

Cultural Competence of Social Workers in Nueva Vizcaya: Towards an Enhancement Program

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Date Submitted:

March 10, 2026

Date Accepted:

June 29, 2026

Date Published:

August 06, 2026

DOI:

10.5281/zenodo.21810718

ABSTRACT

This study assessed the cultural competence of registered social workers in Nueva Vizcaya and determined whether competence differed according to selected demographic characteristics as a basis for proposing enhancement measures. A quantitative descriptive-correlational design was employed with 30 registered social workers selected purposively from a provincial population of 75 practitioners working in government, non-government, and private organizations. Data were gathered through a researcher-developed, expert-validated questionnaire covering ten cultural competence domains. The instrument obtained a Cronbach's alpha of .887. Frequency and percentage described the respondents, weighted mean determined competence levels, the Mann-Whitney U test examined differences by sex, and the Kruskal-Wallis H test examined differences by age, educational attainment, ethnic affiliation, and

years of service. Results showed that the respondents were highly competent overall ($M = 3.67$). Service delivery obtained the highest domain mean ($M = 3.73$), followed by ethics and values, cross-cultural skills, and empowerment and advocacy ($M = 3.72$ each). Self-awareness and professional education registered the lowest means ($M = 3.59$ each), although both remained highly competent. No statistically significant differences were found across any competence domain when respondents were grouped by sex, age, educational attainment, ethnic affiliation, or years of service (all $p > .05$). The study concluded that the social workers possessed a strong foundation for culturally responsive practice, but continuing development in reflective self-awareness, professional education, inclusive leadership, and applied communication should be institutionalized. The proposed enhancement measures emphasize training, reflective supervision, community engagement, culturally responsive communication, and organizational accountability.

Keywords: *cultural competence, social work practice, cultural humility, Nueva Vizcaya, professional development, culturally responsive services*

INTRODUCTION

Culture shapes how individuals and communities understand identity, relationships, distress, help-seeking, and recovery. For social workers, cultural awareness is therefore not an optional interpersonal quality but a professional responsibility that affects assessment, communication, intervention planning, advocacy, and the protection of client dignity. Ethical frameworks in social work require practitioners to recognize their own assumptions, respect cultural differences, and provide services that are equitable and responsive rather than standardized in ways that disadvantage minority groups (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021; International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2023).

This responsibility is particularly important in Nueva Vizcaya, where Indigenous Peoples, ethnolinguistic communities, migrant families, and other cultural groups interact within government and community service systems. Local diversity can enrich practice, but it also requires social workers to understand how cultural beliefs, language, family structures, and community authority influence clients' decisions and expectations. Philippine scholarship has emphasized the importance of Indigenous welfare paradigms and regional ethnolinguistic contexts in designing services that are locally meaningful (Aguinaldo, 2023; Delos Reyes, 2022).

Although cultural competence training is widely promoted, a persistent gap remains between conceptual knowledge and its application in complex practice situations. Practitioners may understand general principles yet still experience difficulty negotiating cultural differences, communicating across languages, challenging institutional bias, or adapting interventions without stereotyping clients (Osborn & Karandikar, 2022). These challenges are closely related to broader social work goals of reducing exclusion and strengthening individual, family, and community well-being (American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare [AASWSW], 2022).

The study addressed this need by assessing registered social workers' cultural competence in ethics and values, self-awareness, cross-cultural knowledge, cross-cultural skills, service delivery, empowerment and advocacy, diverse workforce, professional education, language and communication, and leadership to advance cultural competence. It also examined whether competence differed according to sex, age, educational attainment, ethnic affiliation, and years of service and used the findings as a basis for proposing enhancement measures for culturally responsive social work practice in Nueva Vizcaya.

Literature Review

Cultural Competence, Cultural Humility, and Ethical Practice

Cultural competence combines professional values, knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable practitioners to work responsively across cultural differences. Attipoe (2024) described it as a central force in social work because culture influences how clients interpret problems, relationships, services, and change. Consistent with this view, professional standards emphasize fairness, self-determination, non-discrimination, confidentiality, and respect for cultural identities as foundations of ethical service delivery (Barsky, 2021; NASW, 2021).

