DATA COLLECTION METHODS

Data collection method is an essential dimension or part of psychological (social) research. It is of two broad categories: self-report methods and observational methods.

Self-report Methods are procedures in which people are asked to rate or describe their own behaviour or mental state in some way. This might be done through a questionnaire, in which people produce self-descriptions either by checking off items on a printed list or by writing answers to essay questions. Or it might be done through an interview, in which people describe themselves orally in a dialogue with the interviewer. An interview may be tightly structured, with the interviewer asking questions according to a completely planned sequence, or it may be more loosely structured, with the interviewer following up on some of the subject's responses with additional questions. Researchers have developed numerical methods for scoring some structured interviews.

Observational Methods include all procedures by which researchers observe and record the behaviour of interest, rather than rely on self-reports. In one sub-category, naturalistic observation, the researcher avoids interfering with the subject's behaviour. For example, an

animal behaviourist might un-obstructively watch a duck's courtship behaviour, or a developmental psychologist might observe children through a one-way window in a laboratory playroom. In the other subcategory, tests, the researcher deliberately presents stimuli or problems to which the subject responds. Examples include reaction-time tests, in which a person is asked to respond in a particular way as quickly as possible when a specific stimulus is presented; and problem-solving tests, such as maze problems for animals or paper-and-pencil logic problems for people.

None of these data-collection methods is in any absolute sense superior to another. Each has its purposes, advantages and limitations. Questionnaires and interviews can provide information that researchers would not be able to obtain by watching subjects directly. However, the validity of such data is limited by the subjects' ability to observe and remember their own behaviours and moods and by their willingness to report those observations frankly, without distorting them to look good or please the researcher. Naturalistic observations allow researchers to learn firsthand about their subjects' natural behaviours, but the practicality of such methods is limited by the great amount of time they take, the difficulty of observing ongoing behaviour without disrupting it, and the difficulty

of coding results in a form that can be used for statistical analysis. Tests are convenient and easily scored but are by nature artificial, and the relationships between test results and everyday behaviours are not always clear.