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1.0 Introduction...

• No doubt, research problem (RP) is very important in research because:
  • It is the very reason behind every research activity (Patidar, 2013).
  • It provides for how a study can be conducted and its results reported (Bryman as cited in Kebritchi, 2019).
  • It defines the parameters of a study (Shuttleworth, 2008).
  • In a nutshell, it is the very heart of every research process.
  • But, identifying and stating an acceptable RP is challenging – even for the most accomplished researcher.
  • The challenge is more critical for the higher degree students and early career researchers!
2.1 What is a Research Problem?

The issue(s) that a researcher intends to investigate.

The foundational purpose of one’s study upon which one’s entire research activity is based.

An incongruence; a discrepancy between what is and what ought to be.

An area of concern, a condition to be improved upon, a difficulty to be eliminated, or a troubling question that exists in scholarly literature, in theory, or in practice that points to the need for meaningful understanding and deliberate investigation.

A gap in knowledge that needs to be filled.

Little research has been done in this field.

Something working well that needs to be understood and maintained.

This is called Appreciative inquiry.

Fig. 1: Conceptualization of the Research Problem
2.2 How is a research problem different from other problems?

- A research problem is about a need or a discrepancy that can only be solved through collection and analysis of data.
- This may not be the case with certain problems whose solutions are either known or can be found in literature.
- The common pointers to research problems include:
  1) Issues which attract attention and may need investigation,
  2) Unanswered questions,
  3) Missing links, imbalances,
  4) Unsatisfactory states of affairs, and
  5) problems of adjustment to say technological advances, etc.
Examine Theory/Practice/Experience/Environment

Qn. 1. Is there a discrepancy between the actual status (what is) and what should be (the ideal)?
- No
- Yes [A problem exists]

Qn. 2. Is there a question about why there is a discrepancy?
- No
- Yes [A problem exists]

Qn. 3. Are there possible & reasonable answers to the discrepancy?
- No
- Yes [A problem exists]

If No Problem: Solution already exists: No research problem
If No Problem: No research problem. The problem cannot be investigated through research.
If Yes [A problem exists]: A research problem exists. The possible answers form the basis of investigation.

Figure 2: A Flow Diagram for identifying a Research Problem
Source: Oso & Onen (2009)
Fig. 3: Sources of Research Problems
2.4 What are the different types of research problems?

Research problems can classified into different types based on several criteria. On the basis of types of questions, we have:

1. Descriptive,
2. Relative,
3. Comparative,
4. Predictive,
5. Explanatory
6. Exploratory, and
7. Casual types of research problems.
2.6 How is a RP identified and formulated?

- Scholars have different views about how the research problem can be identified.
- Commonly, a researcher needs to identify a broad area of research e.g.– HRM practices or productivity of academic staff in higher education or UPE et cetera,
- Then the researcher needs to widely and critically review literature.
- This can help the researcher to identify a problem (a gap, an anomaly, etc.)
- But this should be followed by creating research question(s).
- According to Akhidime (2017), “research questions set out the framework and the specific terms of inquiry needed to address the research problem” (p.638).
- Research questions can be asked about different aspects of the problem concept or variable.
- Once a researcher formulates his/her research question, then his/her research problem will become clearer.
How RP identified….Contd

• RP can also emerge from one’s personal or professional life experiences.
• Here, the researcher can observe an ‘anomaly’ or ‘undesirable conditions’ that could prompt lit. review.
• Purpose is to identify ‘gaps in knowledge’.
• After identifying problem, it is thus formulated for research.
• This involves formulating the research questions that the study will address.
• But, such a RP should be verified through lit. review.
• Thus, Bakkabulindi’s (2019, Oral Communication) counsel of “literature first, and literature throughout” holds water.
2.7 Characteristics of a Good Research Problem

- First, it must be clearly and succinctly stated.
- Second, it must be significant in nature.
- Third, it should be grounded in theory.
- Fourth, it should be feasible and amenable to research.
- Fifth, it should generate significant questions that need to be answered.
- Sixth, it needs to be novel in nature; that is, it should be on something new, original or fresh.
- Seventh, it needs to have a base in literature.
- Eight, it should be in one’s field of study.
- Ninth, it should be within the means of the researcher to competently conduct it.
- Finally, it should have the potential for influencing future research and other researchers in a given field.
2.8 How to Write the Statement of the Problem...Template 1(a)

- Essentially, a good problem statement is just one sentence (with several paragraphs of elaboration).
- The statement can be written in two formats:
  1. Interrogative (or question) form – this is a problem statement stated in form of a question or questions.
  2. Declarative Form – is stating a problem statement in terms of a ‘flat’ sentence; not a question.

Examples

i. Is there any relationship between self-esteem and the participation of doctoral students in group discussions at University X?

2. Declarative Form – is stating a problem statement in terms of a ‘flat’ sentence; not a question.

Example:

i. To establish the relationship between self-esteem and the participation of doctoral students in group discussions at University X.
Template 1(b)

According to Jackson (2017), the statement of the problem should contain at least these 5 items:
1. your methodology, e.g., “In this interpretive study…”,
2. the methods you will use to collect data, e.g., “I will interview … and analyze their journals”
3. your participants, e.g., “4 Latina middle-school girls”,
4. where the study will take place, e.g. “who attend an urban public high school in a large western city”
5. what you are studying, e.g., “in order to determine how they use journal writing to help them negotiate the joys and difficulties of adolescence.”

