

II. WHAT'S YOUR QUESTION?



★ THIS CHAPTER COVERS:


- The importance of framing a clear research question
- Considerations in choosing a question, including:
 - ★ Appropriate scope
 - ★ The means to generate answers
 - ★ Time constraints
 - ★ Importance
- Types of cross-cultural research questions



FINDING YOUR QUESTION

Carrying out research requires more than just a research topic. You'll need to articulate a research question that will guide you throughout the research process.

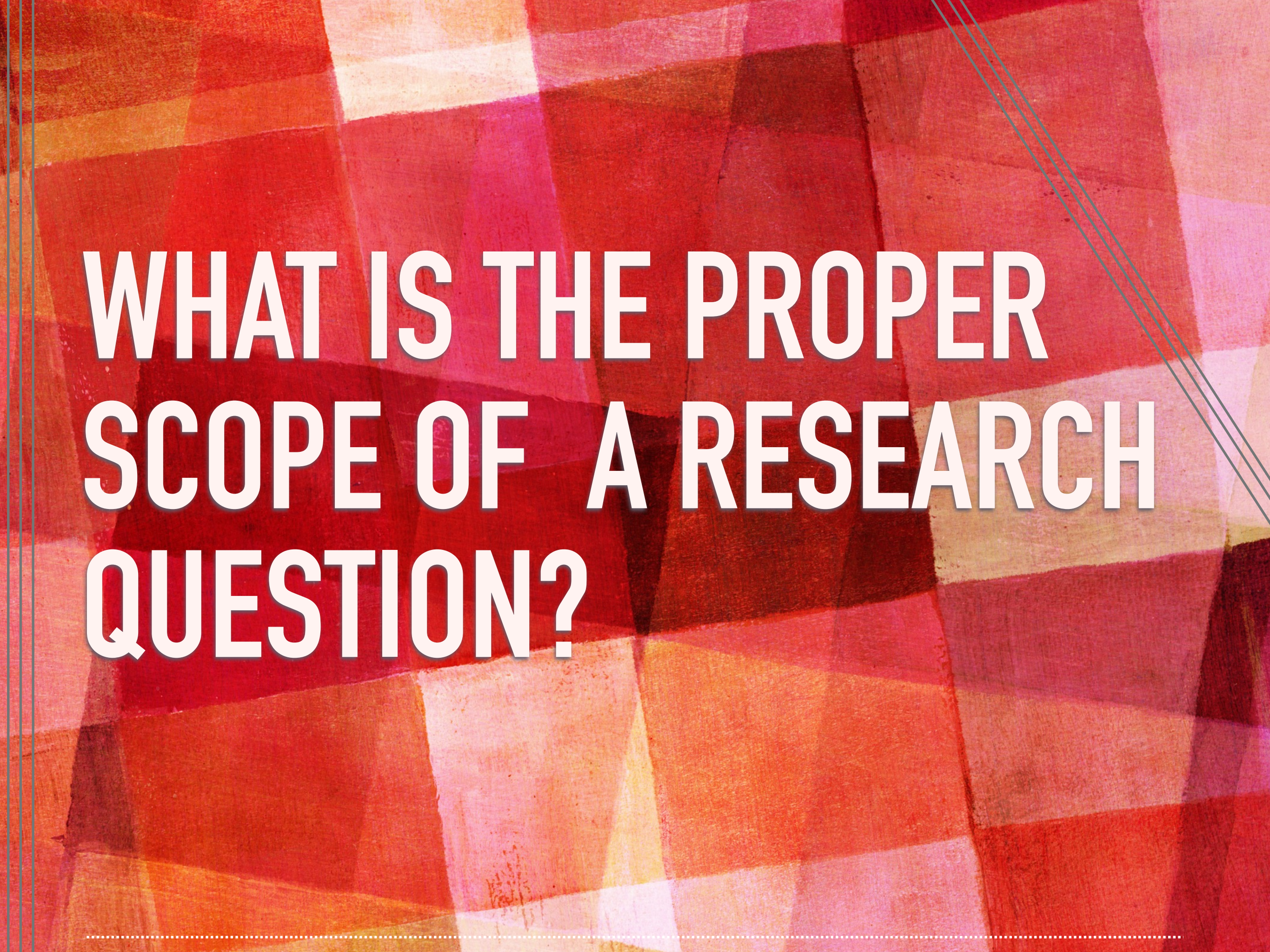
Phrasing your research aims in terms of a question will ensure that your process is focused and practical; you'll narrow the amount of information to consider, and you'll have a clear stopping point once you've found your answer.



