Culturally Responsive and Equitable Data Parties:

A Method for Participatory Analysis and Sense-Making in Virtual Spaces

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In October 2022, the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families convened the 2022 Methods Meeting titled *Applying Mixed Methods and Qualitative Approaches to Social Policy Questions*. This brief, based on a presentation at the meeting describing inclusive and equitable methods, introduces culturally responsive[1] and equitable data parties. The brief includes the following sections: (1) a definition of data parties, (2) strategies for designing and implementing virtual data parties, and (3) considerations for federal agencies to ensure the implementation of virtual data parties is culturally responsive and equitable.

WHAT IS A DATA PARTY?

Many research and evaluation projects embed aspects of community engagement. Community engagement can take various forms to create a process for working with communities. Engagement usually occurs early in the research cycle during the process of forming research questions, setting goals and objectives, or designing instruments. In some instances, community members may also be engaged in the data collection. However, engagement often wanes in the latter part of the research process that focuses on data analysis and dissemination. Researchers and evaluators struggle with effectively engaging community members in data analysis in inclusive and equitable ways.

> A virtual **data party** is a time-limited event of one to two hours where diverse audience members collectively analyze data in a culturally responsive and equitable way.[2]

Data parties are an inclusive and equitable research method for engaging diverse voices to review and interpret data through participatory analysis and sense-making. Participatory analysis brings community members and other interested parties[3] into the analytic process of data interpretation and sense-making. Sense-making is the process by which community members build concepts and assign meaning to data based on lived experience.[4] Culturally responsive and equitable data parties embrace cultural differences, recognize and acknowledge potential biases, and promote fairness in data interpretation. The goal is to center and

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[1] For the purposes of this brief, the definition of "cultural responsiveness" is valuing the lived experiences of others and honoring their cultural context (Cerna et al., 2021).

[2] Adapted from BetterEvaluation. (n.d.). *Data party*. Global Evaluation Initiative. https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/methods/data-party

[3] In recent years, there has been growing acknowledgement that the term "stakeholder" has negative connotations for American Indian and Alaska Native communities because of its roots in colonial practices. As a result, this brief uses the term "interested parties" to refer to any individuals or groups that may be affected by or are interested in research or evaluation activities.

[4] Brown, A. D., Colville, I., Pye, A. (2015). Making sense of sensemaking in organization studies. *Organization Studies 36*(2), 265–277. https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840614559259

empower the people the research directly involves or affects and ensure multiple perspectives are represented. When analysis is culturally responsive and equitable, it highlights cultural, structural, and contextual factors; incorporates the voices of participants; and shifts power to those most affected by the data presented.

> **Inclusive and equitable research** is collaborative research that embraces a range of theoretical frameworks and methods focused on democratizing the research process. It centers and empowers the people who are researched, examines power dynamics, and fair and impartial access to opportunities and resources in every aspect of the research cycle to advance equity for all people.[5]

Why Use Data Parties?

Data parties offer many benefits related to participatory analysis and sense-making. Through a co-learning process, data parties create an opportunity to increase participants' knowledge of research areas and improve interpretation of data. Data parties are beneficial because they:

- Ensure better interpretability of results within a community context.
- Sustain engagement with community members throughout the full research process.
- Increase the audience's ownership of the data.
- Identify additional data needs.
- Help develop more realistic recommendations.
- Create buy-in for later implementation of findings.

Data parties create a pathway to understanding the data and a roadmap for using the data. Participants can help researchers develop more realistic recommendations in accordance with the data to better inform programming and polices.

DESIGNING A DATA PARTY FOR VIRTUAL SPACES

Although data parties are traditionally implemented in person,[6] interest in virtual data parties has grown. Virtual data parties facilitate simultaneous participation from people in various locations, providing geographic variability. They also offer more flexibility in scheduling because participants do not need to travel to a central location and the team does not need to plan around the availability of a particular space. Hosting online sessions may also cost less by avoiding travel expenses and needing fewer supplies and printed materials.

Conducting data parties in virtual spaces has some drawbacks. Being online limits natural interactions and makes it is harder to read body language and facial expressions. Participants are less likely to want to sit in front of a computer screen for long periods of time; therefore, data party efforts need to be streamlined. What may have been a three- to six-hour event in person may become a one- to three-hour event online. Table 1 compares considerations for virtual and in-person data parties.