Current scholarship also cautions against treating competence as mastery of fixed facts about groups. Lekas et al. (2020) argued that checklist-based training may reinforce stereotypes when practitioners assume that cultural knowledge is complete or universally applicable. Cultural humility offers a complementary orientation based on lifelong learning, self-reflection, recognition of power differences, and openness to clients as experts in their own lived experience. Agner (2021) similarly framed the movement toward humility as a necessary shift from presumed expertise to reflective and collaborative practice.

Ethical cultural practice therefore requires continuous examination of personal bias and organizational rules. Social workers must balance professional standards with culturally meaningful responses while remaining alert to practices that may produce exclusion or harm. The IFSW (2023) positions respect for diversity and human rights within the profession's ethical foundation, making cultural responsiveness inseparable from social justice and accountable practice.

Practice-Based Knowledge, Communication, and Service Delivery

Cultural competence develops through interaction between formal learning and practice experience. Osborn and Karandikar (2022) found that practitioners' beliefs, knowledge, and skills are shaped by learning experiences, supervision, and the opportunities available within organizations. This perspective shifts attention from what practitioners know in theory to how they listen, interpret, negotiate differences, and adapt services in actual encounters.

Research in Aotearoa New Zealand showed that practitioners move from learning about culture in educational settings to learning from clients during professional practice. Ide et al. (2022) identified increasingly critical forms of self-awareness that support the negotiation of difference, while Ide and Beddoe (2022) emphasized cultural safety and a receptive orientation to the other person. These findings suggest that culturally responsive communication involves curiosity, empathy, flexibility, and the willingness to revise professional assumptions.

Applied competence is especially important when clients experience vulnerability, trauma, institutional dependency, or limited access to services. Melendres (2022) highlighted the challenges faced by newly employed practitioners, while McGregor et al. (2018) demonstrated the need for culturally sensitive guidance when working

with children and families seeking protection. Person-centered practice likewise requires appropriate language, active listening, and communication methods that support client participation and informed choice (National Center for Evidence-Based Practices and Systems [NCAPPS], 2024).

Professional Education, Organizational Inclusion, and Leadership

Individual competence is difficult to sustain without organizational support. Social work education is expected to prepare graduates for ethical engagement with diversity through field instruction, reflective learning, and competency-based assessment (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2022). Continuing professional education remains equally important because cultural contexts, service systems, and policy expectations change over time.

Organizations influence whether culturally responsive knowledge becomes routine practice. Structural equity requires policies, supervision, data systems, and resource decisions that identify and correct barriers affecting marginalized clients (Gibley-Reed, 2022). Diversity management and legal compliance also require leaders to create inclusive workplaces, address discriminatory behavior, and incorporate cultural responsiveness into performance standards and service protocols (Morris & Harr, 2023).

Leadership consequently extends cultural competence beyond individual encounters to institutional change. In culturally diverse provinces, social workers and agency leaders must collaborate with cultural authorities, community organizations, and service users in developing programs. This approach supports the profession's broader commitment to social justice and to strengthening the social fabric through responsive policies and community connections (AASWSW, 2022; Aguinaldo, 2023). The present study therefore treated professional education, diverse workforce, language and communication, and leadership as essential domains of cultural competence.

The conceptual framework organized the study through an input-process-output structure. The input comprised the respondents' demographic characteristics and the ten cultural competence domains; the process involved questionnaire administration, assessment, and statistical analysis; and the output consisted of proposed measures to enhance cultural competence among social workers in Nueva Vizcaya.

