Developing research ideas: Strategies for going beyond existing studies

1. Study a different aspect of the problem. Suppose many studies on nonverbal interpersonal communication show how we evaluate facial expression to determine a target's intentions or message. You could examine how we evaluate body posture.

2. Replicate a study using a different demographic group (but be sure to justify why this would be scientifically interesting). Health problems for female smokers are different than for male smokers (e.g., women develop lung cancer at a younger age than men and after fewer years of smoking).

3. Fix errors in the methodology of existing studies. A study doesn't have to be perfect to get published. There could be a confound, a measurement problem, problems in generalizing the results, inappropriate or ineffective manipulation of the IV, etc. But be careful not to criticize the previous study too harshly in your lit review.

4. If existing studies show that a certain IV has a certain effect, investigate whether a similar IV has a similar effect. For example, if a certain drug impairs memory in mice, maybe a pharmacologically similar drug will also have this effect.

5. Find a practical application for existing basic or theoretical research. Research on group dynamics was eventually applied to juries. Research on basic attentional processes was applied to the weapon focus effect.

6. Try to reconcile apparently conflicting results from previous studies. Does having observers around help or hurt task performance? Results seemed conflicting until Zajonc figured out it depends on task difficulty; social facilitation occurs for easy tasks but social inhibition occurs for hard tasks.

7. Look for long-term effects. Many studies measure a DV shortly after the manipulation. Suppose jurors exposed to pro-prosecution pretrial publicity evaluate a defendant more negatively than controls if the exposure occurred 30 minutes earlier. But in real life the PTP might be encountered days, weeks, or months before the trial.

8. Repeat a study using different or more sensitive measures. You might argue that "professional success" is better measured by peer evaluations than by salary, which can be affected by budget limitations and other things not related to performance or success. But even if other researchers' measures aren't flawed, it's still good to use different measures in an attempt to get convergence.

9. Test a hypothesis suggested in the General Discussion of a journal article you found interesting. Authors often suggest additional research directions that would extend their study.

In all cases, provide a rationale for your method. It's not enough to say "no one has done this before." Your research hypothesis must be scientifically interesting.

Some of the ideas above are taken from or based on Mitchell and Jolley's (2004) research methods text.