INSTITUTIONAL "INCOMPLETEDNESS": THE CHALLENGES IN MEETING THE NEEDS OF CANADA'S URBAN ABORIGINAL POPULATION

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ABSTRACT / RÉSUMÉ

A substantial share of Canada's Aboriginal people live in cities where the provision of services is often rendered complex owing to a wide variety of residential patterns. The institutional response to addressing the needs of the growing urban aboriginal population is the Aboriginal Friendship Centre. First established by Aboriginal people in the 1950's the AFC's are today the largest off-reserve Aboriginal network of institutions in the country and provide an extensive range of programs and services. On the basis of an analysis of a national survey of aboriginal opinion around the effectiveness of the AFC's, it is contended here that while these institutions are seen as generally successful in responding to the cultural needs of their constituents, AFC's will need to better define roles and relationships with the broader institutional network when it comes to addressing the economic condition of aboriginal peoples.

Une grande partie des peoples autochtones habitent où l'offre des services est compliquée par une grande variété de tendances résidentielles. La réponse institutionnelle pour remplir les besoins d'une population autochtone grandissante est le Programme des centres d'amitié autochtones. Établis par les Autochtones dans les années 1950s, les Centres d'amitié autochtones sont aujourd'hui les réseaux autochtones les plus importants hors des réserves et fournissent une gamme de programmes et services. En se basant sur une analyse d'une enquête nationale sur l'opinion autochtone de l'efficacité des Centres, cet article affirme que bien que ces institutions répondent généralement avec succès aux besoins culturels de leurs membres, les Centres doivent définir leur rôle et leurs relations à un réseau institutionnel plus large pour adresser la condition économique des peuples autochtones.

INTRODUCTION

In his widely acclaimed work on the institutional completeness of ethnic communities, sociologist Raymond Breton (1964) maintained that the greater the degree of a community's organizational capacity, the stronger its sense of group consciousness. Institutional completeness is characterized by the degree to which a given group possesses a network of institutions that can respond to the needs of those who identify with the community. Breton contended that the wider the range of services the community could deliver, the greater the opportunity for the preservation of the group's identity. Over time, supporters and detractors of the idea have respectively contributed to refining the concept. Amongst the issues raised was the source of funds for community institutions and the conditions set out by organizational stakeholders with regards to the priority in the delivery of services. This further raised the issue of a group's institutional autonomy, notably where government is the principal source of funding.

In Canada, the role of preserving Aboriginal identities is undoubtedly influenced by the extent to which the communities are institutionally complete. Among the indicators for assessing whether community institutions contribute to the wellness of their constituents are such things as the degree of awareness of the institutions, the extent to which the services are being employed by constituents and the perceived impact of the program in attaining prescribed objectives. How and by whom such issues are evaluated has an important bearing on community governance, which in turn has an impact on the establishment of priorities.

This paper examines the role of Aboriginal Friendship Centre(s) (hereafter AFCs) and the extent to which they meet the criteria for contributing to institutional completeness. The findings will be based in large part on an evaluation of AFCs done by the department of Canadian Heritage in 2003 and, in particular, a survey commissioned by the firm EKOS to provide a more detailed assessment. The survey involved 606 completed interviews with Aboriginal people (16 years of age or older) living in urban communities where AFCs are located (the margin of error is +/-4.0% for the entire sample and +/-7 to +/-12% for most sub-groups).

In analyzing the extent to which Aboriginal people perceive AFCs to be effective, particular attention will be directed at two sub-groups: those who have lived on a reserve or First Nations community for at least six months; and, those who have not. We will also consider the issue of whether the AFCs strengthen ties between Aboriginal people and, if so, whether this occurs at the expense of building bridges with Non-Aboriginal people.