When considering cultural traits, it may be tempting to phrase a research question in terms of a specific culture. (e.g. “Why does culture X have trait Y?”)

For some types of research, this question may be appropriate. In cross-cultural research, however, we avoid questions regarding unique features of single societies.

Cross-cultural research uses a comparative approach; by examining many cultures at once, we hope to see patterns that explain cultural traits—their prevalence, their causes, and their consequences. In this brief course, we focus on cross-cultural questions.



WHAT IS THE PROPER SCOPE OF A RESEARCH QUESTION?

IT'S A GOOD IDEA TO START OFF WITH A CLEAR ONE-SENTENCE QUESTION.

Once you've narrowed your question to one sentence, consider the following:

Do you have the means to answer this question?

Consider the type(s) of data you need to answer your question and whether you have access to it. Can you find information in primary or secondary sources, or will you have to do fieldwork? Are the sources in a language you are familiar with? Are there monetary costs involved in procuring data?

These factors could rule out a question that is simply not practical for you or is unanswerable using social science methods (e.g. "Does God exist?").

THINGS TO CONSIDER: TIME CONSTRAINTS

Do you have the time required to answer this question?

Consider how many weeks, months, or years you have to collect and analyze data. Questions that are too large will likely be too difficult to answer in a finite period of time.

For example, asking, “What is the difference between people who live near bodies of water and those who live inland?” is far too broad.

Think about how much information you would need to answer that question!



THINGS TO CONSIDER: USEFULNESS AND INTEREST

Will an answer to this question provide useful information?

A question that is too narrow will yield an uninformative answer.

For instance, “Why do some societies practice lip piercing?” could be generalized to ask about a broader category, such as general body piercing or body alteration.

Asking, “Why do some cultures perform body alterations?” will likely yield more generally relevant (and therefore interesting) information than asking about lip piercing in particular.



WHAT KINDS OF QUESTIONS CAN YOU ASK?

There are four basic types of questions used in cross-cultural research. The type of question you use depends largely on the types of variables you are investigating.

It is important to distinguish two kinds of variables. An **independent variable** is a presumed cause. The **dependent variable** is the presumed effect or result of the independent variable. An easy way to remember this is to think of the dependent variable as depending on another variable. The dependent variable is usually the primary phenomenon you are trying to explain.

★ **DESCRIPTIVE QUESTIONS** GENERALLY ASK ABOUT THE
PREVALENCE OR FREQUENCY OF A SINGLE CULTURAL TRAIT.



For example: Is romantic love universal? How common is slavery?

★ **CAUSAL QUESTIONS** ASK ABOUT THE CAUSES OF A CULTURAL TRAIT OR CUSTOM. IN THIS CASE, THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE IS KNOWN, BUT THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLE IS UNKNOWN.



For example: Why do some cultures have arranged marriages?
Why do some cultures have monotheism rather than polytheism?