[5] Johnson-Turbes, A. (2022). *Inclusive & equitable research and methods* [Manuscript in preparation]. NORC at the University of Chicago, Center on Equity Research.

[6] See the resources section for examples of in-person data parties.

Table 1. Comparison of Virtual and In-Person Data Parties

Component	Virtual	In Person
Planning and Preparation	• Choose virtual platform, and invite participants to platform (e.g., create meeting link) • Prepare and send agenda before data party • Send data party materials to participants ahead of time • Conduct dry run to test technology (e.g., polling, breakout rooms)	• Select meeting location considering size, cost, available equipment (e.g., microphone, computer, Wi-Fi, table, chairs), parking, and accessibility • Prepare and send agenda before data party • Print and bring materials to data party
Location	• Ensure participants have access to virtual platform • Use festive backgrounds to create party atmosphere	• Prepare meeting space (e.g., arrange tables and chairs, adjust room temperature, check audiovisual equipment) • Bring refreshments for participants
Tools and Materials	• Share via PowerPoint or platform of choice • Use virtual data visualizations (e.g., data placemats or infographics)	• Share via hard copy • Use poster boards; sticky walls; data placemats; and colored markers, pens, or notecards based on selected engagement technique
Engagement Techniques	• Chat feature • Virtual breakout rooms • Jamboard • Polling • Whiteboards • Other online or virtual platforms	• Gallery walk • Carousel • World Café • Flip charts
Timing	• Meet for two hours or less (to avoid virtual fatigue) • Include one or two short breaks (5–10 minutes) throughout	• Meet for a half day or multiple half days • Include time for breaks (10–15 minutes) and refreshments/meals

Structure of a Data Party

There is no one way to structure a data party. To determine what works best for the research team and participants, consider the following:

▶ **Purpose (what is the intended outcome):** Encourage people to interact with one other and the data to increase participants' understanding of the findings. Participants may provide insights and recommend conclusions drawn from the data and build support for use of the data.

▶ **Participants (who should be involved):** Invite people who have a vested interest in the data and results or who will be affected by the resulting policies and recommendations based on the data. Participants may include the research or evaluation team members, community interviewers or data collectors, community members, collaborators, program leadership, or other interested parties or individuals.

▸ **Planning and timing (what is necessary to make the data party happen and by when):** Plan for the logistics of the virtual data party. Reserve time for two hours or less virtually. Ensure all data party activities are complete *before* drafting the final report to incorporate participant feedback.

Purpose

The purpose of the data party can influence which participants to invite. When planning the event, have a clear understanding of the purpose and intended outcome—what do you hope the data party will achieve? Data interpretation and contextualization of findings are central to a data party. However, there may be other goals—for example, having participants discuss how to use the data. When participants or community members understand the data, their ownership of the data and support for later implementation also increase. Participants feel more empowered to use data that affirm their lived experience and reflect their voice. Develop a process to use the information collected from the data party, to share it back with participants, and to disseminate it to the broader community.

Participants

Think carefully about who will participate in the data party. The type of engagement activity will determine the number of virtual data party participants. The goal is to have discussions in small groups of five to six people. Diversity of perspectives is critical to ensure the event includes a wide range of voices, viewpoints, and experiences.

Consider who is in the room and who is not. Balance perspectives by including decision-makers (for example, program leaders), program participants, and community members. As you plan, think about these questions: Are multiple levels of leadership represented? Are youth and family members included when necessary? Are various program staff included?

Also consider diversity of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age, gender, and geographic location. One major benefit of a virtual data party is that not all participants need to be in the same physical location. Therefore, there is increased opportunity for geographic diversity and accessibility for participants who may have physical or other limitations (e.g., transportation barriers).

Cultural considerations, such as language and norms, are crucial. Aim to use inclusive, nonstigmatizing language. Ways to employ inclusive language are using people-first language (e.g., "people experiencing homelessness" instead of "homeless people"), fostering self-identification (e.g., referring to someone as "queer" instead of "gay" to match their preference for identification), using racial and ethnic terms participants prefer, and inviting participants to introduce themselves using their preferred pronouns.[7] The goal is to create a safe space where people feel free to share their honest opinions. Shared language is another way to create a safe and welcoming space attuned to cultural norms. If participants prefer to speak in a language other than English, ensure the data and supporting materials are translated into the preferred language and the facilitator can speak the language.

