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Formulating Research Problems: Building the Foundation for Reflective Scientific Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

The formulation of research problems is a cornerstone of reflective thinking in scientific inquiry. This process transforms issues into clear questions, laying the groundwork for research and guiding researchers in contributing to knowledge. Originating from "Proballein," research problems embody an inquisitive approach, motivating investigation. To qualify as research problems, they must meet criteria like significance, relevance, practicality, and originality. Identifying problems leads to focused research directions, while literature review offers context. Problems arise from various sources, like personal experiences, real-world issues, or gaps in prior research. Selecting problems involves factors such as creativity, objectives, and societal relevance. Formulating research problems is a compass that fosters curiosity and collective enlightenment, even in resource-limited times.

Keywords: *Research problems, Reflective thinking, Clear questions, Guiding researchers Significance and relevance.*

I. INTRODUCTION

The formulation of research problems marks the foundational step in the process of reflective thinking within scientific inquiry. Formulating a research problem involves the transformation of an identified issue into a scientifically well-defined question or problem statement. This lays the groundwork for the entire research endeavor, guiding researchers in their pursuit of understanding and contributing to knowledge.

Defining a research problem is the subsequent step, involving the precise articulation of the problem's scope, objectives, and data collection strategies. This process separates the specific issue from the broader context, creating boundaries for inquiry and providing a clear direction for the research process.³ In essence, selecting and defining a research problem marks the

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³ Raymond V. Bowers & Frederick Lamson Whitney, *The Elements of Research.*, 3 AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL

initiation of a structured and purposeful investigation that contributes to the growth of knowledge and the solution of pertinent issues.

The components of defining a research problem are essential for creating a clear and focused framework for conducting research. These components ensure that the research problem is well-structured, achievable, and able to yield meaningful results.

(A) Statement of Research Problem

Articulate the research problem using declarative statements rather than questions. This helps convey the problem more effectively. A statement format enhances clarity and conveys the problem's essence succinctly. Avoiding direct questions provides a definitive starting point for the research. Clearly delineate the boundaries of the study. Define what the research will encompass and what aspects will be excluded. This helps in focusing on the key issues relevant to the research problem and prevents unnecessary tangents. Establishing scope and limitations ensures the study remains manageable and well-defined.

(B) State the Objectives of the Study:

Objectives outline the intentions and goals of the study. These could involve historical exploration, legal analysis, case law review, response collection, or suggesting reforms. Objectives provide a roadmap for the research process and clarify the researcher's intent.

The concept of a research problem traces its origins to the term "problem" itself, derived from the Greek word "Proballein," meaning a question poised for resolution or a subject presented for examination. In the context of research, a research problem refers to a subject or issue that a researcher seeks to investigate, whether through descriptive or experimental methods.⁴ This problematic phenomenon acts as the catalyst that motivates the researcher to seek appropriate answers and insights. To qualify as a research problem, certain conditions must be met:

- a) The problem must merit investigation, holding significance within the relevant field of study.
- b) The problem should hold relevance within the social and legal contexts, addressing matters of broader societal interest.
- c) Adequate factual information must be available or accessible to facilitate research on the problem.

REVIEW 131 (1938).

⁴ P.M. Bakshi, *The Discipline of Legislative Drafting*, 34 JOURNAL OF THE INDIAN LAW INSTITUTE 1 (1992).

d) The research problem should potentially lead to practical solutions or contribute to addressing real-world issues.

e) The problem should be pertinent to ongoing social, legal, or developmental occurrences.

f) The problem's scope should be manageable, allowing for thorough investigation within defined boundaries.

g) The problem should possess an element of novelty, offering a fresh perspective or aspect for exploration.

h) The problem's formulation must allow for empirical testing and verification through research methods.

Once a research problem is identified, the researcher's next step involves crafting a clear statement that outlines the direction of the study. This statement aims to eliminate confusion, ambiguity, and obstacles surrounding the research issue. To achieve this, a brief review of existing literature is often necessary, as it provides context and helps in pinpointing specific research gaps.

(C) Research problems can stem from various sources

Felt Difficulty or Personal Experience

Researchers may draw inspiration from personal experiences or observations of societal challenges, such as corruption, gender-based violence, or lack of transparency.

Observation of Practical Issues

Current practical problems faced by the general population can serve as research sources, like the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on various aspects of society.

Unanswered Questions in Previous Research

Existing research may leave unanswered questions or gaps, which researchers can explore further.

Research Funding Agencies

Funding agencies often identify priority research areas, guiding researchers toward critical topics.

