Common Methods of Collecting Data in the Social Sciences

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| **Method** | **Overall Purpose** | **Advantages** | **Challenges** |
| questionnaires, surveys, checklists | when need to quickly and/or easily get lots of information from people in a non-threatening way | -easy to compare and analyze-administer to many people-can get lots of data-many sample questionnaires already exist | -might not get careful feedback-wording can bias responses-are impersonal-some surveys, may need sampling expert- doesn't get full story |
| interviews | when want to fully understand someone's impressions or experiences, or learn more about their answers to questionnaires | -get full range and depth of information-develops relationship with subject-can be flexible | -can take much time-can be hard to analyze and compare-interviewer can bias subject's responses |
| observation | to gather information about people in natural settings or naturally occurring situations  | -view behaviors as they are actually occurring-can adapt to events as they occur | -can be difficult to interpret observed behaviors-can be complex to categorize observations-PI can influence behaviors of program participants |
| focus groups | explore a topic in depth through group discussion, e.g., about reactions to an experience, idea, suggestion, design | -quickly get common impressions -can be efficient way to get much range and depth of information in a short time- can convey key information about a topic, question, program, experience | -can be hard to analyze responses-need good facilitator for safety and closure-difficult to schedule 6-8 people together |

Your research question should dictate your data collection method. The data collection method or instrument chosen must be able to provide reliable data to answer/explain your research question/hypothesis. Each method has its pluses and minuses. More than one method may be required to sufficiently answer a research question or thoroughly test an hypothesis. Consider carefully the advantages and limitations of individual or multiple methods and the practical constraints on methodological choices.