FORGING CONNECTIONS:

AN ETHNO-CULTURAL SELF-HELP CONFERENCE

Conference Report

Kevin Gosine
Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto

Prepared for the Self-Help Resource Centre of Greater Toronto

April 1999
# FORGING CONNECTIONS

**AN ETHNO-CULTURAL SELF-HELP CONFERENCE**

Conference Report

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Introduction

The Forging Connections Conference was an innovative outreach venture designed to explore how the self-help process could be promoted and utilized within Toronto's diverse ethno-cultural communities. This event, which took place at the Anti-Racism, Multicultural and Native Issues (AMNI) Centre (housed at the Faculty of Social work, University of Toronto) on March 25th, 1999, was organized by the Self-Help Resource Centre of Greater Toronto (SHRC) in partnership with the Ontario Self-Help Network (OSHNET). The specific goals of the conference included:

- Introducing SHRC and its vision of self-help/mutual aid to diverse ethno-cultural Communities
- Learning about different communities to help SHRC devise ways to better accommodate diverse needs
- Exploring how self-help/mutual aid strategies might be used to address issues faced by such communities
- Learning what barriers exist to employing self-help/mutual aid strategies in particular communities
- Exploring ways that SHRC and community agencies can work together

Participants at the conference consisted primarily of service providers who worked with minority ethno-cultural populations and, to a lesser extent, ‘self-helpers’ from ethno-specific self-help groups. Most of the service providers hailed from ethno-specific and multicultural social service agencies in the Greater Toronto area, with the attendance representing a wide variety of groups. After introducing participants to SHRC and the self-help concept, the group discussed how these strategies might be used with respect to specific issues, the barriers that existed to employing such strategies, and possible areas of collaboration between SHRC and diverse communities.
The Self-Help Resource Centre of Greater Toronto

The Self-Help Resource Centre of Greater Toronto is a small community agency involved with the promotion of self-help/mutual aid. The organization strives to heighten awareness of this helping process in the community and among human-service professionals, and to facilitate the growth and development of self-help groups, networks and resources.

The SHRC aims to be the nerve center for the self-help movement in Canada. It offers a wide range of programs including: information and referral services to more than 550 self-help/mutual aid groups; a resource library of self-help related material; and the publication of an annual Directory of self-help/mutual aid groups in Metro Toronto. The agency also publishes quarterly newsletters covering events and self-help information, and it facilitates the development and maintenance of self-help groups throughout Toronto and beyond.

Self-Help in Diverse Ethno-Cultural Communities: A Look at the Literature

Very little research has been done examining the participation of diverse ethno-cultural communities in the self-help process or the effectiveness of this type of helping with members of such communities. Canadian literature on this topic has proven all but impossible to find. The majority of the scant literature that exists looks at self-help within the African-American community in the United States. Although this research cannot be directly extrapolated to minority ethno-cultural communities in Canada, it can be used to provide some insight and to help generate relevant questions for investigation in the Canadian context.
As is the case with social services, research indicates that blacks in the U.S. are underrepresented in self-help group participation. Indeed, the self-help process has been plagued by the perception of being a white, middle-class phenomenon. In a 1994 study, Snowden and Lieberman examined data maintained by the California Self-Help Center and found, among other things, that blacks are only one-third as likely as whites to indicate involvement in a self-help group over the course of their lifetime. The investigators point to a number of possible explanations for this finding. The first is cultural incongruity, as self-help groups may use helping techniques or problem definitions that are foreign to ethno-cultural minorities. A second possible explanation is the existence of culturally preferred alternatives, such as talking to people or religious leaders at a local church. A lack of knowledge or access was another possible factor cited, as the availability and the perceived usefulness of self-help groups may be slower in penetrating the African-American community than society at large. Finally, whether their existence is known or not, self-help groups may simply not be “readily at hand” for members of certain ethno-cultural communities. (1994, p. 60). Snowden and Liberman caution that the data they examined may not include unaffiliated self-help groups in black communities and that the existence of such groups cannot be ruled out.

