GENERATING SOCIAL CAPITAL IN FIRST NATIONS
Learnings from the USIC *Project*

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Social capital has become a much-used phrase in academic literature to describe relationships of trust that evolve between partnering organizations, individuals, governments and academics. Using a case study approach this paper explores the mobilization of internal and external networks that occurred in the "Understanding the Strengths of Indigenous Communities" (USIC) project[1] to uncover some considerations for the generation of social capital within First Nations. The paper identifies some key factors to consider in the development of social capital in First Nations, including using strengths — rather than deficits. This entails respecting and including a diversity of perspectives and community members and establishing processes and protocols for relationships both within the community and with external partners and organizations. The paper concludes that building cross-cultural networks requires time, patience, perseverance, and effort, and will be constantly challenging. However, these networks may also benefit the collective interests of First Nations by encouraging community engagement and power-sharing within communities.

INTRODUCTION

As social beings, people have developed a wide variety of relationships that contribute to our ability to function and develop within society: family relationships, workplace and marketplace relationships, relationships arising from leisure, recreational, cultural and spiritual activities, all contribute to our development. More recently, there has been a growing recognition of the function that these relationships play in both our social and economic well-being, and the term "social capital" has been coined to reflect the benefit of these relationships to society.

Abundant research has illustrated that strengthening social capital is likely to improve the health and well-being of both individuals and communities (Fukuyama, 1990; Putnam, 2001; Premier's Council on Health Strategy, 1991) while simultaneously modern life, with its busyness and disruptions, tends to act contrary to the ongoing nurturing of social capital (Putnam, 1999).

The author acknowledges the support of the Department of Indian Affairs in preparing an early draft of this paper, the knowledge and friendship shared by the "Understanding the Strengths of Indigenous Communities" (USIC) research team, communities and participants, as well as the guiding influence of the late Dr. Cynthia Chataway.

In recognition of this growing body of knowledge, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded a Policy Research Initiative (PRI) in collaboration with Statistics Canada to explore the utilization of social capital as a public policy tool. The PRI suggested that to make social capital "a useful tool" policy makers must define it and identify "policy levers for affecting the many ways it is created, accumulated and utilized" (PRI, 2004: 5).

This paper attempts to shed some light on how social capital may be "created, accumulated and utilized" within First Nation communities, through exploring the processes and techniques employed by the "Understanding the Strengths of Indigenous Communities" (USIC) research project.[2] As a collaborative research project involving academics, First Nations and funders, a number of new networks were developed, while other networks were renewed or enhanced through the project. This type of collaboration provides some substantial learnings for the processes of respectful, social capital development — learnings that will be crucial to the development of public policy supporting social capital in First Nations communities.

This paper draws several conclusions regarding the generation of social capital within and among First Nation communities:

1. Use strengths as a starting point for dialogue (rather than starting with the "problem").
2. Find ways to be inclusive and involve a diversity of perspectives.
3. Clarify the terms of your working relationships early on.
4. Build in processes that respect the power relationships impacting on those you are working with.
5. Respect and work with differing world views — no one answer fits all.
6. Be flexible and persevere.
7. Find as many opportunities as possible for meeting in other First Nation communities — instead of meeting in cities, towns etc.
8. Discover how networks help in accessing resources.
9. Be prepared for longer-term involvement.

Background to the USIC Project

The USIC project extended over a period of almost 10 years, beginning with initial applications to SSHRC in the late 1990s, and culminating with the final community reports in 2007. Five First Nation communities from across Canada — Wagmatcook, Batchewana, Flying Dust, Teslin Tlingit and Saanich — stayed with the research project titled "Understanding the Strengths of Indigenous Communities" (USIC) until its conclusion. The research was unique in a number of ways:

- It focused on the strengths of the communities rather than on the problems.
- The researchers were drawn almost exclusively from their communities, then trained to use their skills to elicit community perceptions of First Nations' own strengths.
- It approached the concept of strength holistically, accepting that any one strength cannot be understood out of context of the larger social system.
- It focused on the processes through which strengths were developed and maintained.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the research was its focus on *process*, i.e., exploring how the strengths of relatively strong First Nations were developed and maintained over time. Rather than focusing on the actual achievement by itself, the research explored the process of each strength's development, how it was used to assist the community in growing and persevering, and how the community utilized its strengths to build and develop itself. The end goal of the research was to provide models of development that may be adapted by other First Nations communities for their own use.