Discussion and Interaction

Classroom discussions, interactions with mentors, or peer conversations can spark research ideas.

New Developments

Evolving social, legal, or technological developments can create opportunities for fresh research, such as the implications of new legislation or global events.

In essence, the formulation of research problems acts as a compass, directing researchers toward areas of inquiry that hold intellectual and societal value. It encapsulates the essence of scientific curiosity, challenging researchers to explore, investigate, and contribute to our collective understanding of the world.

The process of selecting a research problem is a crucial and intricate endeavor, particularly in a time when research has become resource-intensive and the availability of proficient researchers is limited. Careful selection of a research problem is imperative due to these challenges. Deciding how to set a research problem is, in itself, a complex task, as it necessitates the consideration of numerous factors.

(D) Selecting a research problem

Selecting a research problem is not a simple task, as it involves several critical considerations:

Origination from Researcher's Mind

A research problem should ideally stem from the researcher's own thinking and creativity, much like a plant emerging from its own seed. It should be an original idea rather than a borrowed one.

Understanding Research Problem Components

To effectively select a research problem, one must have a clear grasp of what constitutes a research problem and its various components.

Unavailability of Answers in Existing Literature

A research problem should pertain to an issue for which answers are not readily available in the current body of literature. If answers are already accessible, conducting research on the same problem becomes redundant.

(E) Objective of Research

The primary goal of research is to provide the best possible solutions to specific problems. Thus, a research problem should be one that requires scientific investigation to arrive at a resolution.

(F) Theory or Practice Relevance

A research problem can pertain to theoretical aspects or practical applications, but it necessitates a solution through rigorous scientific inquiry.

Distinguishing Research Problem from Everyday Problems: There is a distinction between a research problem and a commonplace issue. A personal concern becomes a research problem when it is systematically formulated for investigation. Everyday problems are typically defined by individuals' interests, whereas research problems require a more objective approach.

Contextual Variability

What might be a problem in one context or for one group might not hold the same significance for another. The perception of a research problem can vary based on the individuals, groups, or communities involved.

Cognitive vs. Social Nature

A research problem is a cognitive phenomenon, driven by the intellectual curiosity to find answers. Conversely, a social problem is more evaluative in nature and relates to societal concerns. However, a social problem can evolve into a research problem when it is formulated and approached as such by a researcher.

In essence, a social problem can be transformed into a research problem when a researcher systematically formulates it for rigorous investigation. Selecting a research problem involves tapping into the researcher's intellectual creativity, identifying gaps in existing knowledge, and aligning the problem with the broader goals of scientific inquiry. This process ensures that the chosen research problem is both original and valuable, contributing meaningfully to the advancement of knowledge and potential solutions to complex challenges.

II. CRITERIA FOR SELECTING A RESEARCH PROBLEM

The criteria for selecting a research problem are essential guidelines that researchers follow to ensure that their chosen topic is meaningful, feasible, and valuable to both the academic community and the wider society.⁵ The process of selecting a research problem involves a combination of personal interest, societal relevance, originality, available resources, time constraints, existing literature, feasibility, and potential benefits.⁶ Here's an expanded discussion of these criteria:

(A) Researcher's Areas of Interest

A crucial starting point is the researcher's passion and expertise. Choosing a topic that aligns

⁵ Hashimy, Sayed Quadrat Hashimy, Writing an effective legal research proposal: Standard synopsis format ... Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374420384_Writing_An_Effective_Legal_Research_Proposal_Standard_Synopsis_Format_for_Socio-Legal_Research (Accessed: 13 November 2023).

⁶ MORRIS L. COHEN & KENT C. OLSON, LEGAL RESEARCH IN A NUTSHELL (1996).

with the researcher's interests and knowledge base fosters motivation, systematic exploration, and dedication. A genuine interest in the subject matter propels the researcher to delve deeply and persevere through challenges.⁷

Significance of Topics

A research problem should address issues of social, legal, or practical relevance. Identifying stakeholders who could benefit from the research outcomes is essential. Topics like environmental concerns, cybercrimes, intellectual property rights, women's rights, labor reforms, judicial approaches, and international trade directly impact individuals and society at large.

Novelty of the Idea

Originality is key. A research problem should offer a fresh perspective and contribute to knowledge. Ensuring that the chosen topic hasn't been extensively researched before prevents redundancy and promotes the discovery of new insights. The topic should be well-defined, neither too broad nor too narrow, and it should avoid highly controversial matters.⁸

Researcher's Resources

Researchers should consider their available resources, such as intellectual abilities, educational qualifications, funding, technical support, access to data, and time. Adequate resources are necessary to conduct thorough research and produce meaningful results.