Research attempts have been made to unearth factors that predict the participation (or non-participation) of members of various ethnic groups in the self-help process. Humphreys and Woods (1993) looked at the use of twelve step groups by black and white Americans one year after treatment for substance abuse. These researchers found comparable rates of self-help group participation for both groups but differences in the variables that predicted use. White participation was negatively related to more severe
substance abuse problems, entering treatment due to legal pressure, being treated outside of a residential setting, and being treated for a shorter period. Blacks who were less likely to attend also spent less time in treatment but experienced more serious psychological problems. More interesting than all of this was the finding that racial similarity was a strong predictor of client involvement in a self-help group. Said differently, whites were more likely to participate in mutual-aid groups in predominantly white areas and blacks were more likely to do the same in black areas. With this finding, Humphreys and Woods argue that the perception of self-help as a white, middle-class entity may stem from the fact that most research in this area is done in predominantly white communities.

After looking at the participation rates of ethno-cultural minorities in the self-help process, another question emerges: is self-help an effective model for people in these communities? Research - again, looking at the black population in the U.S. - would appear to answer in the affirmative. Using a sample of 558 people (divided almost equally in half between black and white Americans), Humphreys, Mavis, and Stoffelmayer (1994) attempted to track the profile of people who attended 12 step programs versus those who did not. They found that people who attended mutual-aid groups after treatment were not significantly different from those who did not on the basis of race, gender, education, employment pattern, or marital status. Their results also indicate that black Americans who attended self-help groups after treatment have better outcomes on clinical and social measures than blacks who do not attend self-help groups. The overall conclusion of these researchers is that 12 step programs both “appeal to and benefit disenfranchised groups” (emphasis added) (1994, p. 167).
In light of their findings, Snowden and Lieberman (1994) outline some suggestions on how self-help can be used to empower members of minority ethno-cultural communities. These authors stress the need for self-help clearinghouses and resource centres to put more effort into advertising in various ethnic communities. Given the findings of Humphreys and Woods (1993), they also call for a greater emphasis on creating chapters of established self-help groups in diverse ethno-cultural communities and devising formats that appeal to such groups. Humphreys et al (1994) explain that the appeal and effectiveness of self-help groups with diverse populations stems from the fact that they are not administered by a “homogeneous professional class of helpers (as in psychotherapy)”, as this allows “participants to make alterations in the program to make it more suitable to their culture” (p. 177-8).

**Conference Day – Thursday March 25th, 1999**

The conference began with opening remarks by Kevin Gosine, a University of Toronto placement student at the Self-Help Resource Centre. Kevin welcomed participants and provided an introduction to the day. This was followed by an ice breaker activity facilitated by SHRC board member Rhonda Mouricette. The exercise gave participants an opportunity to provide information about themselves and their agencies or groups.

**Introducing SHRC and the Self-Help Concept**

This portion of the conference was launched by Randi Fine, the executive director of the Self-Help Resource Centre, who provided a general introduction to the SHRC and the self-help/mutual aid concept as defined by the agency. Randi’s discussion was followed by a presentation by OSHNET Co-ordinator Jennifer Poole, who introduced
OSHNET and spoke generally about self-help/mutual aid in the province of Ontario. The Ontario Self-Help Network, as described by Jen, promotes the use of self-help across Ontario by providing resources, consultation, and training. Jen organized her presentation into a ‘what, who, where, how, and why’ of self-help in the province.

Specific issues touched upon included:

1. **What**
   - the different forms a self-help group can take
   - characteristics of self-help groups
   - the type of support provided

2. **Who**
   - Number of groups in Toronto and Ontario (550 and 300 respectively)
   - Number of people served by OSHNET (over 13,000 in 1998)

3. **Where**
   - The sorts of places self-help groups meet
   - The number of self-help centres in the province (15)

4. **How**
   - The diversity of ways self-help can be ‘done’

5. **Why**
   - Issue of ‘does self-help help’
   - Growing interest in and proliferation of self-help

**Hearing From Self-Helpers Themselves**

The morning was rounded out by presentations from two self-helpers from different ethno-specific groups. These presenters provided a picture of what self-help looks like in two different communities and described, on a personal level, what this process has done for them.

