

CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS IN VETERINARY MEDICINE

TOPIC OVERVIEW

Latonia Craig, Ed.D. (she, her, hers)

AWARENESS

What is cultural responsiveness?

Cultural responsiveness is the ability to integrate strategies, interventions, or responses to improve outcomes for individuals (Plotts, 2020). In other words, it is the ability to incorporate what you know about someone's beliefs, customs, and practices into the way you provide care.

UNDERSTANDING

Key take-home messages.

- 1 Cultural responsiveness integrates what you know about someone's beliefs, customs, and practices into the way you provide care.
- 2 Practicing cultural responsiveness requires self-awareness which includes recognizing and dismantling biases and stereotypes.
- 3 Recognize that cultural norms exist for different groups of people, but also understand that people within the same culture may have unique values and beliefs.

TRANSFORMATION

Specific actions you can take to generate positive DEI change with your team, workplace, clients, and community.

- 1 Create a welcoming environment that reflects the diversity of your community. This can include displaying posters or artwork that represent different cultures or providing reading materials in different languages.
- 2 Audit online client reviews. If you notice multiple complaints about wait time, service, and inclusivity, these are areas where culturally responsive interventions can be implemented.
- 3 Review your intake form and revise it to include more opportunities for your clients to share information about their hobbies, interests, values, and beliefs.
- 4 Approach interactions with humility and a willingness to learn. Make a point to learn something new about your clients and coworkers and remember to ask about this topic the next time you see them.

TOPIC ESSAY

Cultural Responsiveness in Veterinary Medicine

Understanding Culture

Understanding culture is essential for understanding cultural responsiveness because culture influences and shapes the way people perceive, interpret, and respond to the world around them. Culture encompasses a wide range of aspects, including shared values, beliefs, and customs that can define a particular group, community, or individual. Regardless of a person's background, everyone possesses a unique cultural identity, which is influenced by various factors such as family, education, religion, language, and experiences.

By recognizing and appreciating the diversity within individuals and communities, we can foster inclusivity, empathy, and effective communication. Cultural responsiveness involves being aware of and valuing the cultural differences among us, ensuring that our interactions and practices are inclusive and respectful of all individuals and their unique cultural backgrounds.

To be culturally responsive, it is necessary to avoid making assumptions or generalizations based on stereotypes and approach everyone with an open mind and willingness to learn about their specific cultural context. By doing so, we can build meaningful connections, bridge communication gaps, and create an environment where everyone feels heard, understood, and respected.

Cultural Responsiveness

Cultural responsiveness integrates strategies, interventions, or responses to improve individual outcomes (Plotts, 2020). Dr. Geneva Gay, a prominent scholar and educator in multicultural education, coined the term "cultural responsiveness" (Gay, 2018). She is known for her extensive research on culturally responsive teaching, which emphasizes the integration of students' cultural backgrounds and experiences into the educational process. Although Dr. Gay's work primarily focuses on education, the principles and ideas behind cultural responsiveness have broader implications in fostering inclusive and equitable environments across different industries and sectors.

Cultural Responsiveness as a Strategy for Inclusion

The benefits gained from applying cultural responsiveness in industry are vast. In business and marketing, understanding the cultural nuances and preferences of different consumer groups has helped companies to tailor their products, services, and strategies to reach and engage diverse customer bases. Examples of these strategies include those of Frito-Lay, which recognized its diverse consumer bases and provided pathways to gain insight into various cultural preferences and tastes. Frito-Lay found that different communities have distinct snack preferences by engaging in intuitive market research and opening

“Cultural responsiveness involves being aware of and valuing the cultural differences among us, ensuring that our interactions and practices are inclusive and respectful of all individuals and their unique cultural backgrounds.”

dialogue for internal feedback from employees of all levels. Because of their interest in including the preferences of their consumer base, they expanded their market reach within the Hispanic community, gained new customers, and improved the brand perception of Frito-Lay as an inclusive and engaged company.

