

## 2. Defining A Research Problem in Social Studies

**Dr. Shruti Ganpule**

Pratibha College of Commerce and Computer Studies,  
Chinchwad.

### 2.1 Introduction:

The first step in undertaking a research study is to define a research problem. Let it be a research paper, research article, column in a newspaper or a research thesis, identifying and defining a research problem is a crucial thing. New research aspirants are quite often found to be confused with the area of research, the research topic, research title and the research problem. At the outset, it becomes essential to identify the research area to be studied.

There are different reasons why a researcher selects a particular area for study. Sometimes, it is in his personal interest to study a specific issue as a research problem. Sometimes, the research supervisor or the research guide suggests a particular topic for study. If it's a newspaper article, or a journal article, the research area is broadly mentioned. In case of a conference research paper, again the broad guidelines are given. Now the question arises how to select appropriate research area for research study and how to convert the same into aptly defined research problem.

**There are four 'I's which help a researcher to define a research problem.**

- A. Individuals
- B. Institution
- C. Issues
- D. Interest

#### **A. Individuals:**

Individuals represent a group of people which belong to a society. They are bound by the rules, traditions, cultures and values of a particular society. Individuals can be studied with the demographic features like their age groups, sex, marital status, employment status, economic status, educational level. E.g. study of stress factors impacting married employed women, study of work life balance of youth employed in IT sector, Study of social media on school going children, etc.

#### **B. Institutions:**

Institutions means different types of business organizations. A researcher can undertake study of problems or performance of sole trading concerns or partnership firms, Private or public limited companies, Government establishments or even Nonprofit making organizations.

The study may pertain to the employees in these organizations, recruitment process, production process, marketing system, corporate governance, CSR activities, Filing of tax returns, collective bargaining etc. Here, the area of problem selected will be specifically related to the particular type of organization or group of such organizations, or an industry.

### **C. Issue:**

The main thrust of any kind of research is a research problem. The issues, as mentioned earlier, may be related to individuals or institutions. Some of these issues are very specific having a narrow scope for further elaboration. Mostly, such issues are related to an individual.

E.g. agitation against retirement scheme or promotional aspects in a particular organization, absence of maternity leave in the organization. These are problems which do require attention; however, such problems cannot be treated as research problems. On the other hand, there are certain problems that are too wide to cover due to constraints related to time, money and efforts.

E.g. Study of economic aspects of Russia Ukraine War, or impact of war on the economies of developing nations. Issues like these, are too wide to study. It will hardly be possible for an individual researcher to undertake such research and complete it within the give time with availability of accurate data. There are so many aspects involved in such a study that it becomes hard for an individual to cover it and to justify the same.

### **D. Interest:**

The research study to be undertaken must be of great interest to the researcher. Just because the research guide or the supervisor is asking him to study, or just because the topic is a hot cake for the time being, it cannot be undertaken as a topic for the research study. It is imperative for the researcher to have some knowledge about the research study to be undertaken. Interest in a particular subject or area, is of utmost importance.

If one does not like the topic, which he selects for study, he won't be able to give his hundred percent. Even, sometimes, it is a remote possibility that the researcher may give up without completing the study. Interest in the research topic selected, is fundamentally essential to the researcher to work with zest.

### **Formulating a Research Problem:**

A good quality food is an essential element of good health. Likewise, a precisely defined research problem, is a foundation on which the final outcome of the research depends.

If a research problem is defined appropriately, it helps to design research objectives, research questions and helps in proving hypothesis. A loosely defined research problem creates doubts in the mind of researcher, leading him to probe in future. It may ultimately result in a poor quality of research study.

## **2.2.1 Guidelines for Formulating a Research Problem:**

### **A. Identify a Broad Area for Study:**

It is the basic area of interest that a researcher wants to undertake. This broad guidelines may help a researcher to move ahead in a specific direction. E.g. Social responsibility of business organizations, health issues of workers in construction industry, women empowerment, entrepreneurship development, and skill development required for employment of self-employment etc.

### **B. Identify Related Issues or Ideas for Study:**

Once, broader area is identified, the researcher can list down several sub topics related to the selected area interest. He can undertake an extensive literature review to know more about his area of interest under study. It will help to find out various aspects related to study. E.g. if the area of interest is construction industry, the researcher can undertake a study related to construction project management, time and cost overruns in completion of construction project, issues and availability of skilled and semi-skilled labour, migration of construction labour etc.

### **C. Feasibility Study:**

If the researcher has some experience or knowledge about the area of his interest, it becomes easier to shortlist the topic for research problem to be studied. Sometimes, it happens that the research problem appears to be quite interesting, but it might not be feasible to undertake the same due to the constraints of time, cost and availability of reliable data. So, the decision to fix the research problem to be selected will be determined by the passion of the researcher and the feasibility study.