USIC: A CASE STUDY OF SOCIAL CAPITAL DEVELOPMENT IN FIRST NATIONS

Social capital has been defined as "the networks of social relations that provide access to resources and support" (PRI, 2004) that exist both internally within communities, and in external networks between and among different communities. Research indicates that these networks have a number of shared characteristics:

- The network may be composed of individuals or of communities of interest or practice.
- They are composed of both strong ties (family, close friends) and weak ties (acquaintances, friend of friend, etc.) (Savory-Gordon, 2003; Granovetter, 1973).
- They are built on trust, reciprocity and shared values (Gilchrist, 2004).

These networks of social relations have proven to be of substantial benefit to both individuals and communities. For example, on an individual basis, "strong ties" such as those amongst family members or close friends, may provide support to an ill or grieving member, while weak ties may provide access to letters of reference for employment, or access to knowledge key to solving a particular problem. On a community basis, these networks increase a community's capacity to deal with adversity, through strengthening the community's resiliency.

The USIC project, a five year SSHRC-funded initiative led by the late Dr. Cynthia Chataway, formerly of York University, contributed to the development of social capital through a broad-based collaboration involving academics, First Nations and a wide variety of funding partners. Once the research process began, the USIC project developed networks in a variety of sites:

1. Within the Community (Bonding): Community Oversight Teams (COT), Focus groups
2. Between Indigenous Communities (Bridging): conference calls, meetings, final community celebrations
3. Between non-Indigenous Institutions and Indigenous Communities (Linking): academe, funders
4. Between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Communities: media reports on project, friendships within the project.

Two of these sites were "external" to the participating First Nations, i.e., the linkages between the non-Indigenous institutions and the communities, and between non-Indigenous and Indigenous communities, while the other two were "internal", i.e., between Indigenous individuals/groups within the community, or between Indigenous communities.

External Networks: Linking Non-Indigenous Institutions and Indigenous Communities

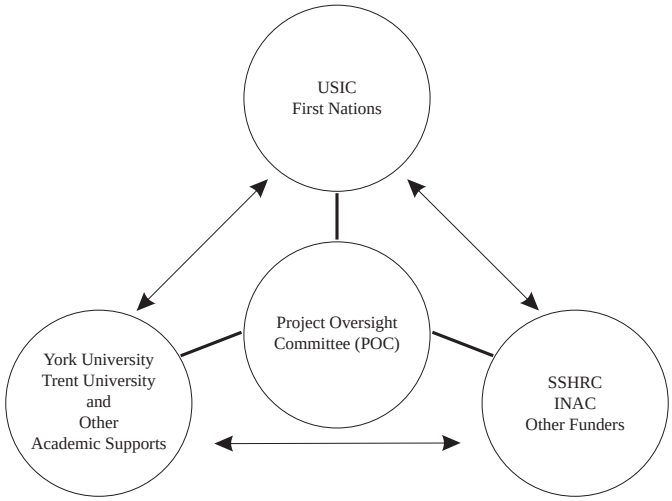
In 1999, Dr. Cynthia Chataway and Larry Sault, a former Chief from his community of Mississaugas of the New Credit, and former Grand Chief of Iroquois and Allied Indians, initiated the USIC project by posing the question "What type of research would be useful to First Nation communities?" to a group of twenty individuals, drawn primarily from First Nations. This initial meeting was composed of a group with whom the two principals had both "strong" and "weak" ties — all were known to them primarily from their work, Cynthia within the academic community working with Indigenous people, and Larry through his role as a First Nation Chief and Vice President of Canadian Executive Services Organization (CESO), Indigenous Services.

This first grouping eventually evolved into the "Project Oversight Committee" (POC), a group that would actively participate in the development of the research proposal, and then provide ongoing advice to the project throughout its five years of funding. After determining the research questions, i.e., "What are the strengths of Indigenous Communities? " And "How have these strengths been developed and maintained over time?" the POC selected a group of 53 people from across Canada to identify the First Nations which they considered to be relatively strong. Out of this group, eight First Nations were selected to be invited to join the project, with the intent to have as wide a range of cultures, strengths, and geographical locations as possible, within Canada.

