactions.

This operational definition was consistently applied during case-based coding and cross-referenced with institutional documentation where available.

- Reliability and Credibility Procedures: Strategies to enhance analytical reliability and interpretive credibility include:

1. Intercoder verification: A subset of transcripts (20%) was independently coded by a second researcher trained in qualitative analysis. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved through analytic consensus, resulting in category definitions refinement.
2. Audit trail documentation: All coding revisions and category consolidations were documented systematically.
3. Triangulation: Survey findings, interview narratives, observational data, and regulatory documents were cross-referenced to confirm recurring patterns.
4. Peer debriefing: Initial interpretations were discussed with two external scholars in social work and sociolinguistics to assess conceptual coherence.

These procedures ensured that reported percentages are based on systematically constructed categories and that qualitative interpretations can be traced back to identify discourse features rather than general impressions.

4. Results

4.1. Survey Findings

This section presents descriptive findings from the structured questionnaire administered to 207 certified social workers across Lembaga Kesejahteraan Sosial (LKS) in North Sumatra. The numerical strand is descriptive in nature and aims to illustrate distributional patterns rather than provide inferential statistical testing.

4.1.1. Alignment between SKKNI Standards and Field Practice

Table 1 presents respondents' perceptions regarding the understanding and applicability of SKKNI competency standards.

Table 1
Understanding and Perceived Applicability of SKKNI Standards (N = 207)

Indicator	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
I understand SKKNI competency units	82%	11%	7%
SKKNI reflects realities in LKS practice	54%	19%	27%
SKKNI sufficiently addresses cultural diversity	41%	22%	37%
National training prepares me for ethnic mediation	32%	18%	50%
Administrative compliance is prioritised over community engagement	74%	12%	14%

The survey findings reveal an important distinction between procedural familiarity with SKKNI standards and their contextual applicability in multicultural welfare practice. While a large proportion of respondents reported a high level of formal understanding of SKKNI competencies (82%), the perceived adequacy of these standards declines substantially when practitioners face culturally diverse service contexts. Only 41% considered the framework sufficiently responsive to cultural diversity, and an even smaller proportion (32%) felt adequately prepared to handle situations involving ethnic mediation.

This discrepancy suggests that competency frameworks may function effectively at the level of bureaucratic literacy but become less effective when translated into culturally complex field situations. From an institutional perspective, SKKNI provides a structured reference for professional accountability; however, frontline welfare interactions often involve culturally embedded norms of communication, authority, and collective decision-making that extend beyond procedural guidance. These patterns indicate that professional competence in multicultural welfare institutions cannot be understood solely through formal compliance with national standards. Instead, practitioners must actively reinterpret these standards within culturally specific interactional environments, where sensitivity to social hierarchy, kinship structures, and local communicative norms becomes essential for effective service delivery.

4.1.2. Linguistic Adaptation in Practice

Respondents were asked about the frequency of linguistic adaptation when working across ethnic communities (Table 2).

Table 2
Linguistic Adaptation in Cross-ethnic Practice

Indicator	Often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely (%)
Adjust dialect or local vocabulary	68%	25%	7%
Modify tone (direct vs. indirect)	74%	20%	6%
Use local proverbs or idioms	49%	34%	17%
Initiate session in client's mother tongue	57%	28%	15%
Perceive language adaptation as crucial for trust	86%	10%	4%

The findings on linguistic adaptation demonstrate that communication flexibility constitutes a central element of everyday social work practice in multicultural settings. A large majority of respondents reported frequently adjusting their tone of speech (74%) and dialectal usage (68%) when interacting with clients from different ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, 86% of practitioners perceived language adaptation as crucial for establishing trust during welfare encounters. These patterns suggest that linguistic competence functions as an informal yet indispensable component of professional practice, even though it is not always explicitly codified within formal competency frameworks. In culturally diverse institutional environments, communication is not merely a neutral medium for delivering welfare interventions but also a relational process through which legitimacy and trust are constructed.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, such adaptations may involve shifts in speech register, the use of culturally appropriate address terms, or the strategic adoption of locally familiar linguistic forms. These communicative adjustments enable practitioners to align their professional roles with culturally recognised expectations of respect, relational hierarchy, and social harmony.

4.1.3. Integration of Cultural and Religious Norms

Respondents also reported on the integration of indigenous (Table 3) and religious norms (Table 4) into intervention processes.

