

Generating Ideas for a Publishable Paper

“Consuming new knowledge is a necessary precursor to producing it.” Travis Pratt

The single greatest challenge you will face as a Ph.D. student is transitioning from someone who has been primarily expected to consume knowledge (e.g., reading textbooks and journal articles) to someone who is now going to be expected to produce knowledge in the form of a publishable paper (i.e., your comprehensive exam paper), a dissertation, and then, to the extent that you desire to be a successful professor at a major university, dozens of academic journal articles and/or books. There is only one way to achieve this - continuing to consume knowledge while learning how to identify “gaps” in existing knowledge. *In other words, you have to develop the discipline to become a voracious reader, identify the limitations of prior research, and understand what has yet to be examined.*

There are two ways to identify what is known (and hence what is not yet known) about a given topic. First, by reading through dozens of studies on a single topic, you will be able to identify “gaps” in knowledge simply due to the fact that *the authors do this for you*. Nearly all journal articles include discussion near the end of the paper where the author(s) address limitations of their study and directions for future research. In other words, you are having ideas placed at your feet. Second, putting aside the proverbial flashing lights and arrows that authors provide to readers with regard to ideas for future research, reading dozens of studies on a single topic will make you a subject matter expert. If you have an idea for a paper that you think can help the field learn something new and important, and if after reading through all the relevant studies on that topic you come to realize that no one has already conducted a study surrounding your idea, then you can feel at least a bit confident that investigating your idea *could* make a novel contribution to the field worthy of being published.

What do you need to be reading? *Peer-reviewed journal articles*. And, moreover, high-caliber journal articles. Reading studies on your topic of interest published in journals like *Criminology*, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, *Justice Quarterly*, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, and *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* (to name just a few) is going to prove to be much more beneficial to you than reading studies published in lower-caliber journals (i.e. those who rank much lower in terms of journal prestige and impact factor). Reading through high-profile studies is going to give you a good sense of the pulse of the field - you will know what the field of criminology is deeming important. Also, studies published in higher-caliber journals will likely include reviews of prior work that are very up-to-date and thorough. Further, you should *always* read the most recently published papers on your topic of interest *first*. This will give you a sense of the current state of knowledge on your topic. It makes little sense to read a study on, for example, the link between depression and drug use published in 1995 when there might be 25 studies published since 2010 on the topic. This does not mean you avoid reading older studies, but that you start by reading the newest studies first.

It is important to keep in mind that ideas for papers that are publishable do not have to be ground-breaking, earth-shattering ideas. Knowledge often accumulates in small increments. Many times a very subtle observation can lead to the generation of a new idea for a study. As one example, five years ago I was reading a study published in the journal *Preventive Medicine* (I often read outside of mainstream criminology) that addressed the following question: Are adolescents who get less than eight hours of sleep at night (compared to those who get eight or more hours of sleep) more likely to engage in unhealthy, antisocial, and deviant behavior? Seems like an interesting question, right? After reading this study I was struck by the fact that the authors only examined less than 8 vs. 8+ hours of sleep when they had information on 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10+ in the data set.

Might there be differences in behavioral outcomes between adolescents who get 5, 6, 7, 8 or more than 8 hours of sleep? This seemed like an important question to me. A year later I had published a study in the same journal, *Preventive Medicine*, in which I examined this very issue. I found that getting 7 hours of sleep at night, and even getting 6 hours of sleep at night, really does not have a profound association with health behaviors and deviance. Rather, it is adolescents who get 5 or fewer hours of sleep at night who exhibit significant health and behavior problems. Why does this matter from a practical and applied standpoint? The findings suggest we don't need to sound the alarm bells for adolescents getting slightly less than recommended amounts of sleep (e.g., 7 hours). Resources would be better spent when directed at adolescents who are significantly and consistently sleep-deprived (i.e., getting 5 or fewer hours of sleep on a regular basis).

Some publishable papers make *practical* contributions, like the above example. Other publishable papers can focus on testing the validity of *theoretical* arguments. For example, I frequently study the causes and consequences of low self-control, and a large body of research has investigated the consequences of low self-control (delinquency, crime, poor health, etc). Relatively less attention, however, has focused on the intergenerational transmission of low self-control (i.e., parental low self-control as a cause of offspring low self-control), which is discussed as an important part of self-control theory by the authors of the theory (Gottfredson and Hirschi). Yet, studies which have examined this topic have tended to focus on only *maternal* low self-control in relation to child low self-control. Thus, an important theoretical question is whether *maternal and paternal* low self-control matter. This was the very issue a recent study of mine published in the journal *Developmental and Life Course Criminology* investigated. My co-authors and I were able to make use of data collected on mothers, fathers, and children to assess the relative strength of the association between maternal and paternal low self-control in relation to child low self-control. Thus, the study helped the field better identify the contributions that both mothers and fathers make, which is why the study was accepted for publication.

Still, other studies can make *methodological* contributions. My final example: The US is not currently a member of the International Criminal Court (ICC), yet recent, nationally-representative studies show that a majority of the US population feels the US should be a

participating member of the ICC. However, *all previous studies provide participants with little to no information about the ICC, the crimes it addresses, and its potential limitations*. In particular, many of the protections provided by the US Constitution are not guaranteed to those brought before the ICC, such as the right to a speedy trial, the right to know your accuser, and the right to a trial by jury. Thus, a methodological question to ask is: If participants were informed of these limitations, would they be less likely to support the US being a participating member of the ICC? Recently, I conducted an experiment in which some participants were asked about their level of support for the ICC *when limited information about the court was presented to them* (consistent with past studies), while other participants were asked about their level of support for the ICC *when additional information about the court was provided* (specifically, info about the lack of constitutional protections). Essentially, we created an experimental group and a control group of participants, with the experimental stimulus being the additional information provided to participants. What was found? Sure enough, support for the ICC was lower among those participants who were provided the additional information about the lack of protections guaranteed by the ICC. As US government officials are very aware of the lack of protections, whereas the general population is not, what was found in the study could provide partial explanation for why, despite majority public opinion support for the ICC, the US is not a participating member of the ICC.

In addition to reading studies to find or generate ideas, you simply have to start approaching how you consume information through a different lens. When I do things like watch the news or read a non-fiction book or online report, I do so for enjoyment. But, at the same time, in the back of my mind I am also thinking about the subject matter as a potential research topic. *You simply must start to think like a researcher*. To be sure, this is not an overnight transformation. However, if you dedicate yourself to consistently reading research with an eye toward identifying new ideas for future studies, this transformation will happen. I am to the point where if it has been a while (i.e. a couple weeks) where I have not read something new, I start to feel stale. However, when I dive into a new study or book, I can feel the idea-generating wheels in my mind start to spin up faster again.

Bottom Line: *Read, a lot. The ideas will come.*

- Dr. Ryan Meldrum