BACKGROUND

Established by Aboriginal peoples in the 1950's, AFCs were the principal institutional response to addressing the needs of the growing urban Aboriginal population. The first AFCs were intended to be "drop-in centres" where social interaction and networking took place often in Aboriginal languages. By 1968, there were over 25 AFCs across Canada and they took on greater responsibilities by providing referral or direct access to various services. Today, AFC's are the largest off-reserve Aboriginal service infrastructure in Canada. They provide services in such areas as housing, education, human resource development and employment, youth and family, health, recreation and culture to off-reserve First Nations, Non-Status Indian, Métis and Inuit people.

AFCs initially relied on volunteers, fundraising events, private donations, grants from foundations, and project funding from provincial and federal governments. In 1972, federal funding was extended under the Aboriginal Friendship Centre Program (AFCP) to support the activities that encourage equal access and participation in Canadian society of urban Aboriginal people while fostering and strengthening Aboriginal cultural distinctiveness. To effectively deliver programs, AFCs have developed a diverse network of community and government linkages.

The effectiveness of AFC's is of considerable importance to its stakeholders – perhaps more so today than ever. As has been documented extensively elsewhere, including in this journal (see paper by Guimond), the urban Aboriginal population continues to grow in both size and complexity. In this context, the relevance of programming designed to support urban Aboriginal people is clear – as is the importance of ensuring that this programming responds to the needs and concerns of urban Aboriginal communities.

KNOWLEDGE AND USE OF THE AFCs

As noted above, among the criteria for determining the degree of completeness is the level of awareness of the institutions on the part of community membership. Aboriginal residents were asked to rate their own level of knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal Friendship Centres and what they do. The EKOS survey asked two question of Aboriginal residents living in areas where AFCs are located to test their awareness. On the basis of an unprompted question, some one quarter of respondents referred to AFCs when asked whether they were able to identify any organizations offering services for Aboriginal people in their community. Some 53% were able to identify organizations other than AFCs. Approximately one in three were unable to identify such organizations. When asked,

however, in a follow up question whether they had heard of AFCs, an important majority (82%) responded positively. Probing yet further about how knowledgeable they were about AFCs, some 14% rated themselves as very knowledgeable, another 43% as somewhat knowledgeable, and 42% saying they were not very knowledgeable. Not surprisingly, there is a link between knowledge and use of AFCs: those who have visited an AFC are far more inclined to rate themselves as very knowledgeable, than those who have not visited a centre.

As to the use of AFCs, overall 58% of Aboriginal residents have visited a Centre, whereas 42% have not. Some two-thirds that are aware of the Centres (67%) indicated that they have visited them. A majority of that group had been to a Centre within the past two years. Hence, one-third of Aboriginal residents that are aware of AFCs have never been to one. Although they provide a variety of services to Aboriginal people, a social visit is the most common reason for visiting an AFC (this accounts for half of all responses for those visiting a local AFC in the previous two years). Others services most frequently sought in visiting AFCs are education and culture (39% each), programs for youth (36%) and employment (34%). Health and child-related programs and information are sought approximately one-quarter of the time (28 and 25 per cent, respectively). One in five visitors to AFCs said that they have not used a program or service.

The table below provides figures for the actual number of programs in each area and the number of participants. As to program expenditure during the year 2003-2004, most funds were directed at health programming (37%), youth programming (21%) and housing (9%), Justice (6.5%) and housing (6.5%).

TABLE 1: Participants in AFC Programs, (2003-2004)

TYPE OF PROGRAMMING	# OF PROGRAMS	# OF PARTICIPANTS
Health	302	110,205
Justice	78	29,526
Education	62	8,147
Employment	75	32,721
Language	8	1,435
Youth	197	92,771
Sports (not recreational)	12	10,647
Cultural	55	98,258
Housing	25	35,115
Economic Development	7	28,442
Other	81	58,193
Total	902	

SATISFACTION AND PURPOSE OF FRIENDSHIP CENTRES

When asked about satisfaction with programs and services used, between 81 and 84 per cent of program users said that they are satisfied. There is no one program or service that engenders more (or less) satisfaction than the others. Virtually everyone who attends a program or uses a service is satisfied with it (at least four in five are), with little difference in satisfaction levels between the different programs. About half of the visitors obtain referrals to a program or service and satisfaction levels are equally high on this front.

