

Problem Formulation in Social Science Research

Md Inaam Akhtar

PhD research scholar Department of Political Science Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Email ID: inaam.akhtar@gmail.com

Abstract

In social science research the first and most important step of research is formulation of research problems. It is like the foundation of building which is going to construct, and drafting an outline of a building is not an easy task. In the same way identifying of various research problems is not an easy task. If someone wants to solve a problem he/she must have to know about the problem. So in the social science research, problem formulation is very important for the researcher before conducting the research. In this article I have tried to focus on several factors through which one can identify the problems which can occur at the time of research.

Key words: Research Problem; Research Topic; Sources; Components; Technique; Purpose.

Introduction

Selection of a topic for research does not immediately put investigator in a position to start considering what data they will collect, by what methods, and how they will analyze them. Before taking such steps, investigator need to formulate specific problem that can be

investigated by scientific procedures. Unfortunately, it happens not in presently that investigator attempt to jump immediately from the selection of a topic to the collection of data, violating the logic of analysis. At best, this means that they will be faced with the task of formulating a problem after the data have been collected, at worst that they will not produce a scientific inquiry at all.¹

Identifying a research problem is indicating a specific area for answering some research question. If the research is to be conducted in business administration, the area of research could be managerial decision, functioning of trade unions, worker's beneficiary schemes, strategies for increasing production, reducing problems of strikes, planning for future growth and so on.² In a research process the first and foremost step happens to be that of selecting and properly defining a research problem. A researcher must have to find the problem and formulate it so that it becomes susceptible to research. To

¹. Sellitz Claire, (1976), *Research Method in Social Relation*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston: Published for the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, P-55.

². Ahuja Ram, (2010), *Research Methods*, New Delhi: Rawat Publication, P-103.

define a problem correctly, a researcher must know have to understand about: what a problem is?

What is Research Problem?

A research problem refers to some difficulty which a researcher experience in the context of either a practical or theoretical situation and want to obtain solution for the same.³ The selection of research topic is himself a big problem in social research. If a person wants to do research then the selection of a topic is big problem, because there must be some reason behind research work. All concerned factors must be taken into account by a researcher before finally defining research problem.

Selection of Research Topic

Whether the research is descriptive or exploratory or explanatory or experimental or theoretical, it is mainly concerned with questions like what, why, how etc. for example when a description is sought the questions raised might be. What types of persons take drugs, what drugs are taken, how are drugs procured, what are the cause of taking drugs, what are the physiological and psychological

effects of taking drugs and so on, or the questions may relate to testing hypothesis.

Zikmund has said that the selection of the problems of research is to be linked with the following:

What is the purpose of the study? What is or how much is already known? Is Extra information required? What is to be ascertain/explore? How is it to be measured? The data which will be collected i.e. will be respondents give correct information? Is the time is appropriate for undertaking the research? Can a hypothesis be formulated? Is the time and money enough for the research?⁴

Sources of Selecting Research Topic

How do we get the ideas of deciding a topic of research? How do we prepare relevant hypotheses? The ideas originated from varied sources they are as–

1. **Researches conducted by others:** Exposure to professional seminars and conferences also sometimes throws ideas of researcher.
2. Reviewing literature and getting ideas from books and articles questions which either others have posed or which arise in the course of one's reading could become research questions.

³. Kothari C.R., (2010), *Research Methodology: Methods and Technique*, New Delhi: New Age International Publishers, P-24.

⁴. Ahuja Ram, (2010), *Research Methodology*, New Delhi: Rawat Publication, P-104.

3. **Experience** i.e. one's own life experiences in professional work or the general life experiences.
4. **Government priorities:** Various government organizations also publicise research topic.
5. **Prevalent theories:** There are some theories which are prevalent in society. These need to be tested by a variety of specific hypotheses to determine in what contexts/conditions they may or may not hold. In this way popular theories as well as scientific theories can give ideas about research problems.
6. **Imagination:** Sometimes, the news media provide an ever growing potential source of research problem for sociologists e.g. methods used by T.V. for creating awareness among women and adopting modern views.
7. **Some observed phenomenon – 1** e.g. Adult Child interaction, shop keeper and customer interaction, interaction of members of two parties, belonging to two different factions.

Some of the areas which have been recently identified for research are -1 Media, Mass Communication, Women Empowerment, political corruption, Sociology of disasters, value oriented education, civil society, and

like. Sometimes, these topics are assigned by the funding agencies.⁵

Feature Taken into Consideration While Defining Research Problem

1. Technical and statistical terms should be clearly defined.
2. Assumptions fixed for the research work should be clearly defined.
3. Clear investigation material is essential with clear cut expressions.
4. Scope of the research problem should be clearly defined.⁶

Components of Research Problem

1. There must be an individual or a group which has some difficulty or problem.
2. There must be some objectives to be attained. If someone wants nothing then one cannot have a problem.
3. There must be alternative means or the courses of action for obtaining the objectives one wishes to attain. This means there must be at least two medium available to a researcher for if he has no choice of means, he cannot have a problem.
4. There must remain some doubt in the mind of researcher with regard to the selection of alternatives. This means

⁵. Ibid. P-108, 109.