Similarly, in the nonprofit world, where the theme of people before profits leads in programming decisions, cultural responsiveness helps organizations to foster meaningful interventions. In 2010, I had the opportunity to contribute to a research project that investigated the impact of socioeconomic and cultural factors on the dietary practices and beliefs of underserved and underrepresented communities. Our research aimed to shed light on the complexities of nutrition-related disparities and explore potential avenues for promoting healthier eating habits and addressing the specific needs of these communities. In this study, we discovered that the accessibility of local stores influenced the nutritional choices of many groups living in a specific area. Access to acceptable produce in the local grocery store was limited or inadequate. Public transportation's additional cost and logistical challenges compounded this lack of accessibility. The desire to eat healthier was present and the ability to fulfill that desire was void. Creating a pathway to hear the community's needs wasn't just a game changer; it also allowed our team to integrate cultural responsiveness by sharing the findings in innovative ways. Those findings ignited discussions around establishing healthy food options and working with local churches and community groups to provide means for access to healthy food options.

As we think about the veterinary profession, consider a pet owner who may share challenges in understanding healthy food options for themselves. In that case, it is reasonable to wonder whether they might also find it challenging to determine what constitutes a healthy diet for their pet. In such cases, it becomes crucial to offer guidance and education to bridge this knowledge gap, fostering intentionality to provide thorough, meaningful care without judgment. As a result, a veterinary team can establish a strong partnership with clients to deliver unequivocal guidance on pet food options that precisely meets those specific needs. Through this collaborative approach, the veterinary team can empower pet owners to make informed decisions, fostering a strong foundation for their pet's overall health and happiness.

Additionally, if a provider has access to information that gives them insight into their client's beliefs and practices, it should be incorporated into the care plan. For instance, if a client shares that they are fasting for Ramadan, consider this when planning procedures. This can go a long way if a client sees that your care plan acknowledges their cultural background. In some East Asian cultures, traditional Chinese medicine may influence beliefs and practices. Discussing treatment options that integrate these principles or other holistic approaches, such as acupuncture or other alternative therapies, could prove beneficial. When practicing culturally responsive care, it is essential to remember that no cultural group is monolithic. Within any cultural, ethnic, or social group, there is a wide range of diversity, perspectives, beliefs, and practices. Acknowledging this while still practicing cultural responsiveness promotes a more nuanced understanding by encouraging open-mindedness and cultural humility—recognizing that each person should be treated as an individual rather than solely defined by their group identity.

“When practicing culturally responsive care, it is essential to remember that no cultural group is monolithic. Within any cultural, ethnic, or social group, there is a wide range of diversity, perspectives, beliefs, and practices.”

Promoting Effective Communication through Cultural Responsiveness

The critical factor in achieving cultural responsiveness is learning to ask the right questions to elicit an understanding of the client or pet owner's point of view. However, before a client is comfortable sharing their perspective, the first impression must be humanized. This step is initiated by offering a warm smile and genuine greeting, paying close attention to whom you are interacting with, avoiding interrupting, and allowing the person to express themselves fully. Try initiating casual conversation to create a more personal connection. Ask open-ended questions about their interests, hobbies, and experiences. Use it in the conversation if you have previous information about their name, occupation, or personal details. What did the client share on their client intake form that can be used to open a conversation? Using previously provided information in the initial meeting can demonstrate that a client's time was not wasted filling out forms. More importantly, referencing the client's profile shows that you value and see them as individuals. Pay attention to body language to ensure it is welcoming and engaging. Maintain an open posture and avoid crossing arms, which can be perceived as defensive or closed off. Humanizing the first impression creates a foundation for building a meaningful connection and effectively positions both the veterinarian and client for giving and receiving information as intended. But it doesn't stop there.

Meeting people where they are is essential in promoting effective communication through cultural responsiveness (Galanti, 2008). Culturally responsive strategies should include clear and culturally appropriate language. Engaging in culturally responsive care also means being attuned to how you communicate health care plans. Using plain language to communicate is necessary to minimize confusion in the healthcare field. Undoubtedly, using medical jargon is difficult to avoid, and when it is used, it must be translated to enable a client to make a clear and informed decision about their pet's health.

Examining healthcare materials given to pet owners should evaluate and incorporate plain language, such as patient education sheets and brochures. Materials should be user-friendly with clear headings and short paragraphs; visual aids can also help to convey complex concepts and procedures in a more straightforward and accessible manner.

Cultural responsiveness plays a vital role in bridging gaps in communication and can enhance pet health outcomes worldwide.

Unlocking the Power of Cultural Responsiveness as a Team Member

In Gay's work (2018), she outlines the steps necessary to attain cultural responsiveness. Self-work is an integral part of cultural responsiveness. It allows a colleague, clinician, team member, or leader to cultivate the necessary skills, awareness, and attitudes for effective cultural responsibility.