The first presenter was Michiko Nakamura of the Japanese-Speaking Women’s Association; a group devoted to providing support to Japanese speaking women living in Canada. According to Michiko, many people in the Japanese community have trouble
accessing social services because of a lack of information and, in many cases, cultural
and linguistic barriers. In addition, there is an unfortunate stigma attached to help-
seeking in any social service capacity within the community. Most of the Japanese
groups that exist are social or recreational in nature and unresponsive to the serious social
or psychological needs of members. All of these factors provided Michiko with a catalyst
to form a self-help group which responded to the unique needs of Japanese-speaking
women, a group which had few avenues to turn for help. Michiko reported taking part in
the Japanese groups described above as well as 'mainstream' groups only to come away
feeling very isolated. Since forming her own group, she took comfort in the realization
that there were other people in her situation. She noted that the appeal of self-help
strategies was that they allowed group members to structure the helping process
according to participants' cultural and issue-related needs.

Michiko’s presentation was followed by Rosa Prince, founder of the Women of
Colour Employment Survival Group. This group, recently expanded to include men,
provides support to people of colour who are experiencing or have had problems or
negative experiences in the workplace. Rosa reported having been involved in self-help
in her native Trinidad but "did not have a name for it before coming to Toronto". Self-
help strategies came so naturally to family, friends, and neighbors in her small
community that there was no need to formalize the process with a label. When Rosa
arrived in Toronto, she took on the challenge of organizing a support group in this new
and untried context. In Trinidad, the group she was involved with was informal and
dealt with very personal concerns. In Toronto, Rosa described the issues she faced as
not so much personal but "societal", with this requiring a different self-help approach.
Most notably, utilization of the self-help process in the big city required a "switch [from] informal to formal" strategies.

Rosa went on to discuss her self-help experience in Canada in some detail. She described the development of a wonderful bonding and trust as well as an appreciation of the different experiences and perspectives that people brought to the group. The group helped individual members to 'depersonalize' personal problems by exploring how such difficulties might be situated within a broader societal context. There was also an empowering emphasis on finding answers to such problems through collective organizing.

Our Turn to Learn: The Applicability of Self-Help and Barriers to its Use in Diverse Ethno-Cultural Communities

The afternoon was devoted to sharing ideas and viewpoints on the place of self-help in diverse ethno-cultural communities. In the first phase of this activity, participants were divided into three groups organized around three particular issues generated by the participants themselves: immigrant/refugee issues, racism, and mental health issues in minority ethno-cultural communities. In each group, participants explored the usefulness of self-help strategies with respect to one of these issues. The specific questions they were asked to address were:

1. What role can self-help play with respect to this particular issue?
2. Please suggest possible limitations to using self-help strategies to address this issue.
3. Please suggest possible solutions to the limitations identified above?
4. How much commonality needs to be present for self-help strategies to be effective? (In terms of race, ethnicity/culture, class background, gender, etc.)
Participants also had the option of taking part in a workshop on how to start a self-help group facilitated by Jennifer Poole.