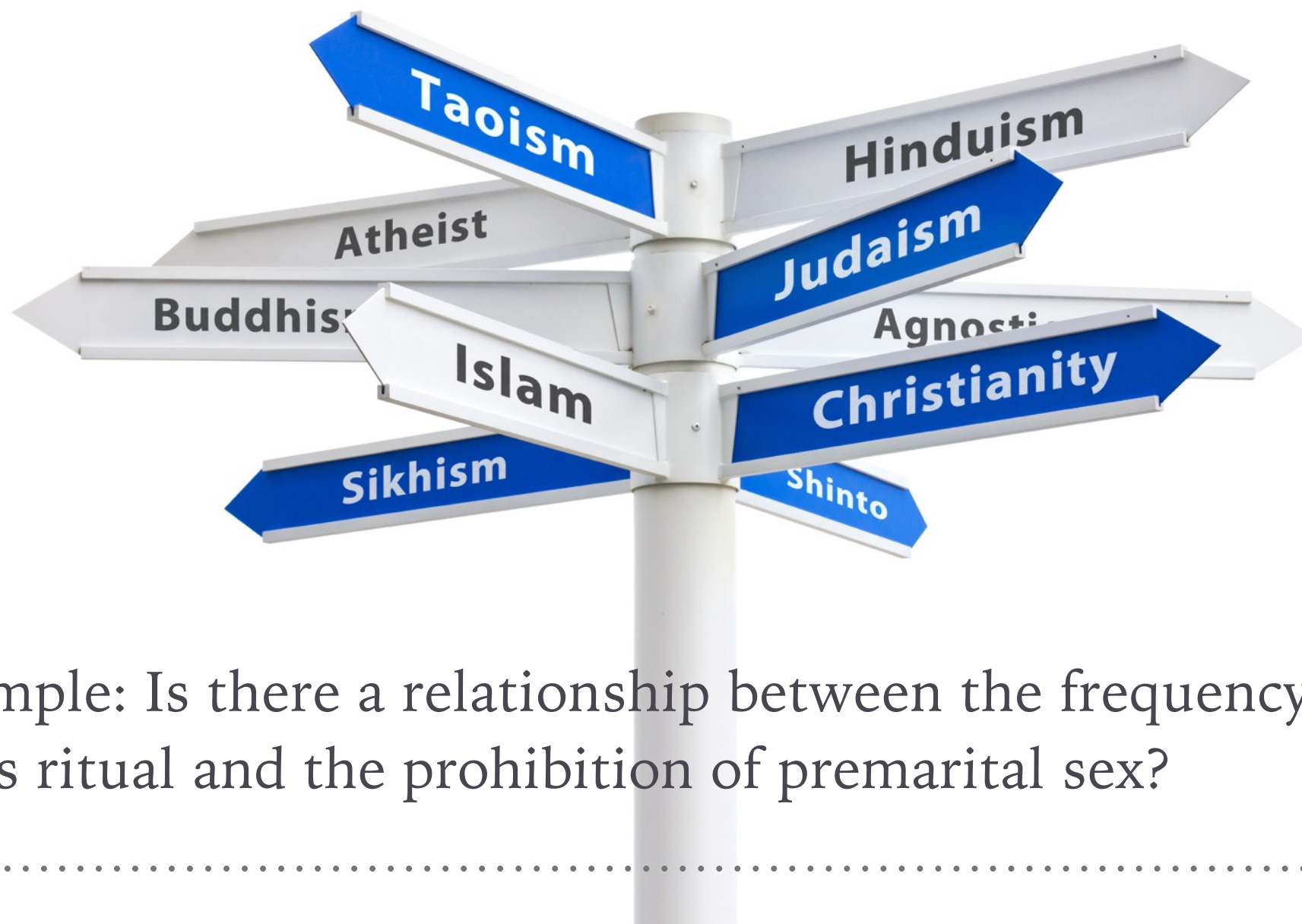
★ **CONSEQUENCE QUESTIONS** ASK ABOUT THE EFFECTS OF A CULTURAL TRAIT OR CUSTOM. IN THIS CASE, THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLE IS KNOWN, BUT THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE MAY NOT BE SPECIFIED.



For example: What are the effects of having a written language?
Does risk of infectious disease increase the rate of polygyny?
Does subsistence strategy affect the social status of elderly people?


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★ **NONDIRECTIONAL RELATIONAL QUESTIONS** ASK WHETHER TWO TRAITS ARE RELATED, WITHOUT IMPLYING CAUSALITY. IN THIS CASE, TWO VARIABLES ARE BOTH KNOWN BUT THE NATURE OF THEIR RELATIONSHIP IS UNCLEAR.



For example: Is there a relationship between the frequency of religious ritual and the prohibition of premarital sex?

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WITH SOME RESEARCH TOPICS, YOU COULD USE ANY OF THESE QUESTION TYPES. IT'S UP TO YOU TO DECIDE WHICH IS THE MOST APPROPRIATE FOR YOUR PROJECT.

For instance, many researchers have investigated the role of money in a society. Any of the following question types could be used to explore this topic:

- **Descriptive:** Do all societies have money?
- **Causal:** Why do some cultures have a form of money?
- **Consequence:** What are the effects of introducing money in a society?
- **Nondirectional:** Is there a relationship between the presence of money and the status of women?

Depending on what information you're looking for, one of these questions is likely more suitable than the others.

SUMMARY

- Try to formulate a clear one-sentence research question that pertains to many societies, can likely be investigated within a reasonable time frame and with adequate support (data), and will provide useful information.
- The four main types of cross-cultural questions are:
 1. Descriptive Questions
 2. Causal Questions
 3. Consequence Questions
 4. Nondirectional Relationships

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This chapter is from: Carol R. Ember. 2016. Introducing Cross-Cultural Research. Human Relations Area Files.
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