Time-Bound Program

Realistic time management is crucial. Researchers should select a topic that can be adequately explored within the available time frame. Setting achievable milestones and objectives ensures the research stays on track and can be completed within the designated period.

Availability of Literature

Adequate existing literature is vital for effective research. Reviewing relevant primary and secondary sources, collecting data, and analyzing and interpreting information depend on the availability of literature. A well-established body of literature allows for better contextualization of the research.⁹

Feasibility of the Study

⁷ Amy Sloan, *Basic Legal Research: Tools & Strategies, Eighth Edition*, BOOKS (2021), https://scholarworks.law.ubalt.edu/fac_books/110.

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ Bowers and Whitney, *supra* note 6.

A research problem should be chosen with careful consideration of its feasibility. Rushing into a complex or impractical topic can lead to frustration and inconclusive results. A well-planned research design that aligns with the researcher's capabilities enhances the likelihood of successful completion.

Benefits of the Research

Researchers should foresee the potential benefits of their work, such as contributing to the body of knowledge, addressing practical issues, gaining personal satisfaction, and receiving recognition. A valuable research outcome adds value to the researcher's career and the academic community.¹⁰

According to Goode and Hatt, additional criteria include:

Researcher's Personal Interest

The researcher's own curiosity and enthusiasm drive the research process.

Intellectual Curiosity: An inquisitive mindset motivates the researcher to explore complex questions.

Practicability of Research

The research problem must be addressable with available resources and methods.

Expected Outcomes and Importance: The anticipated results should have practical significance and potential for implementation.

(B) Research Design

Research is a systematic endeavor with the aim of discovering new facts, verifying existing facts, analyzing their relationships, and developing theories to explain phenomena. It's essential for research to yield reliable and valid results, ensuring that findings are consistent and repeatable over time.¹¹

Reliability and validity are dependent on the planning and strategy of the research, and this is where research design comes into play. Research design dictates how the study will be conducted, determining what needs to be investigated and how it will be done. A well-crafted research design is crucial for the accuracy and credibility of the research outcomes.¹²

¹⁰ Hashimy, Sayed Qudrat, Writing an effective legal research proposal: Standard synopsis format ... Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374420384_Writing_An_Effective_Legal_Research_Proposal_Standard_Synopsis_Format_for_Socio-Legal_Research (Accessed: 13 November 2023).

¹¹ Alan E. Feuerstein & Peter G. Maggi, *Computer Investment Research*, 24 FINANCIAL ANALYSTS JOURNAL 154 (1968).

¹² Hashimy, Sayed Qudrat, Writing an effective legal research proposal: Standard synopsis format ... Available at:

A good research design is influenced by the research's purpose and type. Different types of research, such as exploratory, descriptive, and experimental, require distinct design patterns. An effective research design aligns with the research's objectives, methodology, and intended outcomes. A single design pattern cannot be universally applied; rather, the design should be tailored to the specific research context. A thoughtful and methodically prepared research design lays the foundation for a successful study, ensuring that the research process is well-structured, organized, and capable of producing reliable results. Ultimately, the research design determines the quality and validity of the research findings and contributes significantly to the overall success of the research endeavor.¹³

The designing stage of research plays a pivotal role in shaping the direction and structure of the entire research process. At this phase, the initial research problem that has been identified, selected, and formulated gains clarity and specificity, enabling the creation of a comprehensive plan for conducting the study. This phase involves transforming a vague problem into a well-defined researchable question and developing a research design that guides the entire process. Here's an expanded discussion on the designing stage:

III. THE PROCESS OF DESIGNING A RESEARCH

Problem Definition and Formulation

Defining and formulating the research problem marks the initial step of the designing stage. It involves translating the identified problem into a clear and scientifically researchable question. This clarity is essential to ensure that the research objectives and different dimensions of the phenomenon are precisely indicated.¹⁴

Review of Literature

A brief review of existing literature follows problem formulation. This step helps researchers understand the current state of knowledge related to the research problem. It aids in identifying gaps, trends, and areas that require further exploration.

Research Design Definition

A research design is essentially a strategic plan that outlines the methods, procedures, and structure of investigation to obtain answers to the research question or problem. It is a blueprint

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374420384_Writing_An_Effective_Legal_Research_Proposal_Standard_Synopsis_Format_for_Socio-Legal_Research (Accessed: 13 November 2023).

¹³ Hashimy, Sayed Qudrat, Catalyzing legal systems: The crucial role of juristic writing. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374729698_Catalyzing_Legal_Systems_The_Crucial_Role_of_Juristic_Writing (Accessed: 13 November 2023).