Everyone later returned to the larger group where, pooling the collective wisdom in the room, we exchanged ideas on the above issues and questions. Where the first two questions are concerned, the following ideas emerged from the discussion:

1. Usefulness of Self-help
   - Support
   - Validating experiences
   - Sharing information and resources
   - Social action/advocacy
   - Connecting with people

2. Barriers/Limitations to Employing Self-Help Strategies
   - Stigmatization involved with self-help in many communities
   - May not be appropriate for certain groups (e.g., newly arrived refugees who would be more concerned about material needs)
   - Suspicion on the part of many communities of 'mainstream' agencies (like SHRC)
   - Problems associated with labeling people (i.e., where the formation of ethno-specific groups are concerned)

Addressing the 'So What' Questions

After identifying the barriers and limitations identified above, the group explored potential solutions and the role an organization like SHRC could play in any solution picture. The most prominent limitation identified, both in Rosa and Michiko's presentations as well as in this discussion, was the issue of the stigma attached to self-help in many communities. The key question wrestled with in this context was ‘how can we promote self-help in a way that would make it more palatable?’ The dominant answer provided by participants was more education about the self-help process within specific communities. This might take the form of articles explaining what self-help is all about
in such mediums as ethno-specific newspapers. Staff at SHRC could write such articles in collaboration with representatives from appropriate ethno-cultural communities.

Another solution discussed was the concept of a 'bridge' person who would act as a liaison between SHRC and a given community. Participants felt such a strategy might help to mitigate any mistrust certain populations might have of a mainstream agency like SHRC and provide the latter with a pipeline into the various communities. Overall, then, the general role SHRC might be expected to play in ameliorating barriers to the use of self-help strategies include (a) helping to promote awareness in various communities, and (b) collaborating with and training community representatives in this effort.

The final question addressed concerned how much commonality was necessary for a self-help group to be effective. There was a general consensus that the issue or concern in question (e.g., addictions, caregiving, etc.) was the most important consideration in forming self-help groups. Similarities of race, ethnicity or gender were not as important in the estimation of participants, though such differences may become important where certain issues are concerned. Perhaps surprisingly, participants seemed to agree that it was possible for immigrants or refugees from different racial and ethnic backgrounds to form an effective self-help group. A member of a "black" self-help group (which provides support for people who head single-parent families) noted that her group accepts black members of all ethnic backgrounds. The question of whether this acceptance of diversity within groups extends to the coming together of visible and invisible minorities was not fully explored.
End of the Day

The conference concluded with Randi and Jen informing participants of upcoming events and workshops at SHRC. Participants also made announcements of their own. Randi and Jen thanked participants for their attendance and everyone expressed a desire to stay connected and possibly hold a similar event sometime in the future.

Participants’ Evaluation of the Day

Participants were asked to evaluate the conference in terms of what they liked about the day and what they felt could be improved. The comments by and large were very positive. Specific aspects of the day that participants reported having appreciated include:

➢ The quality of discussion
➢ Discussion topics
➢ The job done by presenters and facilitators
➢ Opportunity for networking
➢ The organization and format of the conference
➢ The diversity of communities represented

There was little in the way of negative feedback. The vast majority of complaints had to do with the physical size of the conference room, which was a little small for the turnout. Other criticisms centred on what one person felt were overly broad topics and a lack of time afforded for networking. Two people reported feeling like they were being 'sold' something. A few participants also thought the five hour conference was too short. Out of 27 evaluation forms collected, 11 people indicated an interest in helping SHRC with future outreach initiatives.
Conclusion

The Forging Connections Conference can safely be labeled a success. Indeed, observation of the quality of discussion at the conference and a review of the evaluations lend fuel to this claim. The conference accomplished its goals of increasing the visibility of SHRC and the self-help/mutual aid process, exploring areas and means of collaboration between community stakeholders and the Centre, and opening up a dialogue about the benefits and barriers to utilizing the self-help process in certain communities. This initiative also unearthed individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds interested in helping the SHRC with future outreach initiatives.

