Measuring Academic Capacity: Research in Relationship

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Premise
Successful, sustainable initiatives in communities are community-centred, community-based, community-paced, and community-led. Culture is perhaps the most important protective factor in community.

Research Question
What is our role as academic partners in building capacity for community-based participatory research (CBPR)?

Goal
To understand and build our capacity to contribute to community-based participatory research with First Nations and Métis people.

Objectives
- To explore changes in our own capacity
- To explore our role in community capacity building

Methodology
Academic researchers working with six First Nations and one Métis Settlement gathered on two occasions to reflect on their own capacity and their contributions to community capacity.

The Public Health Agency of Canada developed the Community Capacity Building Tool (CCBT); a planning tool to help build community capacity in health promotion projects. The tool consists of 9 features considered indicative of increased community capacity: Participation, Leadership, Community structures, Role of external support, Asking why, Obtaining resources, Skills, Knowledge, and learning, Linking with others, and Sense of community. This tool provided the framework for focus group discussion.

The interpretation and presentation of four key themes were validated through discussions with focus group participants.

Theme 1: Language and Measures
Existing literature and tools for measuring capacity (ie: CCBT) continue to define and explore capacity from a Western worldview, making it difficult to co-create concepts and measures of individual and community capacity.

These circles depict a dichotomy of worldviews. In response to the need to measure and document capacity, we often overlook the importance of co-creating relevant and meaningful measures. It is in the act of co-creation, where worldviews overlap, that we contribute to each other’s capacity (for research, sustainability and, ultimately, healthy community development).

Theme 2: Aligning Capacity and Community Development
In 2011, Health Canada presented a community development continuum for First Nations and Métis people. This continuum proved valuable when considering community capacity in community-based participatory research.

Communities in paralysis, for example, are reflected by ineffective or unavailable programs/services, lack of collaboration, financial management issues, little to no community consensus, risk of substance abuse and suicidality, and small clusters of individuals healing.

In contrast, as communities progress through the community development continuum, community capacity is reflected in innovative programming, access to resources, excellent management, cross-sector collaboration, support to and mentorship of other communities, potential national leaders, and stability in public health services.

These scenarios highlight the importance of considering capacity building, the need for capacity building, and our role in capacity building in light of community development. Knowing the stage of community development, we are more likely to align goals with existing capacity, be prepared for and anticipate or own capacity needs, and set realistic goals and timelines.

References:

Theme 3: Balancing Capacity Building
In our desire to live by the CBPR principle of building community capacity, we overlook the importance of building the capacity of academic research team members. As researchers, we are vulnerable to experiencing chaos or paralysis when overwhelmed with ongoing challenges. Individual and team resilience depends on balancing academic and community capacity building.

Theme 4: Capacity Building: a Positive, but not Linear Trajectory
Capacity building is a very cyclical process and, if you stay involved with community, the building of the relationships and phase of the project are powerful determinants of capacity. When faced with challenges and transitions (participation, leadership, funding, priorities), our ability to respond requires increased capacity. Fortunately, our learning path follows a positive trajectory with ‘ups’ and ‘downs’.

Build capacity to embark on project
Capacity grows in response to challenges
Identify need for growth in capacity as a result of unexpected event(s)
Existing capacity challenged as we embark on new phase of research (new partners, new issues)