

# WellSpring

## Diversity in Practice: Becoming Culturally Competent

### Working with People from Different Cultures

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Alberta



It's always been a challenge to train people about the benefits of physical activity and then to motivate them to make that activity part of their lifestyle. Adding the dimension of cultural difference makes this challenge much harder.

In the following article, Marianne Rogerson offers insights on how to work with immigrants from various regions of the world when exposing them to physical activities. For practitioners working in this field, her article is a "must read." As she observes, immigrants are arriving in Alberta in increasingly large numbers. These newcomers hope to get active or to stay active on their own cultural terms.

Rogerson's definition of culture identifies clearly the spheres of daily life touched by culture. Physical activity practitioners must try to learn about the special values, beliefs, norms, and life practices of the immigrants they serve. Participants' cultures will affect the kinds of physical activity services offered.

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But how can practitioners acquire this knowledge? Rogerson recommends training programs for practitioners in the culture of the clientele they are likely to serve. She also suggests learning directly from immigrant clients about their values, beliefs, norms, and life practices and how these will affect present or future activities or services.

Working with people from different cultures requires a proactive approach if practitioners are to be effective. The payoff for working in this way is substantial. Practitioners not only achieve their occupational goals, they also earn the respect of their immigrant clients.

## Cultural Competence for Practitioners

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### A Changing Province

Alberta's population is becoming increasingly diverse. To give one example, between 1996 and 2001, 57% of immigrants to Calgary came from China, India, the Philippines, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, South Korea, the United States, Hong Kong, Afghanistan, and the Russian Federation (Citizen and Immigration Canada, 2000a, 2000b, 2001).

This diversity is not unique to Calgary but is happening in every town and city in Alberta. If we choose to ignore this shift in our population, we risk alienating new Canadians whose culture influences their rates and patterns of participation in physical activity.

Developing sensitivity to different cultures can make our programs and activities attractive and interesting for a broader population base. On the other hand, a lack of cultural sensitivity can deter people from using health-care and fitness services (Kim-Godwin, Alexander, Felton, Mackey, & Kasakoff, 2006).

### The Concept of Cultural Competence

Culture is complex but can be defined as the “learned, shared and transmitted values, beliefs, norms, and life practices of a particular group that guides thinking, decisions and actions in patterned ways” (Coffman, 2004, p. 100).

In order to offer culturally competent services, fitness and physical activity professionals need to understand the impact of culture on health. For example, many ethnic groups see a heavier body as a sign of health rather than as a risk for hypertension or diabetes (Tripp-Reimer, Choi, Kelley & Enslein, 2001).

Cultural competence “emphasizes the ability to function effectively with members of different groups through cultural awareness and sensitivity” (Friedman & Hoffman-Goetz, 2006, p. 427). How can practitioners acquire this competence? Living



in a multicultural society does not necessarily help practitioners to become culturally competent (Crewe, 2004). There must be a conscious and direct effort to acquire this understanding.

### Changing Practitioner Attitudes, Knowledge, and Skills

Practitioners such as nurses, doctors, social workers and teachers now receive limited information about cultural competence in educational institutions (although the amount of information they receive is increasing) (Beagan, 2003; Clark, Zuk, & Baramée, 2000; Crewe, 2004; Eshleman, & Davidhizar, 2006; Rapp, 2006; Wear, 2003).

However, practitioners in the field usually need to look for resources on their own in order to better understand cultural competence. Betancourt (2003) suggests that practitioners can enrich their understanding of cultural competence by examining their own attitudes, knowledge, and skills.

### Attitudes

Suggesting that practitioners begin their study of cultural competence by first learning about their own culture may seem counterintuitive. But assessing your own culture affects how you view other cultures. Western culture, for example, values qualities such as individualism, autonomy, financial success, and youth. The same qualities may or may not be important in other cultures. A practitioner who does not understand her/his own attitude towards culture runs the risk of seeing all culture through only one lens.

Fortunately, there are a number of websites designed to help practitioners, such as the [Vancouver Ethnocultural Advisory Committee](#) (Government of British Columbia Ministry for Children and Families, n.d.)

