Connecting the Dots: A Conversation on Measuring Social Connection

Community Engagement Initiative Report
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Overview

Connecting the Dots brought together **nine researchers and practitioners** from across the US and Europe who are measuring social connection, social isolation, and/or loneliness for a virtual session on July 21. The goals were to:

- **Develop** an understanding of measurement challenges and best practices;
- **Make** recommendations on the development, implementation, and/or evaluation of measurement tools, and
- **Support** each other in gathering data and evaluating interventions for impact.

Rationale
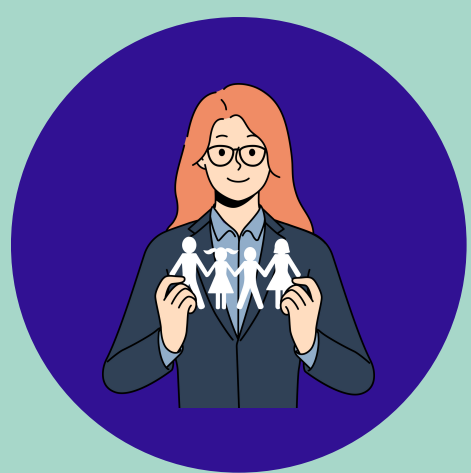
The practitioners involved — including **senior directors, program officers, and managers** — came from a wide range of community-based organizations and have **implemented various tools to evaluate the impact of their programs or products.**

The researchers who participated have **consulted practitioners** on which tool(s) to use, and/or have been involved with the **development, administration, and/or evaluation** of the tools themselves.

Instead of conducting one-on-one interviews, I thought it would be valuable to facilitate a discussion between these two groups that would allow them to **better understand, address, and build upon each other's questions, ideas, and concerns**.

Understanding Measurement Tools

Participants were invited to review the inventory of measurement tools that was created and share questions, concerns, and/or ideas on various aspects. These include:

- **Comprehensiveness** (whether the inventory contained all of the information needed to identify which tool(s) to use)
- **Usability** (how easily the inventory could be used in participants' measurement work)
- **Format** (whether there was a better platform or medium to present this information)

What did people say?

"From a community-based organization's perspective, **we're using scales to measure the impact of our program that were not created to do that** — they were created to be used in a clinical setting to assess loneliness."
Katie Wade, Senior Director of Creative Engagement, Front Porch

"Each of these measures and scales are **important and meaningful in their own right**. If you are looking at the effectiveness of a program or a service, then **you really need the match** — the match is the most important."
Dr. Matthew Lee Smith, Associate Professor, Texas A&M University

"We're creating something in the West and then exporting to [other parts of the world]...it requires extensive formative work to **see if the wording and the concepts are even applicable**."
Dr. Ruth Verhey, International Friendship Bench Lead

"Because we are set up as a social service organization, **we need to do everything we can to engage people and lower the bar to participation**."
Ellen Amstutz, Senior Program Officer for Community Based Programs and External Affairs, DOROT

"We want to collect the data for the researchers and for the science, but that qualitative research, **those stories are what help us tell our donors what kind of impact we're having**, and it really helps us grow our programs."
Maureen Feldman | Director, Social Isolation Impact Project
The Motion Picture & Television Fund

Measurement Challenges

Standardization vs. contextualization: Participants expressed both the **desire for a universal set of questions** that all community-based organizations should use, as well as the **need for measurement to capture variations in lived experience**, whether it be due to ability, culture, gender, race, sexuality, and/or socioeconomic status.

Bringing together research and practice: Participants identified the fact that many of these tools were **developed specifically for clinical or research settings**, while **community-based contexts demand a wide range of factors to be considered**, including funding, time constraints, and the persistent stigma associated with loneliness.

Inventory Feedback

The following recommendations were made to improve the inventory of measurement tools:

- **Indicate the intended setting** for tools (e.g., health care, community, residential facility, etc.)
- **Add the expert opinion** on the tools' merit and value
- **Create a decision tree** that practitioners could use to identify which tool(s) to adopt
- **Identify available modalities** (e.g., phone call, online survey, mail-in, etc.) **and languages**
- **Suggest good questions** to ask to gather qualitative data
- **Further break down** the fields included

Impact

The session provided an opportunity for researchers and practitioners to **deepen their understanding of the various factors to consider in measuring social connection**. For example, one researcher expressed the value of mixed methods — using both qualitative and quantitative methods — to measure impact, which was appreciated by a practitioner working on reducing social isolation among seniors, who expressed that stories help communicate the impact of her organization's work to donors and support its growth.

Participants were also able to provide feedback on the inventory of measurement tools, helping to ensure that it ends up being **a useful resource in their work**.