This group then applied for funding to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), eventually obtaining a five-year Strategic Initiatives grant, as well as obtaining smaller but significant funding from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC).

The USIC project also brought together a group of academics drawn from a number of non-Indigenous institutions, and again, joined these groups with funders. Each community accessed research support from a local college or university, involving large, small and medium-sized institutions. While York University provided the lead, Trent University, University of Saskatchewan, First Nations University, Yukon

FIGURE 1
National Level Networks



Notes:
SSHRC is the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.
INAC is the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs.

College, Cape Breton University, Dalhousie and Algoma University all participated to a greater or lesser degree in the project. The wide network of academic support, drawn from a variety of disciplines, provided communities with an assurance that the research was both valid and valuable, contributing to their self-confidence in embarking on such a large research project.

The project also required the participation of a number of funders, and while some of these, such as Indian and Northern Affairs, had relationships with all the communities prior to the commencement of USIC, for others it was a new relationship which led to unforeseen outcomes, such as a conference on traditional forms of governance in Teslin Tlingit First Nation.

The involvement of academics and funders through USIC with the participating communities, encouraged the development of social relations in a non-threatening manner, i.e., in such a way as to allow the development of weak ties, that may eventually develop into stronger ones. Chataway (2002) has pointed out the advantages for 'outsider' facilitation of a dialogue process; by developing links with outsider institutions, USIC may have promoted opportunities for Indigenous communities to identify outsiders with whom they could be sufficiently comfortable to eventually invite to such a process.

The external networks then can be characterized by Figure 1.

External Networks: Linking Non-Indigenous and Indigenous Communities

The USIC project also supported networks of relations between non-Indigenous and Indigenous communities, primarily through presentations of research findings, media reports on the project, and friendships developed within the project. The research findings had applicability across a wide spectrum of disciplines, thus presentations on the research findings aroused interest from numerous quarters. Presentations to groups as diverse as scientists, political scientists, health care providers and policy makers, and economic developers arose from the USIC research.[3] Additionally, the project garnered local, regional and

national interest through media attention. At the beginning of each community's research, local media outlets were provided with a press release, which in at least some communities, created ongoing interest in the project. A national website, coverage in regional magazines as well as academic journals, continued to build relationships with non-Indigenous communities.

Perhaps the closest relationships however, developed through the friendships established within the USIC network. A number of the research supervisors and students working on the project were drawn from outside of Indigenous communities, and these individuals, on many occasions, formed close relationships not only with the community researchers, but also with the First Nation community with whom they were most engaged. Making presentations to Chief and Council and to the Community Oversight Team on a regular basis; completing funding applications; developing newsletters for community-wide distribution; working with the community researchers and other interested community members to complete the research all contributed to the establishment of such friendships, and in some communities, researchers from the national office resided with community members, sometimes for extended periods.

Both the local networks and the national network intersected at various points and over the life of the project meetings with a meeting of people from all of the groups on at least three occasions. Additionally, the structures interconnected through a variety of different processes. For example national funders often had connections with local research supervisors and local communities, as they funded individual pieces of the research, such as a case study. For example, Batchewana researchers and academic support from Algoma University were involved with the Department of Heritage Canada, which funded a case study on culture at Batchewana First Nation (BFN).

Internal Networks within the Participating Communities

The USIC project, as indicated above, invited a number[4] of relatively strong First Nation communities from across Canada to participate in the research. In accordance with suggested principles for network mobilization (Chataway, 2002), the research director approached the Chief and Council of each community first, and obtained their support in the form of a Band Council Resolution. This approach demonstrated USIC's respect for the political power-holders in the community, and encouraged community members' participation through the assurance of the leadership's endorsement. At the local level, each participating First Nation established a structure similar to that of the national project, with a local college or university providing research support, a local Community Oversight Team (COT), funders, and of course the First Nation community (see Figure 2).