As far as this conference was concerned, seeds have been planted that promise lavish vegetation if properly nourished. The question becomes what type of nourishment should and can be provided given the relatively limited means of a small, under-staffed and modestly funded agency like the SHRC. There is indeed a great deal to build on from this initial endeavor. A next step could entail forming an ethno-cultural self-help network composed of SHRC staff and interested parties from different communities that would plan and direct future outreach and promotional activities. One concept that should definitely be explored further is the 'bridge person' idea. A network or committee such as the one suggested above would be useful in exploring what this might look like. In addition, echoing the sentiments of many of the conference participants, holding a forum such as the one reported on here on an annual basis should be given some consideration.
CONFERENCE ORGANIZERS

Randi Fine, Executive Director, Self-Help Resource Centre

Kevin Gosine, Master of Social Work Candidate, University of Toronto

Rhonda Mauricette, Board Member, Self-Help Resource Centre

Jennifer Poole, Ontario Self-Help Network Co-ordinator

Rosa Prince, Board Member, Self-Help Resource Centre; Women of Colour Employment Survival Group

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Pamela Bailey, Family Councils' Project Co-ordinator, Self-Help Resource Centre

Shawn Chirrey, Family Caregivers' Technological Support Co-ordinator, Self-Help Resource Centre

Jenny Formanek, Administrative Coordinator, Self-Help Resource Centre

Dr. Usha George, Professor of Social Work, University of Toronto; Academic Co-ordinator, Anti-Racism, Multicultural and Native Issues Centre

Michiko Nakamura, Japanese-Speaking Women’s Association

Tammy O'Dwyer, Resource and Development Co-ordinator, Self-Help Resource Centre

A special thanks to the staff at the Anti-Racism, Multicultural and Native Issues Centre at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto.

For further information
Please contact
The Self-Help Resource Centre
40 Orchard View Blvd., Suite 219
Toronto ON M4R 1B9
(416) 487-4355 Fax: (416) 487-0344
E-mail: shrc@sympatico.ca
APPENDIX A:

FORGING CONNECTIONS:
AN ETHNO-CULTURAL SELF-HELP CONFERENCE

Anti-Racism, Multicultural, and Native Issues Centre
Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto
246 Bloor St. W.
Room 100

Thursday March 25\textsuperscript{th}, 1999
10:00 am - 3:00 pm

AGENDA

10:00
- Registration and coffee

10:15
- Introduction (Kevin Gosine, U. of T. Placement Student.)
- Exploring what self-help/mutual aid means to participants (Rhonda Mauricette, Board Member)

10:45
- Introduction to self-help/mutual aid and the Self-Help Resource Centre (Randi Fine, Executive Director)

11:00
- Overview of self-help/mutual aid concept in the Ontario context (Jennifer Poole, OSHNET Co-ordinator)
- 'Self-helper' share their experiences:
  - Michiko Nakamura, Japanese Speaking Women’s Association
  - Rosa Prince, Women of Colour Employment Survival Group

12:30 - LUNCH (Provided)

1:00
- Self-Help and Diverse Ethno-Cultural Communities (Kevin Gosine)
  - Small Group Discussion: Participants will break into smaller groups where they will explore how self-help/mutual aid strategies might be applied to a specific issue (e.g., anti-racism, immigrant/refugee issues, etc.)
  - Report Back: Participants will later return to the larger group where they will share their ideas

2:15
- Sharing resources related to self-help/mutual aid and ethno-cultural issues
- Next steps: Discussing future SHRC outreach initiatives

3:00
- Good bye, au revoir, hasta luego, dehnahun, shalom, adeus…
**APPENDIX B:**

