

## **The Pros and Cons of Data Collection Methods**

### **Surveys**

#### **Pros**

- Standardization
- Easy to do with a large group
- Ease of administration
- Ability to tap the “unseen”
- Suitability to tabulation and statistical analysis
- Sensitivity to subgroup differences
- Can be inexpensive
- Sample can be used to provide much information about a population
- Can provide an opportunity for many people to be involved in the decision-making process
- Can be used to record behaviors as well as opinions, attitudes, beliefs and attributes
- Usefulness enhances if combined with other methods, i.e., observation or case study

#### **Cons**

- Prone to error
- Requires a separate data-entry step
- More expensive
- Possible “interview evaluation” concern among respondents
- Samples must be carefully selected to ensure statistical meaning.
- Subject to misinterpretation, depending on how questions are designed and asked
- Tendency for scope of data to be limited—omission of underlying behavioral patterns
- Time-consuming compared with less formal methods

### **Interviews**

#### **Pros**

- Allows for clarification
- High response rate
- Able to gather in-depth information and to pursue hunches
- Can tailor the line of discussion to the individual
- Easier to reach those who are considered unreachable (the poor, homeless, high status, mobile, etc.)
- May be easier to reach specific individuals (i.e., community leaders, etc.)
- More personalized approach
- Easier to ask open-ended questions, use probes and pick up on nonverbal cues

#### **Cons**

- Reactive effect: interviewer’s presence and characteristics may bias results
- Expensive
- Requires strong interviewing skills
- Slowest method of data collection and analysis
- Responses may be less honest and thoughtful
- Interviewer should go to location of respondent
- Respondents who prefer anonymity may be inhibited by personal approach
- May reach only a smaller sample
- Difficult to analyze and quantify results

## Focus Groups

### Pros

- Generate fresh ideas
- Allows clarification
- Efficiency of getting information from a number of people
- Provides immediate sharing and synthesis
- Works well with special participants
- Less expensive and faster than personal interviews
- Personalized approach
- Group members stimulate each other

### Cons

- Moderately time consuming
- Moderately expensive
- Subject interpretation
- High cost per participant
- Lack of confidentiality
- Respondents who prefer anonymity may be inhibited by personal approach
- Input may be unbalanced because some group members dominate
- Group members and interviewer can bias responses
- Maybe difficult to analyze or quantify data

## Activity Observations

### Pros

- Setting is natural, flexible and unstructured
- Evaluator may make his/her identity known or remain anonymous
- Evaluator may actively participate or observe passively
- Can be combined with a variety of other data collection methods
- Generates relevant, quantifiable data
- Most useful for studying a “small unit” such as a classroom, Extension Council, etc.

### Cons

- Requires skilled observer
- The evaluator has less control over the situation in a natural environment
- Hawthorne effect—if group is aware that they are being observed, resulting behavior may be affected
- Observations cannot be generalized to entire population unless a plan for representativeness is developed
- If observer chooses to be involved in the activity, he/she may lose objectivity
- Not realistic for use with large groups