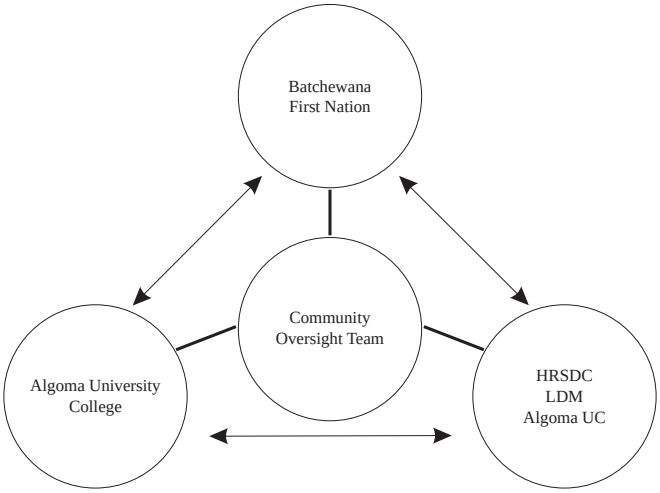
In each of the participating USIC communities, at least two sites were created for network development: the Community Oversight Team (COT), and in the focus groups. Each of these provided differing levels of participation and different access points.

Each community was asked to form its own "Community Oversight Team" (COT) composed of 10–12 members of the First Nation, and reports were regularly provided to COT, Chief and Council, and members of the community. The composition of the COT varied from community to community, but in general, a group of ten to twelve community members volunteered or were appointed by Chief and Council to oversee the ongoing work of the project.

Although the COT's primary purpose was to ensure that the research accurately reflected the community's reality, the COT members played various roles in the participating communities. Often they acted as a conduit of information between the research and the community; sometimes they lobbied Chief and Council or funding agencies for additional monies to support the ongoing work or assisted the project in accessing other resources; often they encouraged the participation of community members in the research processes. Generally the COT met once per month throughout the research process, and reviewed each of the documents produced by USIC prior to its general release to the community and beyond.

In some communities, the COT provided an opportunity for the creation of a network with "crosscutting ties" (Chataway, 2004: 68), in that representatives of different social groups within the community were encouraged to participate. The COT members' participation in the various

FIGURE 2
Local USIC Structure, Using Batchewana First Nation as An Example



Notes:
HRSDC (Human Resources and Skills Development Canada) is the federal department responsible for developing human resources and skills policies and programs.
LDM is the Local Delivery Mechanism some First Nations have established to deliver programs on behalf of HRSDC.

community meetings, open houses and feasts that each community organized as part of the USIC process, also contributed to this broader network formation. Also, the training in research methods provided at the beginning of the community research process, was offered to any community member who might choose to participate, at no cost, and was usually well attended by prospective COT members.

A key site for network development which the USIC process created was contained within the research methodology, in that 12–17 focus groups were held in each participating community. The focus groups engaged approximately five to eight people in each group, discussing in a structured process, over a two to three hour period, the strengths of the participating community. The structured format ensured that each participant's opinions was heard in a safe environment, where ideas were not critiqued and consensus on relationships between strengths was required.

These structured discussions, focused around the positive theme of the communities' strengths, provided participants with a space which encouraged "... dialogue designed to improve communication and understanding" (Chataway, 2002: 72), the first step in the process of building social cohesion. Participation in the focus group discussions led to an almost universal endorsement by participants of the dialogue process (Broad, Boyer and Chataway, 2004) and the opportunity to hear differing perspectives from a wide variety of community members.

Between Indigenous Communities (Bridging)

USIC also created the space for social capital development between Indigenous communities through the communities' involvement in a national research project. Researchers participated in monthly conference calls, where they were encouraged to share successes, challenges and problem-solve issues arising from the

project. This participation gradually developed a network between the communities, solidified by their meeting on a number of occasions, sometimes through training planned by the project itself, but at other times as a result of funding conditions or presentation of the findings.

The community researchers and research supervisors were most able to participate in community–to-community networking, with some opportunities for researchers to actually visit one another's First Nation. These exchanges were identified by the community researchers as some of the most valuable experiences of the USIC project (Schmidt, 2005) and provided them with an opportunity to share their knowledge and learn from each other, thereby encouraging empowerment. As the researchers shared their knowledge and improved their skills as researchers, they participated in "An empowering process [that] engages people as co-participants and designers of their own change" (Chataway, 2002: 73).

