

A Brief Guide to Research Techniques

| Kind of Information | Appropriate Techniques | Advantages | Disadvantages |
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| Things you can directly observe about people, groups, or situations – you don't have to ask them anything | Direct observation | Observation reveals people's actual behavior, which may vary considerably from what they are willing to tell you they do . E.g., reduces respondent reaction bias. | You do not have any information about why they engage in the behavior. |
| Things people know about themselves, others, or a situation that they can easily recall and are willing to state | Questionnaire | Efficient way to collect cognitive level information for both the researcher and the respondent | Questionnaires do NOT work for latent characteristics (like attitudes or values) and they are not very useful if you want to understand people's logic or reasoning process. |
| What individuals think about a topic, event, person – their reasoning and thought processes. | Personal interview | The personal interview allows you to probe the rationale and logic of people's behavior. The individual personal interview allows you to build rapport with the respondent, which improves the quality of the information. | People's "logical" or "rational" explanations of their behavior or what they "think" may or may not reflect all of the phenomena that influence their behavior or decisions. Many factors that people are not aware of may come into play. |
| The summative conclusions or ideas of a group of people, usually people who share a referent characteristic (where they work, membership in a group, etc.) | Group interview | The group interview gives you insight into the shared concepts of a group of people. This may differ considerably from individual responses to the same questions. It provides insight into group processes. | You will most likely get the "consensus" opinion or thought process. You will rarely get minority viewpoints, and you will not get insight into individual thought processes and ideas. Generates one set of information – not one per participant. |
| A range of ideas or opinions that emerges from discussion and interaction | Focus group | You can get a very wide range of ideas, and you can gain insight into how ideas and opinions evolve through the interaction of a group of people | Careful management is required to make sure that broad participation is ensured. Subject to dominance by a few members. . Generates one set of information – not one per participant. |
| Knowledge and skills | Tests | Can be used to both to assess change as a result of intervention and to evaluate the ability of an individual to perform certain tasks, jobs, etc. | Both developing and scoring tests requires great attention to arrive at a valid measure. They are just plain hard to make. |
| Verbal and non-verbal communication | Content analysis | Can be used with a variety of media where behavior and ideas are recorded – art, videos, blogs, websites. Is non- | Since content analysis is non-intrusive, you do not interact with the people who created the blog, etc. You gain limited |

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| | | intrusive. Lends itself to creating quantitative measures if desired. | insight into why behaved as they did, said what they said, etc. |
| Evaluate the contribution of known dimensions to a global latent attribute | Index (sometimes called a formative scale) | The index generates a summative score (interval or ratio level) for a multi-dimensional construct represented by a latent attribute. The index allows you to predict or understand how a change in any one dimension of the construct will affect the value of the global attribute. | To create an index, you must be able to identify all of the dimensions that generate the global attribute. |
| Evaluate a global latent attribute | Scale (sometimes called a reflective scale) | The scale generates a value for a latent attribute (like attitude). You do not need to be able to identify the contributing dimensions. Can be used even when the causal attributes (dimensions) differ among respondents. | Does not permit you to understand why or how the global attribute is formed. |