

WHAT IS A RESEARCH PROBLEM?

Research problem; refers to some difficulty which a researcher experiences in context of either a theoretical or practical situation, and wants to obtain a solution for the same.

Usually we say that a research problem does exist if the following conditions are met with:

- (i) There must be an individual (or a group or an organisation), let us call it 'I,' to whom the problem can be attributed. The individual or the organisation, as the case may be, occupies an environment, say 'N', which is defined by values of the uncontrolled variables.
- (ii) There must be at least two courses of action, say C1 and C2, to be pursued. A course of action is defined by one or more values of the controlled variables. For example, the number of items purchased at a specified time is said to be one course of action.
- (iii) There must be at least two possible outcomes, say O1 and O2, of the course of action, of which one should be preferable to the other. In other words, this means that there must be at least one outcome that the researcher wants, i.e., an objective.
- (iv) The courses of action available must provide some chance of obtaining the objective, but they cannot provide the same chance, otherwise the choice would not matter.

Thus, if $P(O_j | I, C_j, N)$ represents the probability that an outcome O_j will occur, if I select C_j in N, then $P(O_1 | I, C_1, N) \neq P(O_1 | I, C_2, N)$. In simple words, we can say that the choices must have unequal efficiencies for the desired outcomes.

We can, state the components of a research problem as under:

- (i) There must be an individual or a group which has some difficulty or the problem.
- (ii) There must be some objective(s) to be attained at. If one wants nothing, one cannot have a problem.
- (iii) There must be alternative means (or the courses of action) for obtaining the objective(s) one wishes to attain. This means that there must be at least

two means available to a researcher for if he has no choice of means, he cannot have a problem. (iv) There must remain some doubt in the mind of a researcher with regard to the selection of alternatives. This means that research must answer the question concerning the relative efficiency of the possible alternatives. (v) There must be some environment(s) to which the difficulty pertains

TECHNIQUE INVOLVED IN DEFINING A PROBLEM

Defining a research problem properly and clearly is a crucial part of a research study and must in no case be accomplished hurriedly.

The research problem should be defined in a systematic manner, giving due weightage to all relating points. The technique for the purpose involves the undertaking of the following steps generally one after the other: (i) statement of the problem in a general way; (ii) understanding the nature of the problem; (iii) surveying the available literature (iv) developing the ideas through discussions; and (v) rephrasing the research problem into a working proposition.

A brief description of all these points will be helpful.

(i) Statement of the problem in a general way: First of all the problem should be stated in a broad general way, keeping in view either some practical concern or some scientific or intellectual interest. For this purpose, the researcher must immerse himself thoroughly in the subject matter concerning which he wishes to pose a problem. In case of social research, it is considered advisable to do some field observation and as such the researcher may undertake some sort of preliminary survey or what is often called pilot survey. Then the researcher can himself state the problem or he can seek the guidance of the guide or the subject expert in accomplishing this task. Often, the guide puts forth the problem in general terms, and it is then up to the researcher to narrow it down and phrase the problem in operational terms. In case there is some directive from an organizational authority, the problem then can be stated accordingly. The problem stated in a broad general way may contain various ambiguities which must be resolved by cool thinking and rethinking over the problem.

At the same time the feasibility of a particular solution has to be considered and the same should be kept in view while stating the problem.

(ii) Understanding the nature of the problem: The next step in defining the problem is to understand its origin and nature clearly. The best way of understanding the problem is to discuss it with those who first raised it in order to find out how the problem originally came about and with what objectives in view. If the researcher has stated the problem himself, he should consider once again all those points that induced him to make a general statement concerning the problem. For a better understanding of the nature of the problem involved, he can enter into discussion with those who have a good knowledge of the problem concerned or similar other problems. The researcher should also keep in view the environment within which the problem is to be studied and understood.

(iii) Surveying the available literature: All available literature concerning the problem at hand must necessarily be surveyed and examined before a definition of the research problem is given.

This means that the researcher must be well-conversant with relevant theories in the field, reports and records as also all other relevant literature. He must devote sufficient time in reviewing of research already undertaken on related problems. This is done to find out what data and other materials, if any, are available for operational purposes. “Knowing what data are available often serves to narrow the problem itself as well as the technique that might be used.” This would also help a researcher to know if there are certain gaps in the theories, or whether the existing theories applicable to the problem under study are inconsistent with each other, or whether the findings of the different studies do not follow a pattern consistent with the theoretical expectations and so on. All this will enable a researcher to take new strides in the field for furtherance of knowledge i.e., he can move up starting from the existing premise. Studies on related problems are useful for indicating the type of difficulties that may be encountered in the present study as also the possible analytical shortcomings. At

times such studies may also suggest useful and even new lines of approach to the present problem.

(iv) Developing the ideas through discussions: Discussion concerning a problem often produces useful information. Various new ideas can be developed through such an exercise. Hence, a researcher must discuss his problem with his colleagues and others who have enough experience in the same area or in working on similar problems. This is quite often known as an experience survey. People with rich experience are in a position to enlighten the researcher on different aspects of his proposed study and their advice and comments are usually invaluable to the researcher. They help him sharpen his focus of attention on specific aspects within the field. Discussions with such persons should not only be confined to the formulation of the specific problem at hand, but should also be concerned with the general approach to the given problem, techniques that might be used, possible solutions, etc.

(v) Rephrasing the research problem: Finally, the researcher must sit to rephrase the research problem into a working proposition. Once the nature of the problem has been clearly understood, the environment (within which the problem has got to be studied) has been defined, discussions over the problem have taken place and the available literature has been surveyed and examined, rephrasing the problem into analytical or operational terms is not a difficult task. Through rephrasing, the researcher puts the research problem in as specific terms as possible so that it may become operationally viable and may help in the development of working hypotheses.*

In addition to what has been stated above, the following points must also be observed while defining a research problem:

- (a) Technical terms and words or phrases, with special meanings used in the statement of the problem, should be clearly defined.
- (b) Basic assumptions or postulates (if any) relating to the research problem should be clearly stated.
- (c) A straight forward statement of the value of the investigation (i.e., the criteria for the selection of the problem) should be provided.

(d) The suitability of the time-period and the sources of data available must also be considered by the researcher in defining the problem.

(e) The scope of the investigation or the limits within which the problem is to be studied must be mentioned explicitly in defining a research problem.