Efforts to change attitudes towards other cultures can be challenging and difficult to evaluate. Open conversations among professionals and clients that explore the impact of racism, sexism, class bias, and phobias are one way to analyse attitudes. Encouraging practitioners to demonstrate curiosity, empathy, respect, and humility towards those from other cultures is critical to effective communication and the honest evaluation of one's attitude towards others' cultures (Betancourt, 2003).

### Knowledge

To increase their knowledge, practitioners will often identify a certain cultural group and then look for specific information about this group. This process can stereotype individuals and fail to recognize the great diversity among people from a particular country.

For example, there are 62 languages indigenous to Mexico (Presidency of the Republic of Mexico, n.d.). A practitioner who assumes that everyone from Mexico shares the same language has limited cultural knowledge. This is likely to negatively affect both program design and delivery.

There are practical ways to gain cultural knowledge. Learning as much as possible about others' socio-cultural perspectives is essential. This knowledge also allows you to rely less on generalizations (Betancourt, 2003).

Ask your clients about the accuracy of your information to better understand the fluidity of culture and the diversity among groups. Share your

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information with other practitioners, participate in training sessions, and get information from reliable websites.

For example, an excellent resource from the [University of Calgary](#) (n.d.) provides an Alberta web-based resource for students and teachers organizing diversity projects.

### Skills

Practitioners demonstrate their skills through interviewing, communicating, recognizing, eliciting, and negotiating different core-cultural issues. One example of a practitioner skill is developing process-oriented instructions, e.g., participatory decision-making. Involving participants in decision-making makes it possible to overcome cultural barriers. Another opportunity for practitioners to build their skills is through participation in various cultural activities. By participating in social events and cultural festivals, practitioners can also learn from participants.

### An Example of Cultural Competence in Practice

The subject of cultural competence can be intimidating or overwhelming for some practitioners. The example below illustrates how to examine your attitudes towards culture and existing knowledge, and how to apply cultural skills to a specific situation.

Eye contact is an important aspect of Western culture. Fitness instructors routinely rely on eye contact to establish participants' understanding or interest in a particular concept, program suitability, or exercise intensity level. Practitioners raised in a Western culture make judgements about attentiveness, health, and safety based on eye-to-eye contact.

In our Western culture, avoiding eye contact is a sign of disrespect and cuts off an important method of non-verbal information gathering. Practitioners from a Western culture tend to accept and include people who make and hold eye contact.

In some cultures, eye contact can have a different meaning. For example, some Asian cultures view eye contact as shameful. In some African and Latino cultures, eye contact is considered disrespectful (Eyring, 2006; Ling, 1997). If your clients fail to make eye contact with you, you'll need to find other ways to gather information.

With a positive attitude and a desire for diverse cultural knowledge, a culturally competent practitioner can develop and practise cultural competence in designing and delivering programs. For example, you would not insist on eye contact, but would interpret a lack of eye contact within the particular cultural context.

Achieving cultural competence is a long-term process that requires individual, institutional, and societal change and creativity (Selig, Tropiano, & Green-Moton, 2006). Each practitioner can identify their attitudes towards other cultures, work with others to expand their knowledge of diverse cultures, and deliver programs and services that respect the needs of every client.

It is impossible to know about all cultures' customs and practices. However, our goal as fitness professionals should be to recognize those cultural differences that are important to our participants and work towards a mutually agreeable, healthy, and safe fitness environment. If you are looking for additional information, the [Alberta Association for Multicultural Education](#) (n.d.) is an ideal place to begin.

References for this article are available on the Alberta Centre for Active Living's website ([www.centre4activeliving.ca](http://www.centre4activeliving.ca)).



## Mission Statement of the Alberta Centre for Active Living

Working with practitioners, organizations, and communities to improve the health and quality of life of Albertans through physical activity.

### IF YOU HAVE ANY SUGGESTIONS OR QUESTIONS, WE'D LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU.

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Research and education for the promotion of physical activity