Table 3
Integration of Local Cultural Values in Interventions

Strategy	Often (%)	Sometimes (%)	Rarely (%)
Invoking kinship hierarchy (Dalihan Na Tolu)	61%	27%	12%
Mobilising community cooperation (Gotong Royong)	72%	19%	9%
Consulting the elderlies before interventions	48%	33%	19%
Framing assistance in culturally familiar metaphors	66%	24%	10%

Table 4
Religious Sensitivity in Social Work Practice

Indicator	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Religion influences intervention acceptance	81%	12%	7%
I adjust intervention timing based on religious events	69%	18%	13%
Religious leaders are involved in mediation	58%	23%	19%
Lack of religious sensitivity may cause resistance	84%	9%	7%

The survey also highlights the significance of culturally embedded values in shaping welfare interactions (Table 3). A substantial proportion of respondents reported mobilising communal cooperation norms (72%) and culturally familiar metaphors (66%) when facilitating intervention processes. These strategies suggest that practitioners frequently draw upon locally meaningful cultural references in order to make welfare communication more accessible and socially legitimate.

Religious sensitivity also emerges as a particularly influential dimension of professional practice (Table 4). A large majority of respondents (81%) indicated that religious considerations significantly affect client receptiveness, while 84% acknowledged that a lack of religious sensitivity may generate resistance during welfare interactions. These findings underscore the importance of understanding religion not merely as a private belief system but as a social framework that structures trust, moral authority, and community acceptance in many Indonesian contexts.

In pluralistic welfare settings such as North Sumatra, where diverse religious traditions coexist, practitioners must therefore navigate complex moral and communicative landscapes. Cultural and religious literacy becomes essential for interpreting clients' expectations and for framing welfare interventions in ways that resonate with locally recognised values.

4.1.4. Professional Identity and Hybrid Positioning

To examine how practitioners construct and negotiate professional identity following certification, the study analyses survey responses related to perceived authority, legal recognition, and the interaction between institutional standards and community expectations. The results are presented in Tables 5 and 6.

Table 5
Self-Perception of Professional Identity Post-Certification

Indicator	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
I see myself as a certified professional rather than a volunteer	88%	8%	4%
Certification increases my authority in the community	76%	15%	9%
Legal recognition strengthens my professional confidence	84%	10%	6%
The law clarifies my ethical responsibilities	79%	13%	8%
Community still sees social work as a voluntary charity	41%	22%	37%

Table 6
Hybrid Identity Negotiation

Indicator	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
I represent government standards in my work	83%	11%	6%
I must adapt decisions to local customs	91%	6%	3%
There is tension between formal rules and local expectations	67%	18%	15%
Community trust depends more on cultural familiarity than certification	72%	17%	11%

The final set of findings relates to practitioners' perceptions of professional identity following SKKNI certification (Table 5). The survey results suggest that social workers do not simply replace traditional welfare approaches with formalised professional standards. Instead, they develop a hybrid professional orientation that integrates elements of bureaucratic accountability with culturally embedded practices.

Respondents acknowledged the importance of adhering to nationally recognised competency standards while simultaneously emphasising the necessity of contextual adaptation in field practice (Table 6). This dual orientation indicates that professional identity is not constructed solely through institutional certification but also through continuous negotiation between formal regulatory expectations and the practical realities of multicultural welfare service delivery. Such hybrid positioning reflects the broader institutional dynamics within which social workers operate. While national competency frameworks aim to standardise professional practice, the cultural complexity of local welfare environments requires practitioners to remain flexible and responsive to diverse communicative norms. Consequently, professional competence emerges not as a fixed technical attribute but as a socially negotiated practice shaped by the interaction between institutional governance and local cultural systems.

4.2. Interview Findings: Thematic Analysis

Twenty-four semi-structured interviews were analysed through iterative thematic coding. Five major themes emerged from the data, reflecting how practitioners interpret and negotiate competency standards within culturally diverse service environments (Table 7).

Table 7
Major Themes Identified from Interview Data (n = 24)

Theme	Description	Representative Quotation
Bureaucratic–Relational Tension	Perceived gap between documentation standards and kinship-based negotiation	"In the office, we talk about documentation and assessment forms. In the field, we talk about who is the eldest uncle." (P07)
Linguistic Adaptation as Mediation	Strategic adjustment of tone, dialect, and politeness norms	"With Malay clients, we speak softly… If we are too direct, it is considered rude." (P05)
Informal Cultural Learning	Cultural competence learned through mentoring rather than certification	"Cultural knowledge is something we learn informally from senior workers." (P19)
Religious Framing in Mediation	Aligning intervention with religious authorities	"Sometimes involving church elders is more effective than formal meetings." (P16)
Hybrid Professional Identity	Dual positioning as state representative and community member	"We hold certificates from the state, but in the village, we are still someone's nephew." (P08)