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[7] DC Fiscal Policy Institute. (2017). *DCFPI style guide for inclusive language*. https://www.dcfpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Style-Guide-for-Inclusive-Language_Dec-2017.pdf

Although virtual data parties have the potential to create more diverse engagement, consider the limitations that may occur because of the location, technology, and digital divide (i.e., the disconnect between individuals who have ready access to computers and the internet and those who do not). Host the data party at a time of day convenient to participants, paying attention to time zones. Some participants may not have access to high-speed internet, video technology, or unlimited cell phone data plans. Participants may not be familiar with the technology or may require accommodations. Careful planning will help address these barriers. For example, technical assistance before the data party will help participants navigate the online tools to ensure community members can fully participate. Share written or video instructions on using the platform or engagement features. Enable both phone and computer audio access and closed captioning to create an inclusive data party. For participants joining by phone, email or mail them materials ahead of time and describe data and images in detail during the data party.

The research team plays several roles during a virtual data party. Diverse and skilled facilitators for a data party are a *must*. The facilitator(s) will be responsible for connecting with participants and encouraging open and honest conversation about the data. One or two people from the research team should serve as note takers during the discussion. Depending on the platform used, the team may want to record the data party for later reference and to supplement the notes (obtain participants' consent to being recorded).

Another research team member should run the technology, help participants with technical difficulties, advance slides, manage any supplemental platforms, and keep time.

Planning

In addition to setting a date and time for the data party, consider the need for data use agreements to ensure data confidentiality and ensure that, if needed, agreements are in place before the data party. Another planning step is to prepare the data and create easy-to-understand visualizations to facilitate participants' review and reflection during the event. Sharing raw, unprepared, or complex data will hinder conversations about what the data mean. In some instances (e.g., having large amounts of qualitative data), the team may want to share the data with participants before the event to give them time to review the data and prepare for the discussion. Another planning step is to create an agenda and send it in the form of an invitation to keep with the party spirit. At the beginning of the data party, set norms and expectations to create an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere (see earlier section on cultural considerations).

Platforms and Tools

Choosing the right platform and tools for the virtual data party may require some research. There are many options available. Choose a virtual tool based on how the participants should and will engage with the data. Select tools with annotating features, such as Miro, Mural, Microsoft Whiteboard, Jamboard, or Zoom Whiteboard.[8] Table 2 provides questions to consider when selecting the preferred platform.

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[8] OPRE and NORC do not endorse any specific platform. Consult with your organization and partners to identify recommended platforms that meet your privacy and data security needs.
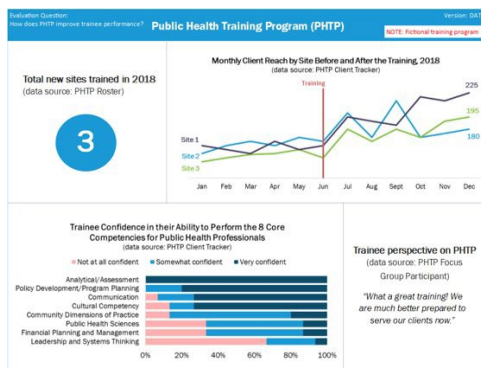
Table 2. Questions to Ask When Selecting Online Platforms and Tools

Cost	How much does the platform or tool cost? Is cost based on the number of participants? Is a free version available? What features are accessible on the free version compared with the paid version?
Accessibility	Will participants need to log in or create an account? Is closed captioning available? Are phone and computer options for audio available?
Training	How user-friendly is the platform or tool? Is customer support available? Does the researcher's organization have IT support? With what platform or tool is the research team already familiar?
Functionality	Are breakout rooms an option? Is polling available? Is there a whiteboard or annotation feature? Can registration be enabled? How many people can participate at one time? Can participants interact with the data in real time or at the same time?