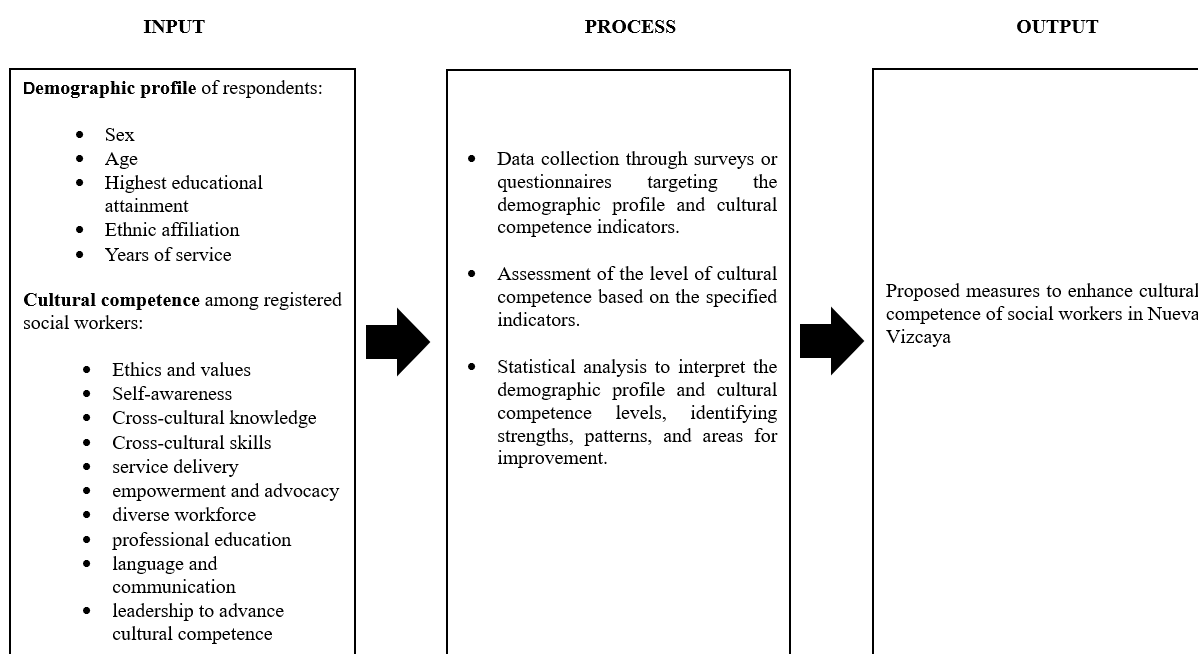


Figure 1. *Research Paradigm of the Study*

METHODS

Research Design

The study used a quantitative descriptive-correlational research design. The descriptive component documented the demographic profile and current level of cultural competence of registered social workers, while the comparative component tested whether competence differed across selected profile groups. No variables were manipulated, and the data represented the respondents' self-assessments within their natural professional settings.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines. Data were obtained from registered social workers employed in government agencies, non-government organizations, and private institutions throughout the province. The locale was selected because its Indigenous, ethnolinguistic, and migrant communities provide a culturally diverse setting in which culturally responsive social work is especially relevant.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The provincial population consisted of 75 registered social workers identified through the Philippine Association of Social Workers, Inc.-Nueva Vizcaya Chapter. Thirty registered social workers were selected through purposive sampling. Eligible participants were actively practicing in Nueva Vizcaya, had at least one year of relevant professional exposure unless newly registered practitioners met the study criteria, and had experience serving culturally diverse clients. The sampling strategy was used to obtain information-rich respondents directly engaged in social work practice.

Research Instrument

A researcher-developed questionnaire was used. Part I gathered information on sex, age, highest educational attainment, ethnic affiliation, and years of service. Part II measured ten cultural competence domains: ethics and values, self-awareness, cross-cultural knowledge, cross-cultural skills, service delivery, empowerment and advocacy, diverse workforce, professional education, language and communication, and leadership to advance cultural competence. Responses were rated on a four-point scale interpreted as highly competent (3.25-4.00), competent (2.50-3.24), moderately competent (1.75-2.49), or not competent (1.00-1.74). The instrument was reviewed by a multidisciplinary panel and obtained a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of .887, indicating good internal consistency.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher secured permission from the relevant organizations and professional authorities before recruiting participants. The questionnaire underwent expert validation and pilot testing, after which the revised instrument was administered to the selected social workers. The purpose and procedures of the study were explained, written informed consent was obtained, and questionnaires were distributed in paper or electronic form according to respondent preference. The main survey commenced on January 7, 2026, and 30 complete responses were obtained through face-to-face coordination. Returned questionnaires were checked, coded, and prepared for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

Frequency counts and percentages described the respondents' demographic characteristics. Weighted mean summarized each cultural competence domain and the overall level. The Mann-Whitney U test examined differences according to sex, whereas the Kruskal-Wallis H test examined differences according to age, highest educational attainment, ethnic affiliation, and years of service. Statistical decisions were made at the .05 level of significance.