Network Evolution and Sources of Social Capital

As the sections above illustrate, the USIC project created both external and internal networks of relationships, both at the organizational or community level, as well as at the individual level. These relationships evolved over time: some, such as the relationships between research supervisors and community researchers became stronger, while other networks expanded to create larger groupings of "weak ties" such as the relations between community researchers and funders.

The major sources of social capital for the USIC project were accessed from three areas: academe, funders of social research (primarily SSHRC and government departments), and the First Nation communities themselves. Key personnel within these differing sites leveraged resources and extended the network development through a commitment to the project itself and to inclusive practices which encouraged broad-based community participation.

The project's design provided structural sources of social capital: in an effort to address power differentials within First Nation communities (Chataway, 2002) the research methodology employed numerous access points to participation, and encouraged respectful dialogue among participants. Due to the nature of a national project with limited funding, local research supervisors were required to mobilize local resources and thus engage local interest, further utilizing relations with local institutions and First Nation organizations.

BUILDING RESPECTFUL SOCIAL RELATIONS: PROCESSES AND PRINCIPLES OF USIC

Chataway (2004) emphasizes the need for outsiders respecting both the culture and the politics of First Nations in the process of developing working relationships. This theme has been explored by many others, including action researchers (Reitsma-Street and Brown, 2004).

The USIC project established a number of processes and principles to ensure that respectful relations resulted from the collaboration in two main areas: the definition of the research itself, and secondly, in the control of the research findings. USIC involved participants both in defining the research questions and the research methodology, as well as developing the protocols for the dissemination of the findings. Each of these raised however a number of challenges for the project, and resulted in self-questioning for many of the researchers and supervisors (Schmidt, 2009).

Defining the Research Parameters

As mentioned earlier, the USIC project began when Dr. Cynthia Chataway and Larry Sault convened a meeting of twenty people, composed of seventeen Indigenous and three non-Indigenous people. The question posed to the first meeting of what later became the POC, was "What kind of research would be useful to Indigenous communities?" This question offered a wide-open space for discussion and later collaboration, as community members were afforded the opportunity to define the research questions. Out of this discussion developed the two research questions which guided the USIC project: What are the strengths of Indigenous communities? And How have these strengths been developed and maintained over time?

The involvement of the POC members did not end at this point however, instead they con-

tinued to meet to further determine which communities represented relatively strong First Nations that should be invited to participate, and their participation was evident in the development of the selection process. Rather than the POC themselves nominating the communities, they brainstormed a group of 53 individuals who would be knowledgeable about First Nations from across the country, and asked them to nominate those communities which they felt would be "relatively strong" First Nations. Finally, from this group, the POC invited those communities which they felt would represent a true diversity (in terms of size, proximity to urban centres, regions, cultural diversity, etc).

Ownership of the Research Findings

Once the communities were identified, the research director approached the Chief and Council of each and obtained a Band Council Resolution supporting the project. This was an essential part of the project's structure, as approval of Chief and Council signified the formal acceptance of the project's presence in the community. At this point, the community was notified by way of a widely-distributed press release, also approved by Chief and Council, advising the community that the project was underway. Throughout the research community members were consistently reassured of the legitimacy of the project's presence in the First Nation by the assurance that a BCR had indeed been obtained, as were various funders who required this stamp of approval for the project.

A number of factors contributed to ensuring that the community itself would have control over the dissemination of the research findings, following the agreement by Chief and Council for the research to be conducted within their First Nation. First, a protocol had been designed that accorded the COT the authority to deny dissemination of any materials. Once the COT and Chief and Council had approved the publication/distribution of materials, the findings were distributed throughout the community through the website, newsletters, and through a package to be distributed in the mailbox of every community member. Each First Nation member was thus accorded the opportunity to explore in detail the research findings, question the researchers and/or research, and dispute or discuss the findings thoroughly.

Challenges for Respectful Relations

While the USIC project was founded with progressive processes and structures in the building of respectful relations, the project found a number of challenges for the development of respectful relations that required additional work.