Close to three-quarters of Aboriginal people surveyed by EKOS agree that AFCs are a place to participate in activities in their language and relate to their culture. A similar percentage agree that they help Aboriginal people to feel connected to their community. Two-thirds remark that AFCs provide a safe haven for urban Aboriginal people. Agreement with the view that AFCs offer a place to participate in activities in their language and to relate to their culture declines with age (from 81% of those under 35 to 68 per cent of those 55 and older) because they tend to not know about them.

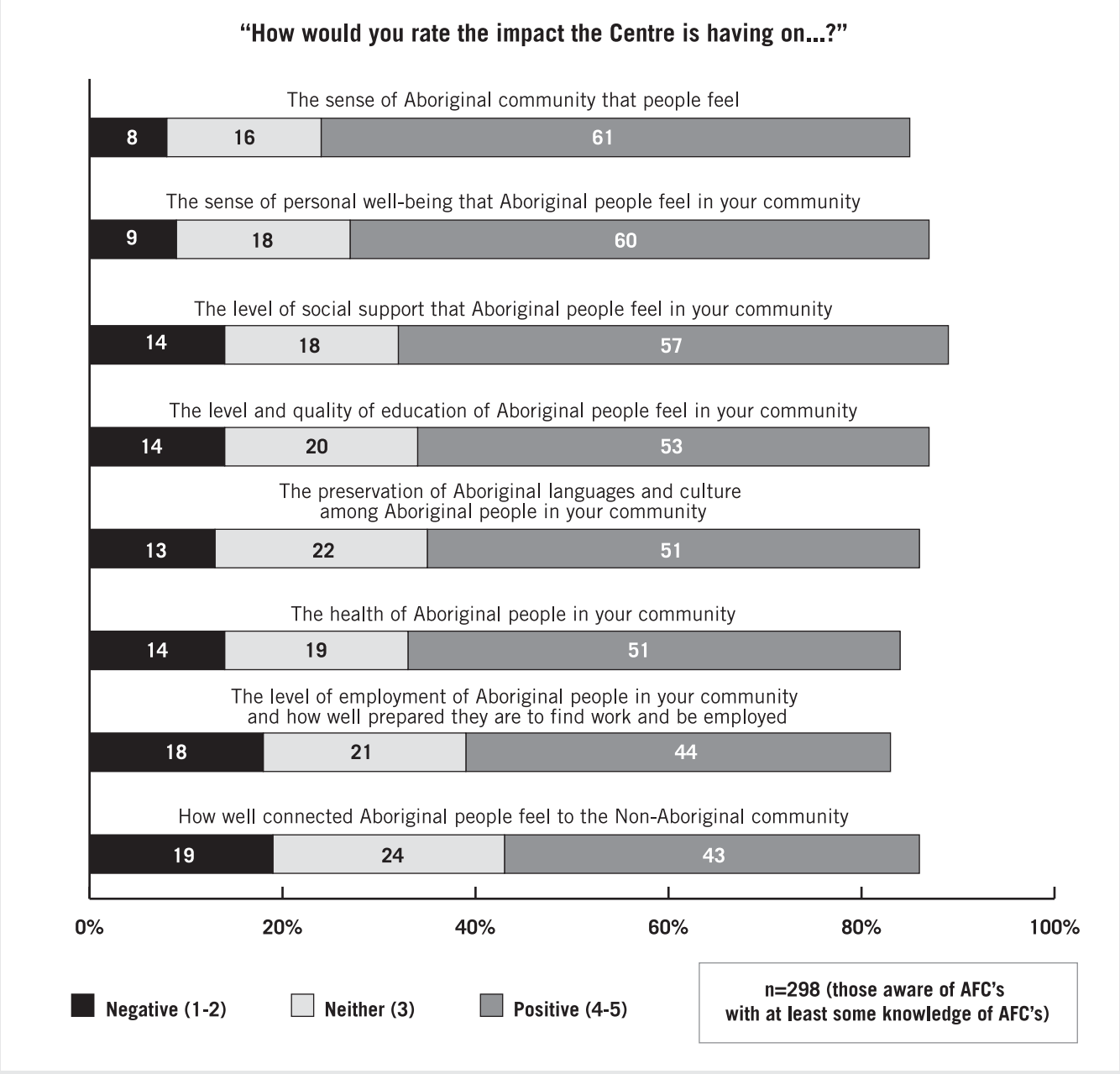
The impact of AFCs appears to be viewed as moderate when rated by Aboriginal respondents with some awareness of them. As illustrated in the table below, six in ten respondents agree that AFCs have a positive impact on the sense of Aboriginal community as well as on the sense of personal well-being. Just less than six in ten agree that AFCs have a positive impact in the community on the level of social support. About one in two agree that AFCs have a positive impact on the level and quality of education (53%), the health of Aboriginal people, and preservation of Aboriginal languages and culture (51%). Respondents felt that the AFC's had a lesser impact on the level of employment of Aboriginal people to the non-Aboriginal community (43%).