¹⁴ Bakshi, *supra* note 7.

that guides the entire research process from problem formulation to conclusion drawing.

Components of Research Design

A research design addresses various aspects of the research process, including:¹⁵

- a) Determining the research problem.
- b) Identifying the study's location or setting.
- c) Specifying the type of data required and its sources.
- d) Detailing data collection techniques and methodologies.
- e) Outlining the sample design.
- f) Describing data analysis and interpretation methods.
- g) Allocating resources such as funds, time, and personnel.
- h) Setting a timeline for completing the research work.
- i) Establishing guidelines for preparing the research report.

IV. SIGNIFICANCE AND NEED FOR A WELL-STRUCTURED RESEARCH DESIGN

The significance and need for a well-structured research design are highlighted by the following reasons:

Facilitating Efficient and Reliable Research

A research design provides a roadmap for the research journey, helping to maximize efficiency and reliability by ensuring that each step is organized and purposeful.

Minimizing Bias and Errors

A thoughtfully designed research plan helps minimize biases and errors that might affect the research outcomes. It encourages objectivity and accuracy in data collection and analysis.

Guiding Resource Allocation

A research design aids in planning the allocation of resources such as finances, personnel, time, and effort. This prevents wastage and ensures optimal utilization of resources.

Ensuring Progress in the Right Direction

Research is an evolving process, and a well-structured research design helps keep the study on the right track. As new aspects and conditions emerge during the study, the design can be

¹⁵ *Id.*

modified to accommodate these changes.¹⁶

Thus, the designing stage of research is about crafting a detailed and flexible plan that guides the entire research journey. It ensures that research objectives are met efficiently, biases are minimized, resources are utilized effectively, and the study progresses in a systematic manner. A well-prepared research design serves as a compass, directing researchers towards reliable and meaningful outcomes.

V. ADVANTAGES OF RESEARCH FORMULATION

The advantages of a well-designed research plan are numerous and contribute significantly to the efficiency, organization, and success of the research process.

Stipulated Timeframe

A meticulously crafted research design ensures that the research is conducted within the designated timeframe. This prevents delays and helps in achieving research goals within the set deadlines.

Systematic Execution

The research is conducted in a structured and systematic manner, following the defined procedures and methodologies. This systematic approach minimizes deviations and ensures that the research progresses in an organized fashion.

Progress Documentation

A well-structured research design facilitates ongoing documentation of the research's progress. This documentation provides insights into the development of the study, making it easier to track milestones and make necessary adjustments.

Resource Utilization

Resources, including finances, time, and human effort, can be effectively utilized when guided by a research design. The plan aids in optimal allocation and prevents wastage.

VI. CONCLUSION

In a nutshell, the formulation of research problems stands as the cornerstone of reflective thinking within the realm of scientific inquiry. It serves as a vital compass that directs researchers toward meaningful investigations, encapsulating the essence of curiosity and

¹⁶ Hashimy, Sayed Qudrat, *Catalyzing legal systems: The crucial role of juristic writing*. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/374729698_Catalyzing_Legal_Systems_The_Crucial_Role_of_Juristic_Writing (Accessed: 13 November 2023).

contributing to collective enlightenment. Through the transformation of identified issues into clear, well-defined questions, the groundwork for research is laid, guiding scholars on their journey of understanding and knowledge contribution. Originating from the Greek term "Proballein," the concept of research problems embodies the spirit of inquiry, fueling researchers' motivation to explore and uncover insights. The criteria for research problem qualification, including significance, relevance, practicality, and originality, serve as guiding principles for the selection process. This process paves the way for focused research directions, while literature review adds context and depth to the chosen path of inquiry. These research problems, sourced from personal experiences, societal challenges, and gaps in existing knowledge, encapsulate the dynamic nature of exploration. Amidst the challenges of limited resources and evolving contexts, the art of selecting research problems involves creativity, objective alignment, and differentiation from everyday issues. The intricate task of defining a research problem is guided by multifaceted factors, encompassing personal creativity, contextual dynamics, and the cognitive-social interplay. Through a well-structured research design, the trajectory of investigation is delineated, ensuring systematic and purposeful exploration. This design sets the stage for efficient resource allocation, minimization of bias, and the achievement of research objectives. By adhering to key components such as problem definition, objectives, source identification, and methodology, the research design acts as a blueprint for the entire investigative process. In summary, the formulation of research problems and the subsequent design of research studies intertwine to form the bedrock of rigorous scientific inquiry, facilitating meaningful contributions to knowledge and solutions to complex challenges.

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