Self-awareness: When reflecting on personal cultural background and biases, it involves a process of introspection and self-awareness. This process is not a quick one-and-done. In the Harvard Business Review, they discovered that although 95% of people think they are self-aware, only 10%–15% are. Self-awareness requires dedicated time for self-reflection, preferably in a quiet and comfortable environment. Consider how those things may influence perception, attitudes, and behaviors while reflecting on your own cultural background, heritage, upbringing, and experiences. Reflect on the languages you speak, customs you practice, and communities you identify with. Ask yourself, “What steps do I take to ensure my communication and actions consider cultural diversity within the team?”

Identify biases and stereotypes: Be honest with yourself and identify any biases or stereotypes you may hold about different cultures and how those biases might appear. Consider situations in which you may have made assumptions, exhibited cultural insensitivity, or unintentionally perpetuated stereotypes. Ask yourself, “Have there been situations in which I've unknowingly made assumptions or exhibited cultural insensitivity?”

Take on moral imagination and put yourself in the shoes of others; this will lead to a different perspective. Moral imagination requires a strong sense of empathy by actively seeking to understand and appreciate the perspectives, experiences, and feelings of others. Learning is an integral part of this work. Take the initiative to learn about different cultures, histories, and perspectives. No one group is monolithic. Continuous learning will help to broaden your understanding and challenge any standing bias that may be present. Biases and cultural influences are part of being human. Ask yourself, “What actions am I taking to cultivate cultural sensitivity and expand my cultural awareness?”

Regularly reflect on your interactions with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Ask yourself, “How can I ensure that my words and actions promote inclusivity, respect, and cultural responsiveness? How do I hold myself accountable for addressing and mitigating my biases?”

“Only when culture itself is understood can differences be respected without sacrificing the connections that unite them” (Barrera et al.). We can build bridges of communication, empathy, and shared experiences by embracing cultural understanding. Understanding culture involves recognizing and appreciating the beliefs, values, traditions, and norms that shape our identity as humans and pet owners. ■

References

Barrera, I., Kramer, L., & Macpherson, D. (2012). *Skilled dialogue: Strategies for responding to cultural diversity in early childhood*. Brookes Publishing Company.

Galanti, G.A. (2015). *Caring for patients from different cultures*. University of Pennsylvania Press.

Gay, G. (2018). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.

Plotts, C. (2020). *Cultural intentions*. DBC Publishing.



Latonia Craig, Ed.D.

Dr. Latonia Craig is a prominent leader and advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion in the veterinary field. She is the inaugural chief diversity, equity, and inclusion officer for the American Veterinary Medical Association. In this role, she leads the development and implementation of strategic initiatives to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion within the veterinary community, nationally, and internationally.

Known for her dynamic leadership style, ability to engage and inspire others, and unwavering commitment to creating a more inclusive and equitable veterinary profession, Dr. Craig has received numerous accolades for advancing diversity and inclusion across various academic disciplines. She is often sought after as a keynote speaker and panelist at veterinary conferences and events and is widely recognized as a thought leader and change agent in veterinary medicine.

She holds a certified diversity professional certificate and an Insight Discovery practitioner license. Dr. Craig earned a bachelor's degree in political science, a master's degree in Pan-African studies from the University of Louisville, a master's degree in educational leadership from the University of Cincinnati, and a doctorate in leadership education from Spalding University.

RESOURCES

Krause, I.-B. (1993). Book review: Promoting cultural diversity: Strategies for health care professionals Kathryn Hopkins Kavanagh & Patricia H. Kennedy sage publications, 1992. pp. 162, Pb. £13.50; ISBN 0-8039-4657-0. *International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 39(4), 313–313.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/002076409303900407>

MeetingNotes.com. (n.d.). *10 rapport-building questions to build trust and connection quickly*.
<https://meetingnotes.com/blog/rapport-building-questions>

Minnican, C., & O’Toole, G. (2020). Exploring the incidence of culturally responsive communication in Australian healthcare: The first rapid review on this concept. *BMC Health Services Research*, 20(1), 20. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-019-4859-6>

Plotts, C. (2020). *Cultural intentions*. DBC Publishing.

Twin English Centres. (n.d.). *Learn to say hello in 50 languages*.
<https://www.twinenglishcentres.com/blog/learn-to-say-hello-in-50-languages>

The inclusion of resources by this author does not imply or constitute an endorsement by the American Veterinary Medical Association or the Veterinary Medical Association Executives.