In the next section, we will examine the degree to which those respondents that have lived on a reserve or in a First Nation community for at least six months and those that did not differ on the extent to which they perceive AFCs to be effective. We focus on those persons that have heard of AFCs. Whether or not one reported living on a First Nation community, the percentage contending that friendship centers provide a safe haven for urban Aboriginal people is roughly similar, with two in three in agreement with this view. While the majority agree that the sense of connection to the Aboriginal community created by AFCs is good, those who lived on a reserve (68%) are less likely than those who did not (78%) to give a positive assessment in this regard.

As to the impact of the AFCs on a variety of factors (see Table 1), one observes

that the most important difference between the two groups is with respect to the preservation of Aboriginal languages and culture among Aboriginal people in your

FIGURE 1: Impact of Friendship Centres



Sources: EKOS Reasearch Associates Inc. Aboriginal Friendship Centre Survey, n=606, 2004

community. Those who have lived on a reserve for more than six months are less likely to rate the impact as positive compared to those who have not lived on-reserve for an extended period of time. Those who have lived on-reserve or in a First Nation community are less likely to favorably rate the AFCs on issues of employment but are more likely to positively evaluate the level of social support.

ARE AFCs BRIDGING AND/OR BONDING?

A concern around institutional completeness of groups with a shared identity is that they risk becoming insular when they target raising group consciousness in the extension of services. Hence, they do bonding as opposed to bridging between groups as characterized by the respected American scholar Robert Putnam in his

TABLE 1

VERY AND SOMEWHAT POSITIVE IMPACT COMBINED	I HAVE HEARD OF ABORIGINAL FRIENDSHIP CENTRES	
	LIVED ON A RESERVE OR IN A FIRST NATION COMMUNITY FOR AT LEAST SIX MONTHS OF THE YEAR	DID NOT LIVE ON A RESERVE OR IN A FIRST NATION COMMUNITY FOR AT LEAST SIX MONTHS OF THE YEAR
The level of employment of Aboriginal people in your community, and how well prepared they are to find work and be employed	32.8	40.7
The preservation of Aboriginal languages and culture among Aboriginal people in your community	37.0	52.8
The sense of Aboriginal community that people feel	48.1	54.6
The sense of personal well-being that Aboriginal people feel in your community	55.5	56.4
The level of social support that Aboriginal people feel in your community	58.2	51.8
The health of Aboriginal people in your community	43.6	44.4