**LIST OF PARTICIPANTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Organization/Program</th>
<th>Phone Number</th>
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<tr>
<td>Abeygunawardena, Hema</td>
<td>Breast Cancer Support Group</td>
<td>(416) 515-8423</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooks, Joan</td>
<td>Grand Society</td>
<td>(416) 468-5471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cheng, David</td>
<td>St. Stephen’s Community House</td>
<td>(416) 929-3281 or (416) 926-8221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chu, Janice</td>
<td>St. Stephen’s Community House</td>
<td>(416) 925-2103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciuk, Maria</td>
<td>Golden Days Services for Seniors</td>
<td>(416) 621-1792</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correia, Fatima</td>
<td>Willow Breast Cancer Services</td>
<td>(416) 690-8900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawkins, Sandra</td>
<td>Hinks Belcrest Centre</td>
<td>(416) 633-0515 ext. 241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demerson, Velma</td>
<td>Survivors of Medical Abuse</td>
<td>(416) 975-9398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diaz-Pages, Darlinys</td>
<td>Diverse Communities Outreach Program</td>
<td>(905) 525-4573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edwards, Cheryl</td>
<td>Scratch Back Club</td>
<td>(416) 536-6168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elhamalawy, Mahasan</td>
<td>St. Joseph Immigrant Women Centre</td>
<td>(905) 529-5209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gassim, Sadia</td>
<td>St. Joseph Immigrant Women Centre</td>
<td>(905) 529-5209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gayle, June Marie</td>
<td>Durham Region Lupus Assoc.</td>
<td>(905) 686-1117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gayle, Sharon</td>
<td>Durham Region Lupus Assoc.</td>
<td>(905) 619-0000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hay, Joan</td>
<td>Community Network Support Team</td>
<td>(519) 371-4802</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeshani, Shelina</td>
<td>Aga Khan Social Support Services</td>
<td>(416) 423-4777</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jethani, Salima</td>
<td>Aga Khan Social Welfare Board</td>
<td>(416) 423-9997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krasevec, Julia</td>
<td>Immigrant and Refugee Health Program</td>
<td>(905) 523-6361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lemus, Sandra</td>
<td>Mary’s Place</td>
<td>(905) 529-5692</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leonard, Chris</td>
<td>Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention</td>
<td>(416) 977-7725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leung, Raymond</td>
<td>Chinese &amp; South Asian S.H. Centre</td>
<td>(416) 494-6413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Organization/Program</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lonie, Jim</td>
<td>Consumer/Survivor Dev. Project</td>
<td>(519) 371-4582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lozada, Rosa</td>
<td>Diverse Community Outreach Program</td>
<td>(905) 525-4573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mangat, Rupi</td>
<td>Peel Health Department</td>
<td>(905) 791-7800 ext.7658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martella, Angela</td>
<td>Family Service Association (Student)</td>
<td>(416) 586-0031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin, Nancy</td>
<td>Peterborough Family Resource Centre</td>
<td>(705) 748-9144 ext. 305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matonda, Doreen</td>
<td>Culture, Community &amp; Health Studies</td>
<td>(416) 925-0243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melara-Lopez, Nora</td>
<td>Immigrant and Refugee Health Program</td>
<td>(905) 523-6361</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middleton, Angela</td>
<td>Woodgreen Community Centre (Student)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moazami, Safoura</td>
<td>Toronto Cancer Prevention/Personal Interest</td>
<td>(416) 392-7469</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nakamura, Michiko</td>
<td>Japanese Speaking Women’s Group</td>
<td>(416) 485-9386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nascimento, Ana</td>
<td>Woodgreen Community Centre</td>
<td>(416) 469-5211 ext. 1260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pablo, Susan</td>
<td>Health Canada</td>
<td>(416) 954-3724 or (416) 754-0397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quintanilla, Sonia</td>
<td>Lay Health Educator</td>
<td>(905) 628-6325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reyes, Nancy</td>
<td>Salvation Army</td>
<td>(905) 522-7336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rivera, Ilang</td>
<td>St. Joseph Immigrant Women Centre</td>
<td>(905) 529-5209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shen, Huaming</td>
<td>St. Stephen’s Community House</td>
<td>(416) 515-0629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thibault, Suzanne</td>
<td>Ontario Coalition of Senior Citizens’ Org.</td>
<td>(416) 785-8570</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tirumala, Nandini</td>
<td>Across Boundaries</td>
<td>(416) 242-9709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wang, Peter</td>
<td>Senior Activities Ctr. (St. Stephen’s House)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zirvi, Surjan</td>
<td>Devonport Perth Neighborhood Ctr./OCSCO</td>
<td>(416) 766-0531</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