Ermine's (2005) proposition of the creation of "ethical space" suggests that cross-cultural collaborations require a concerted approach to relationship development that goes beyond structures and processes towards a new consciousness of cross-cultural initiatives. Ermine suggests that to date, the engagement between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples frequently leads to misunderstanding due to different worldviews, where words and descriptors have differing meanings, resulting in differing understandings of what is being agreed to, leading to misunderstandings that can be profound.

In the USIC project, academics and communities held different expectations, for example, around authorship of journal articles, research reports and presentations. For example, some of the students working on the project had need for sole authorship on certain pieces of work for the completion of academic degree requirements, while communities sometimes felt that acknowledgement of community knowledge, included acknowledgement of authorship. In other cases, communities felt that the knowledge contained in a case study or focus group report, for example, was the community's knowledge and as such, no one or even several authors should claim authorship as the knowledge was derived from the community. Additionally, funders also at times required/desired changes be made to reports before or after they had been approved by the community representatives, leaving the project in a dilemma as to how to respond, with deadlines that were completely unfeasible given the community approval protocol. This left research supervisors in difficult situations trying to meet the requirements of several "bosses" — the funder, the COT, Chief and Council, and the national project.

These misunderstandings resulted in individuals in all locations within the research project struggling to find that "ethical space" to which

Ermine refers, yet also finding that that space, and the processes and principles that result in the creation of respectful relations, is key to the mobilization of networks which provide due respect to each of the partners.

Role of Strong and Weak Ties in Accessing Resources

The social capital literature discusses the relative advantages of both strong and weak ties in accessing resources, and outlines that weak ties, i.e., ties that are more of an "acquaintance" nature than a friendship or family member, may actually be most advantageous in terms of leveraging or accessing resources. The literature provides the example that while family and close friends may be essential for enduring a particularly difficult emotional or physical trauma, it is more likely to be an acquaintance that provides the key to accessing a job or a bank loan.

The USIC project found that both types of ties were fruitful to the project, but that indeed, it was through the "weak ties" that some of the key resources were accessed. For example, the research supervisors were on occasion appointed or selected by Chief and Council — a strong tie to the community, but on other occasions were referred through the academic research support committees. In one case, an academic became aware of the USIC project through the website, eventually providing a link to a funder; often one potential funder who might be unable to assist themselves, would provide a referral to another funder who was able to assist.

The process of accessing resources through weak ties leads to a number of challenges for First Nations communities. First, the USIC project found that this type of access required substantial time investments, and a highly motivated and skilled individual(s) who could negotiate with tact and diplomacy. The language of funders varies according to the particular government department or ministry, or foundational focus; and required the project to be highly sophisticated in both its approach and presentation. Many of these resources also required the use of academic or technical language which would preclude any First Nation community which did not have ready access to that type of expertise.

First Nations may also be at a disadvantage in the initial development of "weak ties" — INAC was frequently identified to USIC as the funder responsible for all First Nations initiatives, but USIC through its academic connections was able to access substantially more funding than would have been available had INAC been the sole funding source. Linking First Nations with academics, or with other progressive organizations, may be one way to develop some additional weak ties that will advantage them in seeking other resources.

IMPLICATIONS OF LEARNINGS FROM USIC FOR SOCIAL CAPITAL GENERATION IN FIRST NATIONS

According to Chataway (2004) for development in First Nations communities to be deemed successful would require two outcomes: first, that the project contributes to sharing power more broadly within First Nation communities; and second, that the project support Indigenous culture through the advancement of collective community interests over individual benefits. An analysis of the USIC project indicates a number of learnings on both of these fronts, as well as on the process of developing social capital in First Nation communities, findings which may be of high value to those interested in economic development.

Strengths as the Starting Point of Dialogue

A key learning from the USIC project is the importance of using community strengths — not deficits — as the starting point for community dialogue. This focus provided a rich site for discussion, embracing diverse opinions and perspectives and giving community members an opportunity to take pride in their community. Often, one participant would identify a 'strength' that others had never considered, or had no knowledge of or no experience with, which most discussions also demonstrated a number of areas where community members shared common values and beliefs (e.g., 'elders', 'youth', or the natural resources of the community).