Ethical Consideration

Participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. Respondents were informed of the study's objectives, procedures, confidentiality safeguards, and their right to withdraw without penalty. Identifying information was separated from the data; responses were coded, securely stored, and reported only in aggregate

form. The researcher also observed cultural sensitivity through respectful communication, avoidance of assumptions, and careful handling of information shared by participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of the Respondents

Table 1. *Demographic Profile of the Respondents*

Variable	Category	Frequency and Percentage
Sex	Male	5 (16.7%)
	Female	25 (83.3%)
Age	18-25	2 (6.7%)
	26-35	10 (33.3%)
	36-45	15 (50.0%)
	46-55	3 (10.0%)
Educational attainment	Bachelor's degree	21 (70.0%)
	Master's degree	7 (23.3%)
	Other	2 (6.7%)
Ethnic affiliation	Ilocano	10 (33.3%)
	Tuwali	10 (33.3%)
	Tagalog	4 (13.3%)
	Kankanaey	2 (6.7%)
	Ibaloi	2 (6.7%)
	Other	2 (6.7%)
Years of service	Less than 1 year	2 (6.7%)
	1-5 years	8 (26.7%)
	6-10 years	17 (56.7%)
	11-15 years	3 (10.0%)

The respondent group was predominantly female (83.3%), most were 36-45 years old (50.0%), and 70.0% held a bachelor's degree. Ilocano and Tuwali social workers were equally represented at 33.3% each, and more than half had six to ten years of service (56.7%). The distribution demonstrates that the study captured practitioners with substantial professional experience and different ethnocultural affiliations, although the small number of respondents in several categories should be considered when interpreting group comparisons.

Level of Cultural Competence

Table 2. *Summary of Cultural Competence Domains*

Domain	Mean	Interpretation	Rank
Service delivery	3.73	Highly competent	1
Ethics and values	3.72	Highly competent	2.5
Cross-cultural skills	3.72	Highly competent	2.5
Empowerment and advocacy	3.72	Highly competent	2.5
Language and communication	3.69	Highly competent	5
Cross-cultural knowledge	3.68	Highly competent	6
Diverse workforce	3.66	Highly competent	7
Leadership to advance cultural competence	3.60	Highly competent	8
Self-awareness	3.59	Highly competent	9.5
Professional education	3.59	Highly competent	9.5
Overall	3.67	Highly competent	-

Registered social workers demonstrated a highly competent overall level ($M = 3.67$), and every domain fell within the highest interpretive range. Service delivery ranked first ($M = 3.73$), indicating that participants

generally integrated cultural considerations into program design, access, outreach, and service adaptation. Ethics and values, cross-cultural skills, and empowerment and advocacy followed closely ($M = 3.72$ each), showing strong attention to professional standards, culturally relevant interventions, client rights, and the use of cultural strengths.

Self-awareness and professional education obtained the lowest domain means ($M = 3.59$ each), followed by leadership to advance cultural competence ($M = 3.60$). These scores remained highly competent but identify the most appropriate priorities for continuous improvement. Reflective practice, feedback, formal training, mentoring, and leadership participation can help practitioners sustain competence beyond individual service encounters. This interpretation is consistent with scholarship that views cultural competence as a developmental process supported by self-reflection, organizational learning, and practice-based education (Ide et al., 2022; Osborn & Karandikar, 2022).