Source: Adopted from Alecia Jackson (2018)
Template 2(a)

One way of writing the problem statement is to:

1. Start by describing the ideal situation; that is, the ideal relationship between your study variables or issues.
2. Then describe the actual situation prevailing in your research area or context.
3. Provide evidence of the intensity and magnitude (or scope) of the existing problem.
4. Give the implications of the current situation.
5. Then state what needs to be done (the problem itself).
These guidelines indicate that when writing a Problem statement, start with describing the:

1. **Stable Context**
Describe unchanging facts about the topic/problem e.g. For many years, people have debated about ________or__ has been controversial because …or________________________ has dominated discussions of…

2. **Describe the Status quo**
State common but incorrect or incomplete assumptions. Many people think____________Or At first glance, it may seem like _______

3. **Describe the Destabilizing Moment**
Describe something that reveals the status quo assumptions to be incomplete or inaccurate e.g.
➢This initial perception fails to take into account __________________________ Or This theory can't explain ____________________Or People have failed to notice, however, ___________

4. **Show the Consequences**
Show readers why they should care: what bad things will happen if people continue to believe the status quo? What good things will happen once they stop believing it? E.g.
➢If we continue to believe _______________, we'll never understand the larger question of ______________

5. **State your Resolution**
Provide a better theory/explanation to replace the status quo. State your claim.____________________________________________________
Example 2...

In order to accomplish their missions, public universities need motivated workforces (Statement 1). There are, however, frequent and severe disciplinary actions, absenteeism, as well as various forms of unrest in public universities which affect the accomplishment of the set missions. Our preliminary investigation reveals that both non-management and management staff are under motivated (Statement 2 & 3). Without effective motivational packages and procedures, the said vices are likely to continue and retard the achievement of the universities’ missions (Statement 4). Thus, there is a need to examine the public universities’ motivation systems and procedures, which is the aim of the proposed research (Statement 5). (Adapted from Okafor, 2017)
Template 3(a)

• According to Bwisa (2008), the researcher needs to:
• Start with a general problem identifying the need for the study. E.g. The problem of this study is ______
• State the specific problem proposed for research. (use citation & usually a number to make it clear to the reader, e.g. 30% of the farms have been affected by the Napier grass disease).
• Introductory words describing Methodological approach (i.e. Research Design) are given and are appropriate to the specific problem, e.g. this qualitative study will explore... or this quantitative study will examine ...
• General population group of proposed study is identified. E.g. small scale farmers in affected locations will be surveyed to determine...
Example 3...

Brain drain in Kenya is increasing (GENERAL PROBLEM). Every year about 50 professionals migrate abroad due to unsatisfactory working conditions (SPECIFIC PROBLEM WITH NUMBERS and supported with a citation). This brain drain is different from previous shortages, because it involves not only fresh graduates but also seasoned professionals (quote). This crisis in the professionals’ industry requires innovative solutions. One innovative solution may be a less structured leadership style, such as steward leadership (quote). This qualitative case study (DESCRIPTION OF STUDY TYPE) will explore perceptions of professionals in Kenya (POPULATION BEING STUDIED) about steward leadership as a strategy to alleviate or reduce factors contributing to the brain drain among professionals in the lake basin region (GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF STUDY) The data to be gathered in this study may provide leaders with information relating to how they may address or mitigate factors contributing to the current brain drain.

Source: Adopted from Bwisa (2008)
Template 3(b)....

• There is a problem in _____________________________ (e.g. organization or situation where problem is occurring). Despite _____________________________ (efforts to prevent or deter), _____________________________ (something undesirable or unexpected) is occurring (provide evidence). This problem has negatively affected ________________ (victims of the problem) because ___________________________. A possible cause of this problem is ___________________________. Perhaps a study which investigates ________________ by a ________________ (paradigm/method) could help resolve the situation.

• Source: Adapted from Bwisa (2017)
2.9 Recommended Template for Writing the Statement of the Problem

- It is recommended that the researcher uses the integrated format of stating the research problem.
- In this format, the researcher needs to:
  - **Step 1**: Describe the ideal or actual situation in the research context if there were no problem.
  - **Step 2**: Describe the actual situation that is prevailing in the research context.
  - **Step 3**: Problematize the situation indicating how ‘bad’ or ‘good’ the situation that concerns or bothers you.
  - **Step 4**: Point out what would happen if nothing is done to change the present situation or show what desirable things might happen if the current situation is improved upon.
Step 5: State what needs to be achieved in this study in an interrogative or a declarative manner. Remember to include what Jackson (2018) proposed to be included in a good problem statement such as the: (1) study methodology, (2) the methods to be used to collect data, (3) study participants, (4) place where the study will occur, and (5) what is exactly being studied.

Step 6: State how the data that will be obtained from the study shall be used to benefit stakeholders such as policy-makers.
2.10 Relationships between Key Concepts

Fig. 4: Relationships between Research Area, Problem, Questions, Topic (and Title)
2.11 What skills are required for identifying and stating a RP?

- Reading skills
- Conceptual skills
- Analytical skills
- Critical thinking skills
- Writing skills
3.0 Activity for self reflections

- What is your current research area?
- What is the research problem?
- What is your main research question?
- What is the purpose of your study?
- What is your working topic (and title)?
- What are your sub-questions and research objectives?
- What is your statement of the problem?
- What is the significance of your study?
Thank you for your attention!

Any questions or comments?