Data Engagement Techniques

There are many data engagement techniques for participatory analysis and sense-making (see the resources section for detailed examples). The key is to determine which are adaptable for a virtual space. The following suggestions are methods that translate easily from in-person meetings to virtual spaces:[9]

Data placemats: Easy to use, data placemats display qualitative and quantitative data in thematic groups. The placemats can include traditional graphs from survey responses or quotes from interviews and focus groups. Share data placemats with participants via PowerPoint or another slide-sharing tool.

Trend timelines: Use trend timelines to explore the influence of major events (e.g., organizational milestones, policy changes) on metrics or data outcomes over time. To enable participants to deliver real-time feedback, share trend timelines via a collaborative tool, such as PowerPoint or Jamboard.[10]

Data walks: Data walks create an opportunity for participants to view a series of results and respond to discussion questions. Conduct data walks with collaborative tools, such as Jamboard.

[9] For additional details on implementation of these data engagement techniques, see Public Profit (n.d.). *Dabbling in the data: A hands-on guide to participatory data analysis.* https://www.publicprofit.net/Dabbling-In-The-Data
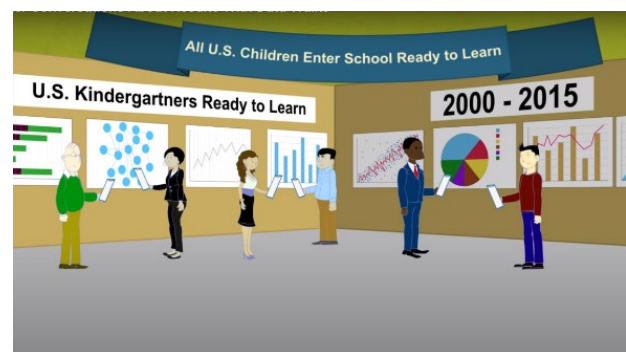
[10] OPRE and NORC do not endorse any specific platform. Consult with your organization and partners to identify recommended platforms that meet your privacy and data security needs.

1-2-4-All: Make sense of qualitative data in small groups with the 1-2-4-All activity. Use the breakout group function on any platform to create small groups where participants can reflect on themes identified in qualitative data. This process is a progressive group think to facilitate sharing various perspectives. Participants first reflect singularly (1), then in pairs (2), then in small groups (4), and finally in the large group (All).
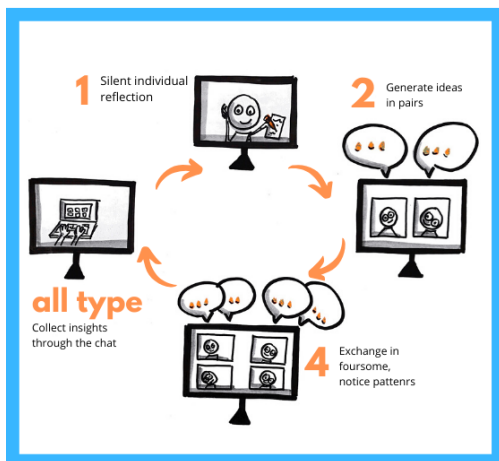
Tip of the Iceberg: Use a visual of an iceberg to guide participants through a discussion about the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical factors influencing the data points. Share and discuss the iceberg visual using software that displays graphics and allows annotation, such as Microsoft Word or Adobe.[11]

Examples of Reflective Questions

1. What are the data telling you?
2. What is missing from the data?
3. What surprises you about the data?
4. What do you think is occurring here and why?
5. What stands out for you?
6. What other meanings do you see in the data?
7. What is one step we should take based on these data?
8. How might we best communicate these findings?

FACILITATION

One of the keys to a successful culturally responsive and equitable data party is having the right facilitator. A good facilitator expresses warmth and empathy, creates a safe and accepting atmosphere, encourages group participation, and demonstrates cultural humility.[12] The facilitator is responsible for setting the fun and festive tone for the data party while keeping participants focused on the purpose.

In a virtual space, accurately perceiving nonverbal responses can be a challenge. The facilitator can use reflective questions to pursue understanding of intentions and meanings when participants engage with the data. Figure 3 presents suggestions for facilitating a culturally responsive and equitable data party in virtual spaces.