Discussing strengths for two or three hours left participants feeling good about the experience, and often willing to participate further in

the project itself. Often people regretted having to leave early or before they had a chance to say all they wanted to. It was not uncommon for participants to state at the conclusion of a session "we've barely scratched the surface" of strengths. At the conclusion of Batchewana's project in 2005, over 100 people came to the closing feast, a demonstration of the enthusiasm for the project and in Flying Dust First Nation, a similar event attracted an even larger group.

Using focus groups as method, encouraged a diversity of community members to be involved — for example, a group might be composed of young mothers, or elders, or students — reducing anxiety about 'not having anything to say'. By targeting different groupings within the community, the focus groups also provided an opportunity to include groups who might not often be heard, such as persons with disabilities, or youth.

The opportunities which USIC community based researchers had to visit one another's communities emerged as a strength of the project itself. For many, it was a unique experience, in that many researchers indicated they had not visited other First Nations before, and the strong desire to meet more frequently with other communities and community members was expressed many times throughout the project. Creating the space for exchanges between First Nations, so that community members can share their knowledge and experience, is clearly an important step in generating social capital within First Nations, and strengths-based dialogue could provide a facilitating focus.

Power-sharing in the USIC Project

The structures and processes of the USIC project led to a broader power sharing than what occurs in most research, both internally within each of the participating First Nations, and externally between First Nations, academics and funders.

Internally, power was shared by the Chief and Council, COT members, and research participants by approval protocols that ensured that no one group or individual could control the outcome. By reporting back to the full community, USIC ensured the integrity of the research findings while the COT and Chief and Council were able to determine how broadly these findings were disseminated. The regular reporting gave assurances to everyone involved that there would be no major surprises in the final reports of the project.

Externally, the roles of the participating communities, academics and funders were all clearly defined in the materials developed and shared throughout the project, avoiding (for the most part) major misunderstandings. The free flow of information also ensured a level of power-sharing, as each of the COT members had access to the same information as the POC with regard to the funding processes, the resources of the project, the research methodology — in short, the full outline of the project. Some of the challenges of the project revolved not around the lack of access to information, but rather the processing of large quantities of information.

As identified earlier, there are still some areas where power-sharing between academics and First Nations have not been fully resolved within the USIC project, where there is still a need for the creation of an "ethical space" wherein this can be negotiated. The learnings from USIC would indicate that this is an area that needs to be addressed before further progress on protocol development can be made.

Finally, power-sharing between funders, academics and First Nations has still not been fully realized within the USIC project, although a number of funders did demonstrate a new willingness and understanding of how essential this is. Research that respects community processes and community knowledge is going to take longer, and old accountability mechanisms that do not reflect the community's culture or the respect for community protocols can only serve to undermine power-sharing. USIC, due to the size and scope of the project, was forced to rely on a wide variety of funders (and of course, funders like to include various partners in larger ventures such as this) but some of the requirements of the funders made almost impossible demands on project personnel. Researchers and academics selected for their skills and knowledge of research methodology and community practices, were also obliged to become project managers, adept at budgeting, managing personnel, deadlines and bank statements, and reporting to a variety of masters. For several of the participating communities, these demands proved exceedingly onerous and contributed to personnel stress and turnover.

Collective vs. Individual Benefits

Chataway (2004) points out that frequently development in First Nations benefits individuals at the cost of the collective interests of the community, and Navarro (2002) suggests that this is one of the risks of policies supporting the creation and accumulation of social capital. The USIC project was designed with the intent to benefit the collective interests of First Nations by disseminating knowledge to communities about how relatively strong First Nations have developed and maintained their strengths.

There is no doubt that the USIC project has benefited some individuals, in that those most intimately involved with the project have developed their individual skills, and have also expanded their own personal networks, giving them some advantage in future endeavours. The creation of social capital has however not been restricted to the individuals employed in, or overseeing, the project, as outlined in Section 2. The external relationships developed between First Nations, First Nations and academics and First Nations and funders, may have provided access to resources for the collective benefit of the community.