- *Bureaucratic–Relational Tension*

The first theme highlights the perceived tension between bureaucratic procedures and relational community structures. Many respondents described a contrast between formal administrative requirements, such as assessment forms, documentation protocols, and case reporting, and the relational dynamics that shape decision-making in local communities. In practice, welfare interventions often require consultation with kinship authorities or respected elders who hold informal legitimacy within the community. Practitioners explained that while documentation is necessary for institutional accountability, the acceptance of interventions frequently depends on recognition of local authority structures. As one respondent noted, *"In the office, we talk about documentation and assessment forms. In the field, we talk about who is the eldest uncle"* (P07). This theme suggests that professional practice involves continuous negotiation between procedural compliance and culturally embedded decision-making norms.

- *Linguistic Adaptation as Mediation*

The second theme concerns the role of linguistic adaptation as a mediating strategy in cross-cultural interactions. Respondents frequently described adjusting speech styles, tone, and dialect to align with community-specific norms of politeness and respect. Such adaptations include shifting between direct and indirect forms of expression, moderating tone during sensitive discussions, and incorporating local vocabulary to build rapport with clients. Practitioners indicated that overly direct communication may be interpreted as confrontational or disrespectful in certain cultural settings, particularly in communities that value indirectness as a marker of social harmony. One practitioner explained, *"With Malay clients, we speak softly… If we are too direct, it is considered rude"* (P05). These narratives indicate that linguistic flexibility functions as a practical mechanism for building trust and facilitating dialogue within culturally plural welfare encounters.

- *Informal Cultural Learning*

The third theme relates to how practitioners acquire cultural competence in practice. Many respondents reported that formal certification and training programs provide only limited preparation for the cultural complexities encountered in the field. Instead, much of their cultural understanding develops through informal mentoring, peer learning, and accumulated field experience. Senior practitioners often serve as key sources of practical knowledge, guiding newer staff on how to approach culturally sensitive situations or negotiate local authority structures. As one participant stated, *"Cultural knowledge is something we learn informally from senior workers"* (P19). This finding suggests that experiential learning plays a central role in shaping cultural competence, complementing but not replacing formal competency frameworks.

- *Religious Framing in Mediation*

Religion emerged as another important dimension influencing intervention processes. Respondents indicated that aligning welfare interventions with religious values or involving respected religious leaders can significantly increase community acceptance of programs. In many cases, practitioners reported consulting pastors, imams, or other religious figures when addressing sensitive family or community issues. These actors often function as trusted mediators who can legitimise interventions within local moral frameworks. As one respondent explained, *"Sometimes involving church elders is more effective than formal meetings"* (P16). This theme demonstrates how religious institutions can serve as intermediary spaces where formal welfare objectives are reframed in culturally meaningful ways.

- *Hybrid Professional Identity*

The final theme reflects how practitioners interpret their own professional identity within the intersection of state authority and community belonging. Respondents described a dual positioning in which they are recognised as certified professionals representing national standards while simultaneously remaining embedded in local kinship and social networks. This duality requires practitioners to balance institutional responsibilities with expectations arising from community relationships. One participant illustrated this dynamic by stating, *"We hold certificates from the state, but in the village, we are still someone's nephew"* (P08). Such narratives indicate that professional identity in these contexts is not purely bureaucratic but negotiated through everyday social relations.

Taken together, the interview narratives consistently reveal that social work practice in multicultural settings involves ongoing mediation between formal procedural requirements and culturally embedded expectations. While documentation and certification provide institutional legitimacy, effective field practice depends on communicative sensitivity, relational negotiation, and contextual cultural knowledge.

4.3. Observation Findings

Observational data were collected from three selected LKS in North Sumatra, including two rural institutions and one urban site. The observations focused on practitioner–client interactions during

consultation sessions and case discussions in order to understand how professional communication unfolds in everyday welfare encounters. Across the three sites, consultation sessions typically began with greeting exchanges before practitioners initiated case-related discussions. In several interactions, practitioners used locally familiar greeting expressions before shifting to Indonesian when moving into the formal consultation stage. This pattern suggests the existence of a dual communicative structure in welfare interactions: local linguistic forms were often employed to establish relational proximity and social comfort, while Indonesian functioned as the institutional language used for formal documentation and administrative procedures.

At the rural sites, kinship references appeared frequently during the early stages of conversation. Practitioners often asked clients about family relations or acknowledged the presence of senior relatives before explaining case procedures. Such interactional practices reflect the importance of relational orientation within local welfare encounters. Rather than addressing clients solely as individual service recipients, practitioners recognised the broader kinship networks that influence decision-making processes in many communities in North Sumatra. Observations also indicate that practitioners temporarily paused formal consultations to engage in brief conversations with community elders who were present near the consultation area. These interactions occurred before the completion of official case documentation and appeared to function as informal consultation processes through which practitioners sought contextual understanding or social validation for the welfare intervention being discussed.