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[11] OPRE and NORC do not endorse any specific platform. Consult with your organization and partners to identify recommended platforms that meet your privacy and data security needs.

[12] Cultural humility incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and critique, redressing power imbalances, and developing mutually beneficial and nonpaternalist partnerships with communities (Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, 1998).

Figure 3. Tips for Hosting Culturally Responsive and Equitable Data Parties Virtually

Tips for Hosting Culturally Responsive and Equitable Data Parties Virtually

- Ensure time and resources are set aside to plan and implement the data party.
- Start with the end in mind—what do you want the data party to accomplish?
- Be intentional when selecting participants to attend the data party.
- Make the data party a voluntary event.
- Know the audience, and pay particular attention to cultural sensitivities and power hierarchies.
- Let people know what the data party is about ahead of time.
- Inform people about how they will participate, including how to access the virtual platform and any tools and resources.
- Work with team members to present data in easy-to-understand designs.
- Set a collaborative, engaging tone for the data party.
- Split into smaller groups of four to five people (and limit participation to no more than 20 participants).
- Be prepared to encourage participation if needed.
- Probe and inquire to understand different perspectives.
- Be open to different meanings of the data.
- Schedule more time than you think you will need.
- Determine needed follow-up communication.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FEDERAL PROGRAMS

In advancing equity, the federal government's goal is to give everyone the opportunity to reach their full potential by assessing whether, and to what extent, its programs and policies perpetuate systemic barriers to opportunities and benefits for people of color and other historically marginalized or minoritized groups. Inclusive and equitable methods that promote community engagement, such as culturally responsive and equitable data parties, help achieve this goal. Consider the following points when planning and implementing culturally responsive and equitable data parties in virtual spaces:

▸ **Decide if data parties are right for you.** It takes time and resources to embed inclusive and equitable methods into a research study or evaluation. Plan to secure agency buy-in for this method. Make sure the project team has the time available to recruit participants for and implement a data party. Building relationships with community members, program participants, and other interested parties helps ensure meaningful involvement. Incentives for data party participation are often necessary, and the amount and type of incentive can vary based on the funding parameters. Virtual incentives (e.g., e-codes or gift cards) can distribute funds more quickly but may create challenges, such as the need to provide contact information to vendors before funds are distributed.

▸ **Work with partners to plan for the data party.** Assemble a team or advisory panel of people who represent the community that the program serves to help guide the implementation of the data party. Engage facilitators with lived experience within the context of the research to serve as cultural guides for the data party planning and implementation. Partners can help

design discussion questions to fit the specific goals of the data party, set a theme and party environment that appeal to the participants and fit the context, and provide feedback on appropriate data visualization tools.

▸ **Reflect and share experiences with others.** Solicit feedback from data party participants about what worked and what could be improved. Discuss challenges and successes with team members. Reflect on the input received, and create an actionable plan for improving future data parties. Then, share your experience with others. Peer-learning is an effective way to improve the process and broaden the use of data parties.

CONCLUSION

Involving community members, collaborators, and partners in data analysis and interpretation ensures multiple perspectives are represented in the research process. Culturally responsive and equitable data parties are an effective tool for participatory analysis and sense-making. They create a safe space where the people most affected by the data have an opportunity to review, discuss, and, where necessary, make recommendations for revisions. Data parties help ensure the lived experiences of these individuals are represented. Incorporating this type of inclusive and equitable research method helps advance equity in social and behavioral sciences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

RESOURCES

Data Party Overview

Community Solutions Planning & Evaluation. (n.d.). *Free resources*. https://communitysolutions.ca/web/resources-public/

Lewis, K. M., Ewers, T., Bird, M., & Wilkins, T. (2019). Engage stakeholders in program evaluation: Throw them a party! *Journal of Extension,* 57(4). https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol57/iss4/15

Engagement Techniques

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Public Profit. (n.d.). *Dabbling in the data: A hands-on guide to participatory data analysis*. https://www.publicprofit.net/Dabbling-In-The-Data.

Data Party Examples

Bird, M., & Lewis, K. (2021). Data parties engage 4-H volunteers in data interpretation, strengthening camp programs and evaluation process. *California Agriculture*, *75*(1), 14–19. https://doi.org/10.3733/ca.2021a0005

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