Differences According to Demographic Characteristics

Table 3. *Summary of Tests for Differences Across the Ten Cultural Competence Domains*

Grouping Variable	Test	Observed p-value Range	Decision at $\alpha = .05$
Sex	Mann-Whitney U	.496-.933	Not significant
Age	Kruskal-Wallis H	.288-.991	Not significant
Educational attainment	Kruskal-Wallis H	.054-.639	Not significant
Ethnic affiliation	Kruskal-Wallis H	.126-.899	Not significant
Years of service	Kruskal-Wallis H	.122-.992	Not significant

No statistically significant difference was found in any cultural competence domain when respondents were grouped by sex, age, educational attainment, ethnic affiliation, or years of service. All p-values exceeded .05. The closest result to the threshold occurred in ethics and values by educational attainment ($p = .054$), but it remained non-significant. The null hypothesis was therefore retained for all demographic comparisons.

The absence of demographic differences suggests that competence within this group was broadly shared across personal and professional categories. Cultural competence may be shaped less by fixed demographic characteristics than by common professional education, ethical expectations, organizational exposure, and continuing learning. This supports the view that competence can be intentionally developed through education, supervision, and institutional systems rather than presumed from a practitioner's identity or length of service (CSWE, 2022; Lekas et al., 2020).

Proposed Cultural Competence Enhancement Measures

Table 4. *Proposed Measures for Sustaining and Enhancing Cultural Competence*

Priority Area	Core Activities	Expected Contribution
Reflective self-awareness	Quarterly reflective supervision, bias-awareness exercises, peer case consultation, and structured feedback.	Improved recognition of assumptions and power dynamics.
Professional education	Annual training on cultural humility, Indigenous contexts, intersectionality, trauma-informed practice, and culturally adapted interventions.	Stronger transfer of knowledge to practice.
Language and communication	Develop language-access protocols, interpreter guidance, culturally appropriate materials, and active-listening simulations.	More accessible and accurate client communication.
Leadership and organizational inclusion	Designate cultural competence focal persons, integrate indicators into supervision and evaluation, and conduct inclusion audits.	Sustained agency accountability and inclusive workplace practices.
Community partnership	Regular consultation with Indigenous leaders, cultural organizations, service users, and community representatives during program design and evaluation.	Services aligned with local cultural priorities.

The proposed measures sustain the strong service-delivery and ethical foundations identified in the study while concentrating on the comparatively lower domains of self-awareness, professional education, and cultural competence leadership. The plan also strengthens applied communication and community partnership because competence must be demonstrated in relationships, not only in self-reported knowledge. Institutionalizing these activities can help Municipal Social Welfare and Development Offices and other employing agencies move from occasional seminars to continuous, supervised, and accountable cultural responsiveness.

CONCLUSION

Registered social workers in Nueva Vizcaya demonstrated a highly competent overall level of cultural competence across all ten domains. Their strongest area was service delivery, supported by high ratings in ethics and values, cross-cultural skills, and empowerment and advocacy. Self-awareness, professional education, and leadership to advance cultural competence were the lowest-ranked domains, but they remained within the highly competent range. The findings show that the participants possessed a strong professional foundation for culturally responsive, inclusive, and ethical social work practice.

Cultural competence did not significantly differ according to sex, age, educational attainment, ethnic affiliation, or years of service. Within the limits of the sample, competence appeared to be a broadly shared professional capability rather than a function of demographic background. The study contributes localized evidence from a culturally diverse Philippine province and underscores that competence should be sustained through lifelong learning, reflective practice, organizational leadership, and meaningful partnership with the communities served.

Recommendation

Registered social workers should engage regularly in reflective supervision, cultural humility training, language-access development, and case consultation involving culturally complex situations. Municipal Social Welfare and Development Offices, government agencies, NGOs, and private organizations should institutionalize cultural competence through annual capacity building, inclusive workplace policies, community consultation, competency-based supervision, and evaluation indicators. Academic institutions should strengthen field-based and experiential learning on Indigenous communities, intersectionality, cultural safety, and culturally responsive intervention planning.

Professional organizations and policy makers should develop common standards and resources for culturally responsive service delivery across agencies. Future studies should include larger and more geographically diverse samples, examine organizational support and training exposure, incorporate client and community perspectives, and use qualitative or mixed-method designs to explore how competence is enacted in practice. Longitudinal evaluation of the proposed enhancement measures is also recommended to determine their contribution to practitioner behavior and client outcomes.

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