In the site located within a Malay-majority community, practitioners were observed adopting a moderated and relatively indirect style of communication during sensitive discussions, particularly when addressing family conflicts or financial difficulties. Instead of asking direct questions, practitioners occasionally framed statements through indirect or consultative expressions. This communicative strategy appears to align with locally recognised norms of politeness and respect, where direct confrontation may be perceived as socially inappropriate.

Language use during consultations further reflects the hybrid nature of professional communication in multicultural welfare institutions. Local language expressions were occasionally used during informal conversational segments, particularly when practitioners attempted to build rapport with clients. However, Indonesian was consistently employed when practitioners recorded case information or completed administrative documentation. This shift between local linguistic forms and the national language indicates a functional distinction between relational communication and institutional reporting practices.

Taken together, these observations demonstrate that professional competence in multicultural welfare institutions is enacted not only through formal procedural knowledge but also through the ability to navigate culturally embedded communication norms. Practitioners continuously adjust their communicative strategies in response to local expectations regarding respect, hierarchy, and collective participation in decision-making processes. In this sense, everyday welfare encounters become sites of interactional negotiation where institutional standards and culturally grounded communication practices intersect.

5. Discussion

This study examines how competency standards defined by the SKKNI are interpreted and enacted within culturally plural LKS in North Sumatra. By conceptualising competence as an interactional and culturally mediated practice, the discussion is structured around the three research questions.

RQ1. Alignment between SKKNI and Culturally Embedded Welfare Practices

The findings reveal that the alignment between SKKNI-defined competencies and culturally embedded welfare practices is partial and structurally uneven. While SKKNI provides a formal framework that strengthens procedural accountability and professional standardisation, its technocratic orientation does not fully capture the relational and culturally embedded dimensions of welfare practice. In everyday interventions, practitioners frequently rely on discretionary reasoning, culturally informed judgment, and relational negotiation to implement formally prescribed competencies. This pattern supports the

argument that competence cannot be reduced to procedural compliance but must be understood as a contextually enacted practice. In line with cultural competence theory, effective practice requires sensitivity to local social structures, including kinship systems, community authority, and religious norms. The findings resonate with Stray et al. (2023), who demonstrate that frontline workers reinterpret rigid policy criteria through context-sensitive judgment, as well as Mitchell et al. (2021), who highlight the necessity of translating formal frameworks into trust-based practices. Thus, SKKNI functions less as a prescriptive model of practice and more as a regulatory reference that is continuously adapted within culturally situated welfare interactions.

RQ2. Negotiating Ethnic and Linguistic Diversity through Interaction

The study further demonstrates that practitioners actively negotiate ethnic and linguistic diversity through a range of interactional strategies, positioning communication as a central dimension of professional competence. These strategies include linguistic adaptation, the use of culturally appropriate forms of address, and the incorporation of locally meaningful discourse practices that align with norms of respect, hierarchy, and collective deliberation.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, these findings confirm that communication in welfare settings operates as a form of social action rather than a neutral exchange of information. Practitioners engage in code-switching, tone modulation, and culturally embedded communicative practices to establish trust and legitimacy. This aligns with the concept of communicative competence, in which effective interaction depends on the ability to navigate diverse linguistic repertoires and social expectations. The findings extend existing literature on intercultural implementation by demonstrating that the gap between macro-level policy and micro-level practice is mediated through language. Wang et al. (2023) and Lin (2023) similarly identify the limitations of top-down frameworks when detached from ethnolinguistic realities. However, this study contributes empirically by showing how linguistic strategies, kinship-sensitive engagement, and religious framing function as operational mechanisms through which practitioners translate institutional standards into culturally intelligible practices.

RQ3. Reconfiguring Professional Identity through Hybrid Practice

The findings indicate that the negotiation of cultural and institutional demands leads to the emergence of a hybrid form of professional identity. Practitioners position themselves simultaneously as state-certified professionals and as culturally embedded actors operating within local, moral, and social frameworks. This dual positioning reflects an ongoing process of identity negotiation rather than a linear transition toward bureaucratic professionalism. Such dynamics resonate with studies on street-level bureaucracy, which emphasise how frontline actors reinterpret and translate formal mandates into context-sensitive practices (Evans, 2004; Thomann et al., 2017).

