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**Defining the Research Problem**

In research process, the first and foremost step happens to be that of selecting and properly defining a research problem.\* A researcher must find the problem and formulate it so that it becomes susceptible to research. Like a medical doctor, a researcher must examine all the symptoms (presented to him or observed by him) concerning a problem before he can diagnose correctly. To define a problem correctly, a researcher must know: what a problem is?

A research problem, in general, refers to some difficulty which a researcher experiences in the context of either a theoretical or practical situation and wants to obtain a solution for the same. In other words, a research problem is one which requires a researcher to find out the best solution for the given problem, i.e., to find out by which course of action the objective can be attained optimally in the context of a given environment. There are several factors which may result in making the problem complicated. For instance, the environment may change affecting the efficiencies of the courses of action or the values of the outcomes; the number of alternative courses of action may be very large; persons not involved in making the decision may be affected by it and react to it favourably or unfavourably, and similar other factors. All such elements (or at least the important ones) may be thought of in context of a research problem.

The research problem undertaken for study must be carefully selected. the following points may be observed by a researcher in selecting a research problem or a subject for research:

(i) Subject which is overdone should not be normally chosen, for it will be a difficult task to throw any new light in such a case.

(ii) Controversial subject should not become the choice of an average researcher

(iii) Too narrow or too vague problems should be avoided.

(iv) The subject selected for research should be familiar and feasible so that the related research material or sources of research are within one’s reach. Even then it is quite difficult to supply definitive ideas concerning how a researcher should obtain ideas for his research. For this purpose, a researcher should contact an expert or a professor in the University who is already engaged in research. He may as well read articles published in current literature available on the subject and may think how the techniques and ideas discussed therein might be applied to the solution of other problems. He may discuss with others what he has in mind concerning a problem. In this way he should make all possible efforts in selecting a problem.

(v) The importance of the subject, the qualifications and the training of a researcher, the costs involved, the time factor are few other criteria that must also be considered in selecting a problem. In other words, before the final selection of a problem is done, a researcher must ask himself the following questions:

(a) Whether he is well equipped in terms of his background to carry out the research?

(b) Whether the study falls within the budget he can afford?

(c) Whether the necessary cooperation can be obtained from those who must participate

If the answers to all these questions are in the affirmative, one may become sure so far as the practicability of the study is concerned.

(vi) The selection of a problem must be preceded by a preliminary study. This may not be necessary when the problem requires the conduct of a research closely similar to one that has already been done. But when the field of inquiry is relatively new and does not have available a set of well developed techniques, a brief feasibility study must always be undertaken.

**The Necessity of Defining the Research Problem:**

Quite often we all hear that a problem clearly stated is a problem half solved. This statement signifies the need for defining a research problem. The problem to be investigated must be defined unambiguously for that will help to discriminate relevant data from the irrelevant ones. A proper definition of research problem will enable the researcher to be on the track whereas an ill-defined problem may create hurdles. Questions like: What data are to be collected? What characteristics of data are relevant and need to be studied? What relations are to be explored. What techniques are to be used for the purpose? And similar other questions crop up in the mind of the researcher who can well plan his strategy and find answers to all such questions only when the research problem has been well defined. Thus, defining a research problem properly is a prerequisite for any study and is a step of the highest importance. In fact, formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution. It is only on careful detailing the research problem that we can work out the research design and can smoothly carry on all the consequential steps involved while doing research.

**Techniques 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. However, in practice this a frequently overlooked which causes a lot of problems later on. Hence, 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. 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. 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:** 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.

**(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.* 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.

**(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.