⁶. Khanzode V.V. (1995), *Research Methodology: Technique & Trends*, New Delhi: APH Publishing Corporation. P-25.

that research must answer the question concerning the relative efficiency of the possible alternatives.

5. There must be some environment to which the difficulty pertains.⁷

Selecting the Problem

Selection of the problem is a very difficult task. There must be a firm situation in the minds of the researcher that, on which subject and problem he has to research.

While selecting the problem following points must be taken into consideration.

1. It is not desirable to choose the same subject on which lot of research work is already done.
2. Vague problems should be avoided.
3. The subject selected for research work should be easy, workable, informative and within the jurisdiction of a researcher.
4. Research work should be economical and time saving.
5. Preliminary study is necessary for choosing any research problem.⁸

Formulating the Research Problem

Although the selection of a research topic may be determined by other than scientific considerations, the formulation of the

research problem is the first step in a scientific inquiry, and as such, it should be influenced primarily by the need of scientific procedure. However, there is no simple rule which will guide the investigator to prepare significant questions about a given research area. Here, the training and gifts of the individual are of major importance.⁹

Formulating Research questions

Research Questions constitute the most important element of any research. These are different form of the Research objectives. They describe the ideas contained in the research objectives. However, Research questions emerge after the Research objectives. In fact, they point out the data that are required to be collected in the study.¹⁰

Technique for Defining a Problem

1. Detail information about the problem should be clearly stated in descriptive way. It is useful for considering exact research problem.
2. General statement for understanding the nature of the problem is useful for solving the problem.

⁷. Kothari C.R., (2010), opt. cit, P-25.

⁸. Khandoze V.V., (1995), opt. cit. P-26

⁹. Trivedi R.N. and Shukla D.P., (1998), *Research Methodology*, Jaipur: College Book Depot, P-54.

¹⁰. Ahuja Ram, (2010), opt. cit. P-114.

3. Surveying the available information is necessary while defining the research problem.
4. Security of various data and drawing out the exact picture of data statement is necessary.
5. Discussion concerning with the research may often be useful for deceleration of the subject matter. Through this, many new information can enlighten on the subject matter. Through this, many new information can enlighten on the subject matter.
6. Rephrasing the research problem is useful for the development of defining a research problem.¹¹

Technique of Developing Research Questions

1. Record all questions that occurs in mind after reading literature or after discussions with others or after thinking on various aspects of study.
2. Review these questions whether each question is necessary and deletes those which are outside the scope of the study. This will also remove overlapping between questions.

3. Clarify the questions on the basis of this nature i.e. separate what, why and how questions.
4. Examine the scope of the questions. Depending on the time and money available for the study, the scope cannot be too ambitions. Only such areas are to be chosen which would be manageable within the time and resources.
5. Separate major or key questions from subsidiary questions.¹²

Types of Research Questions

Research questions are grouped into 3 types:-

1. What questions (concerned with description)?
2. Why questions (concerned with explaining causes)?
3. How questions (concerned with bringing about changes)?

What questions pertain to describing the characteristics of and patterns in the given social phenomena?

Why questions relate to the causes or reasons for the characteristics of the particular phenomena and the behavior of the individuals involved. They also explain the relationship between events and between activities and social processes.

¹¹ . Khandoze V.V., (1995), opt. cit. P-26, 27.

¹² . Ahuja Ram , (2010), opt. cit. P-115, 116.

How questions are concerned with bringing about change and the outcomes of change.¹³

Purpose of Research Questions

The main function of Research question is to define the scope of the Research i.e. to determine what is to be studied and the extent to which it will be studied.

Many a time, the researcher is deflected or distracted from his original objects of Research. This may be because of several influences like encouraging new ideas, discussion with colleagues, reading more literature and ideas that he gets during the course of research. However, he does not neglect his original research. At the most, he may change some research questions and asks some new questions from the respondents.¹⁴

In addition to what have been stated above the following points must also be observed while defining a research problem.

1. Technical terms and phrases or words should be clearly defined, which special meanings have used in the statement of the problem.
2. Basic assumption or postulates (if any) relating to the research problem should be clearly stated.

3. A straight forward statement of the investigation should be provided.
4. The suitability of the sources of data available and the time period must also be considered by the researcher at the time of defining the problem.
5. The limits within which the problem is to be studied or the scope of the investigation must be mentioned in defining a research problem.¹⁵

Conclusion

We can conclude by saying that problem formulation is the first and most important step before starting a research. In this step a clear statement of problems of entire research is defined. After determining the area for research one must have to follow these serial patterns- the problem is to be explained in a common way, the vagueness have to be resolved, a clear relation must be defined in different variable, the time period of research must be fixed, the expenditure of the research, process of data collection and process of data analysis must be clear.

Thus, we can say that a research problem is itself a small research to find out the solution of the identified problems of the entire research. There may be several factors which may create complicated problems at the time of

¹³. Ibid. P-116, 117.

¹⁴. Ibid. P-116.

¹⁵. Kothari C.R., (2010), opt. cit. P-28, 29.

conducting research. So it is necessary to go through the entire research processes to identify the problem of the research before going actual research.

References

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