

Problem Identification

Problem Identification

There are countless problems with family planning and health programs. Finding a problem is not hard, but identifying one for the purpose of research is not always easy. One of the most important tasks of research is to identify and define clearly the problem you wish to study. If you are uncertain about the research problem, if you are not certain in your own mind about what you want to study, you may be sure that others who read your proposal will also be uncertain. A well-defined problem leads naturally to the statement of research objectives, to the hypotheses, to a definition of key variables, and to a selection of a methodology for measuring the variables. A poorly defined research problem leads to confusion.

All research is set in motion by the existence of a problem. A problem is a perceived difficulty, a feeling of discomfort with the way things are, a discrepancy between what someone believes **should be** and **what is**. While problems are the initiating force behind research, not all problems require research. A potential research situation arises when three conditions exist:

- 1 A perceived **discrepancy** between what is and what should be.
- 2 A **question** about why the discrepancy exists.
- 3 At least **two possible and plausible answers** to the question.

The last point is important. If there is only one possible and plausible answer to the question about the discrepancy, then a research situation does not exist. Consider the example given below.

1 Example of a Nonresearch Problem

Problem Situation: A recent survey in District A found that 1,000 women were continuous users of contraceptive pills. But last month's service statistics indicate that none of these women are using contraceptive pills.

Discrepancy: All 1,000 women **should be using** contraceptive pills, but all 1,000 women **are not using** contraceptive pills.

Problem Question: What factor or factors are responsible for 1,000 women discontinuing their use of contraceptive pills?

Answer: A monsoon flood has prevented all new supplies of pills reaching District A, and all old supplies have been exhausted.

In the above example, a problem situation exists, but the reason for the problem is already known. Therefore, assuming that all the facts are correct, there is no reason to conduct research on the factors associated with pill discontinuation among the 1,000 women. On the other hand, there may very well be a need to conduct research on the question of why the supply and logistics system is incapable of providing contraceptives to women during the monsoon. Study the next example.

2 Example of a Research Problem

Problem Situation: District A is always flooded during the monsoon season. Recognizing this problem, the national family planning program established a new supply logistics system for the district. Each pill user is given a four-month supply before the monsoon begins. During the monsoon, small motorboats are available to transport new supplies to selected distribution centers accessible to village-level family planning workers. Despite these new measures, this year service statistics indicated that there are no pill supplies in District A.

Discrepancy: The new logistics system **should be able** to assure a continuous supply of pills, but this year **there are no supplies**.

Problem Question: Why has the new supply logistics system been incapable of delivering contraceptive pills to users?

Possible Answers:

- 1 An order for new pill supplies was not placed in time before the monsoon rains.
- 2 The riverboats used to transport the supplies are out of order.
- 3 Field-workers were not told about the new system and failed to give users a four-month supply of pills before the monsoon.

In this example, there are several possible and plausible reasons for the problem situation. One or more of these reasons might be correct. Therefore, this is a potential research situation.

In some situations, it is relatively easy to identify the problem, to define it, to hypothesize the reasons for it, and to conduct research to determine which reason is correct or more nearly correct. The reasons for the supply and logistics problem in the above example could probably be determined fairly easily and certainly would not require an expensive research study. Other problems, such as the one in the next example, are not so easy to identify or to study.

3 Example of a Research Problem

Problem Situation: A recent family planning survey revealed great differences between villages in the rate of contraceptive prevalence. Despite the fact that all villages receive the same level of health and family planning services, some villages have a prevalence rate as high as 80 percent, while others have a rate as low as 6 percent.

Discrepancy: All villages **should have** approximately the same rate of contraceptive prevalence, but in fact **there is great variation** between villages.

Problem Question: What factors are responsible for the areal variation in contraceptive prevalence rates?

Possible Answers:

- 1 Villages differ in their socioeconomic environments. Some villages are agricultural; some are fishing communities. Some villages are Hindu; others are predominantly Muslim or Buddhist. Some villages have access to markets in towns; others do not. Some villages have schools, health clinics, electricity, and a good water supply; others do not have these facilities. These socioeconomic differences affect the level of contraceptive practice.
- 2 Villages differ in institutional support for contraceptive acceptance. In some villages, local influentials strongly support the national family planning program. In other villages, they do not support it. In some villages, there are active Mothers' Clubs that support family planning. In other villages, there are

- no Mothers' Clubs. These differences in institutional support for family planning affect the level of contraceptive practice.
- 3** Village-level health and family planning workers differ in their effectiveness. Some workers are highly motivated and very active in their assigned areas. Other workers are less motivated and less active. These differences in worker effectiveness affect the level of contraceptive practice.

While the problem situation presented above is fairly clear, the reasons for the problem are complex. Three reasons have been given, but it is likely many more could be stated. In situations such as this, the researcher must devote considerable time and attention to identifying the problem situation. The aim is to focus the research on the most important aspects of the problem.