### **D. Formulate Research Question:**

The researcher should ask himself questions like why he is undertaking this study, what will be the outcome of the study, the group of people that will be benefitted by this study. Whether the research study will contribute something to the existing body of knowledge? Will the research study be useful to provide solutions to the social issues? Will it be really useful to the community or to the group of individuals selected, organization under study? What exactly the researcher wants to find out is the basic research question. It is better to list down all those questions which may form part of the research study.

### **E. Formulate Research Objectives:**

A research objective is the goal or aim which the researcher needs to achieve. It is an answer to the question why the researcher has undertaken the study. It is essential to write down objectives of the research study so that the researcher can follow well defined and planned path to complete research study. The research objective must be very well defined in clear terms. There should not be any ambiguity or confusion in the statement of objectives.

A clearly defined statement of objective leads to flawless work. The statement of objective, may now, contain words or phrases like 'To study', 'to compare', 'to analyze', 'to identify' or 'to critically evaluate' etc. It shows what exactly the researcher has planned to do. This also shows what kind of research design the researcher has chosen. Whether it is a descriptive study, or evaluative study or comparative analysis, a causal study etc.

#### **F. The Operational Definitions:**

The end result or the output of research study is to add something useful to the existing body of knowledge. The readers, observers, other new researchers should be able to understand the terms and concepts used in the statement of problem and the statement of objectives. So, it becomes essential at this stage to provide operational definitions. These definitions are for the purpose of understanding of the readers. These definitions might not be legal, or as per those given in the dictionaries. These definitions help to clear the concepts and phrases used in the statement of problem or objectives. E.g when we say study of workers engaged in construction industry, we need to define and explain the terms like what is construction industry, what type of construction activities are involved, what are type of workers employed in a construction industry, skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled, casual, etc. These definitions also help a common man to read and understand the research study.

#### **G. Make sure that the Research Problem is Aptly Selected.**

This is the final stage to verify that the research problem selected for study is chosen appropriately. It is defined appropriately. The researcher is well equipped with the resources like availability of respondents, reliable sources of data, reliable data, time to complete research work and monetary resources. The researcher should be confident regarding the selection of research problem.

#### **The Role of Literature Review in Defining a Research Problem:**

Reading is the only key for successful research study. The researcher should read all available literature from all available resources. He has to keep on reading all kind of existing material on the research problem he wants to deal with. It may be research articles, research papers, scholarly articles, white papers, books, research thesis, online blogs, magazines, weekly or fortnightly editions etc. It helps the researcher to find the earlier research work done by other researchers previously in the area he has selected. It helps him to find out the research gap so that the research work he has undertaken will be an addition or extension to the already existing body of knowledge. The extensive research work will ensure that the research study he has undertaken is not an imitation. It will sharpen his concepts. It will help him to focus on the area of study which is untouched or which is still left to be studied.

### **2.3 Conclusion:**

The formulation of research problem is the base of any research study. The reliability, accuracy, usefulness of any research study highly depends upon the clearly defined research problem. The journey of research study begins with identifying a broad idea of research

study, enlisting sub areas, preparation of research questions, designing research objectives. Undertaking extensive literature review is a prerequisite to define a research problem. The area of interest of the researcher serves as a motivational factor in the completion of the research study. It is essential to define a research problem with precision. There should not be any scope for ambiguity, confusion or uncertainty in defining a research problem. Thus, for the end result of research study to be useful or meaningful, it is essential to define the research problem clear and unambiguous terms.

#### **2.4 References:**

1. Agee, J. (2009). Developing qualitative research questions: a reflective process. *Taylor & Francis Online*, 431.
2. R. Kothari, G. G. (2019). *Research Methodology, Methods and Techniques*. New Delhi: New Age Publishers.
3. Framework of Problem-Based Research: A Guide for Novice Researchers on the Development of a Research-Worthy Problem. (2008). *the International Journal of an Emerging Transdiscipline*, Timothy J. Ellis and Yair Levy.
4. Kothari, C. R. (2013). *Research Methodology*. New Delhi: New Age Publishers.
5. Kumar, R. (2005). *Research methodology*. Australia: Pearson Education Australia.
6. Kumar, R. (2014). *Research Methodology... a Step by Step Guide for Beginners*. New Delhi: Sage.
7. Sachdeva, J. K. (2011). *Business Research Methodology*. NewDelhi: Himalaya Publishing House.
8. Sandberg, M. A. (2011). Generating Research Questions Through Problematization. *Academy of Management Review*.