Drawing on hybridity theory, this process can be understood as the production of asymmetrical hybridity, in which globalised competency frameworks intersect with local cultural systems without fully displacing them. Empirical research further demonstrates that professional identity in practice is continuously reconfigured through adaptive strategies, informal learning, and engagement with local sociocultural norms (Nothdurfter & Hermans, 2018; Suryandari et al., 2024). Rather than replacing indigenous practices, standardisation generates flexible forms of professionalism that integrate institutional requirements with culturally grounded legitimacy. This interpretation is further supported by evidence from Indonesian and comparable contexts, where practitioners often navigate multiple roles, engage in cross-sector collaboration, and exercise adaptive leadership in response to resource constraints and community diversity (Adisaputri & Ungar, 2023; Yuan et al., 2022). These conditions contribute to diverse identity trajectories, ranging from professional growth and renewed commitment to challenges such as role strain and uncertainty. Consequently, professional identity emerges not as a fixed outcome of certification but as a negotiated and evolving construct shaped by both structural pressures and local interactional realities.

Overall, these findings contribute to theoretical debates by reframing professional identity as an interactionally constructed and contextually embedded phenomenon. They extend existing scholarship by demonstrating that standardisation processes do not simply impose uniformity but instead produce

hybrid governance outcomes that require continuous translation between policy frameworks and local practice. Practically, the findings suggest that competency-based systems such as SKKNI should be complemented by institutional support mechanisms that recognise hybrid practices, including culturally responsive training, participatory learning models, and organisational structures that legitimise frontline discretion. Without such integration, regulatory frameworks risk reinforcing technocratic rigidity while overlooking the contextual conditions necessary for effective service delivery in culturally plural settings.

Several directions for future research emerge from this study. Comparative studies across other Indonesian regions or Southeast Asian contexts could assess whether hybrid professional identity represents a broader structural pattern. Longitudinal research may further explore how digitalisation and competency standardisation reshape identity negotiation over time. In addition, incorporating client-based evaluation instruments would strengthen the empirical basis of practitioner-reported effectiveness. Finally, integrating micro-level interactional analysis with macro-level governance perspectives would deepen understanding of how professional identity is continuously negotiated in diverse frontline contexts.

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Appendix

Survey Instrument

Section A. Understanding and Perceived Applicability of SKKNI Standards

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

1. I understand SKKNI competency units. (Knowledge)
2. SKKNI reflects realities in LKS practice. (Knowledge)
3. SKKNI sufficiently addresses cultural diversity. (Knowledge)
4. National training prepares me for ethnic mediation. (Skills)
5. Administrative compliance is prioritised over community engagement. (Attitudes)

Response options: Agree / Neutral / Disagree

Section B. Linguistic Adaptation in Cross-Ethnic Practice

How often do you engage in the following practices?

1. Adjust dialect or local vocabulary (Skills)
2. Modify tone (direct vs. indirect) (Skills)
3. Use local proverbs or idioms (Skills)
4. Initiate the session in the client's mother tongue (Skills)
5. Perceive language adaptation as crucial for building trust (Attitudes)

Response options: Often / Sometimes / Rarely

Section C. Integration of Local Cultural Values in Intervention

How often do you use the following strategies in your practice?

1. Invoking kinship hierarchy (e.g., Dalihan Na Tolu) (Knowledge)
2. Mobilising community cooperation (e.g., Gotong Royong) (Skills)
3. Consulting the elderlies prior to interventions (Skills)
4. Framing assistance using culturally familiar metaphors (Skills)

Response options: Often / Sometimes / Rarely

Section D. Religious Sensitivity in Social Work Practice

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

1. Religion influences intervention acceptance. (Knowledge)
2. I adjust intervention timing based on religious events. (Skills)
3. Religious leaders are involved in mediation. (Skills)
4. Lack of religious sensitivity may cause resistance. (Attitudes)

Response options: Agree / Neutral / Disagree

Section E. Self-Perception of Professional Identity Post-Certification

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

1. I see myself as a certified professional rather than a volunteer. (Attitudes)
2. Certification increases my authority in the community. (Attitudes)
3. Legal recognition strengthens my professional confidence. (Attitudes)
4. The law clarifies my ethical responsibilities. (Knowledge)
5. The community still perceives social work as voluntary charity. (Attitudes)

Response options: Agree / Neutral / Disagree

Section F: Hybrid Identity Negotiation in Practice

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

1. I represent government standards in my work. (Attitudes)
2. I must adapt decisions to local customs. (Skills)
3. There is tension between formal rules and local expectations. (Knowledge)
4. Community trust depends more on cultural familiarity than formal certification. (Attitudes)

Response options: Agree / Neutral / Disagree