discussion of social capital in his seminal work entitled *Bowling Alone*. One of the goals of the funding provided by the government of Canada to the AFCs is to ensure the creation of "…a bridge for urban Aboriginal peoples, enabling them to derive strength from their peers as a means of relating to the rest of the urban population." Indeed, in the formal evaluation of the AFCs conducted by the Department of Canadian Heritage, several AFC leaders pointed to the "…individual and collective role played in expressing, and at times representing, the views of urban Aboriginal peoples…" Half (52%) agree that Friendship Centres help Aboriginal people to feel connected to the non-Aboriginal community. Some 57% of those who have lived on a reserve or in a First Nations community for more than six months (versus 44% who have not done so) feel that AFCs help make such connections. As to whether they feel more connected to their own community, some 70% agree that AFCs do so with two in three that have lived on a reserve for more than six months sharing that view and three in four feeling as such amongst the group that have not lived on-reserve for more than six months.

While survey respondents feel that AFCs are more effective in bridging than bonding, it would be wrong to conclude that bonding represents an obstacle to bridging. As observed in the Table Above, those who strongly agree that AFCs help Aboriginal people feel connected to their own community are more likely to also strongly agree that AFCs help Aboriginal people in their community to feel connected to the non-Aboriginal community

CONCLUSION

We have attempted to determine whether, from the perspective of Aboriginal peoples, AFCs could be described as offering a complete range of services to the community. But the idea is not to limit assessment to whether the services exist; rather this study has sought to to determine the perceived level of effectiveness of each of the services provided. Indeed, simply identifying whether a given group has services to extend in several areas makes for an inadequate evaluation of institutional completeness if the services are not sufficiently effective in strengthening group consciousness. Moreover, a proper analysis of institutional completeness will also consider whether after review a community is best positioned to deliver the service and if not should the service be offered outside the community or is some partnership called for? These questions are somewhat outside the scope of the discussion above.

But in this preliminary research, it is fair to contend that the AFCs get a positive review from most Aboriginal people around the preservation of culture and identities. When it comes to matters related to wellness (i.e. social support) the ratings are also favorable. When it comes to employment however, the AFCs get a somewhat weaker rating. It is not clear however from our analysis to what extent AFCs want to invest resources in employment services and we assume that this varies across the cities where they are located. Still the question emerges as to whether the mix of offering employment assistance and cultural programming represents the best practice for AFCs. The means to provide services may exist; however if the AFC in a particular community is not best positioned to deliver said services, it may detract from broader efforts to meaningfully reinforce group identities. These questions need further examination.

Finally, the data presented here refute the argument advanced in some quarters that the reinforcement of the bonds between Aboriginal people and building of bridges between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples are mutually exclusive goals. While not necessarily a surprising finding, it is nevertheless worth highlighting. Recall the definition of "institutional completedness" provided above: to the extent that both strong bonds among Aboriginal people and healthy relationships between Aboriginal and

TABLE 2

AGREEMENT WITH: FRIENDSHIP CENTRES HELP ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN MY COMMUNITY TO FEEL CONNECTED TO THE NON-ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY	FRIENDSHIP CENTRES HELP ABORIGINAL PEOPLE TO FEEL CONNECTED TO THEIR OWN COMMUNITY				
	STRONGLY DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	SOMEWHAT AGREE	STRONGLY AGREE
Strongly disagree	45,8%	25,9%	15,6%	8,9%	4,4%
Somewhat disagree	8,3%	25,9%	15,6%	14,0%	3,1%
Neither agree nor disagree	12,5%	3,7%	50,0%	17,8%	16,2%
Somewhat agree	20,8%	29,6%	14,1%	38,9%	31,6%
Strongly Agree	8,3%	7,4%	3,1%	12,7%	37,7%

non-Aboriginal people may be viewed by urban Aboriginal people as "needs," it is exciting to be able to report that AFCs are making important contributions to both the well-being and the institutional completedness of Canada's urban Aboriginal community.

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