The question that remains outstanding of course, is whether these weak ties will provide the community with sufficient leverage to continue to redistribute power within its membership, and empower itself as a collective identity. There are indications that it will: the recognition that has accrued to the participating communities, as they shared their knowledge with others, likely provided them with further opportunities to leverage the relationships. It is impossible to know how extensively the knowledge resulting from the USIC project has been disseminated or how it may have influenced those communities which are less strong, but the collective benefits of this type of relationship development may have been significant.

Measuring Social Capital

The Policy Research Initiative's report on measuring social capital (June 8, 2004) suggested a variety of methods for the measurement of social capital. In exploring the creation and accumulation of social capital within the USIC project, it is evident that the measurement of social capital is a challenging exercise. People tend to forget how they first became connected to a particular funding department, or how they first met an individual who later acted as a connecting link to another organization. Strong ties are certainly better recalled than weak ones.

The USIC research explores the *process* of development, and thus a number of the case studies suggest how one tie leads to another, much as Gladwell (2002) suggests in his book "The Tipping Point", there are some individuals, and even some organizations that act as "clearinghouses" providing information, and connecting similarly interested people or organizations with others. No doubt these connecting links — or "nodes" as they are referred to in the social capital literature — are crucial to the creation of social capital, but Ermine's work, and the USIC experience, strongly suggests that in the First Nation context, such nodes may need to be evaluated critically. Indiscriminate engagement by First Nation communities with other organizations may lead to further support for unhealthy power structures, or alternatively, contribute to further deterioration in the strengths that have ensured their current levels of perseverance and resiliency.

CONCLUSIONS

The learnings from the USIC project can provide substantial guidance on developing networks between outsiders and First Nation communities, as well as developing networks within communities themselves. Its adherence to a set of pre-established protocols for research processes, its respect for existing governance structures, and its intent to share power within the participating communities, all demonstrate a sound foundation for building healthy relationships, and its focus on strengths provides a sound starting point for discussion.

The project also raises a number of challenges for the outsider working with First Nations:

- Establishing a set of mutually agreed cultural understandings
- Identifying insiders who are able and willing to participate in a collaborative process
- Identifying outsiders who are committed to community capacity building

- Working within a community's timeframe
- Investing sufficient time and resources in the pre-research period to allow for true collaboration on the identification of research questions and research design
- Ongoing investment of both time and resources to maintain and sustain a lengthy project

For USIC, one of the greatest challenges was locating and supporting the key personnel — both insiders and outsiders — who were prepared to make a long-term commitment to a project that could not provide any ongoing stability. For the insiders, only a strong belief in the benefits to the community kept them going through funding instability and their own need for financial security. For the outsiders, where much of the work was being conducted without the signposts of traditional research, motivation to continue had to come from within. The support provided by monthly conference calls and emails helped, but not nearly so much as face-to-face meetings, and in future projects of this scope, it is recommended that semi-annual meetings be built into the planning.

Developing social relations between diverse groups such as academics, First Nations and funders, requires patience, an ongoing commitment from all parties to dialogue, the flexibility to make adjustments, and a willingness to change. Establishing policy to support the development of such relations is challenging: people often think they are flexible until they are confronted with values/realities that challenge their own worldview. A project or initiative that creates "ethical space" for a new relationship to develop, requires a profound commitment by all parties to ensuring that this engagement results in respectful relations, and may, as Ermine (2007) suggests, require that disengagement occur — perhaps more than once — so that the ethical space can be ongoing.

NOTES

1. Understanding the Strengths of Indigenous Communities (USIC) was a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded project, involving 8 First Nations from across Canada. The project was led by the late Dr. Cynthia Chataway of York University.
2. It should be noted that the USIC project was not intended as a project which would create 'social capital'. Social capital creation and development was simply an unintended outcome of the project.
3. For example, conference presentations to CANDO in 2004 and 2005, Health Canada First Nations and Inuit Health Branch in 2006, etc.
4. The number of participating communities changed over time as some First Nations began the process, but later decided that they were unable to continue for a variety of reasons. Thus, while a total of eight communities were engaged in some of the processes, five communities actually completed the final research process. Not all eight communities were engaged at the same time.

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