Social Psychology and Health Program
Comprehensive Exam Options

Option 1: Comprehensive Essay Exam. This format consists of 6 essay questions with answers limited to 1500 words per question. The essays are to be written on 2 specified days (usually mid-August). One purpose of this exam is to see how well students can teach themselves key areas of the social psychological literature. The student will need to think critically, integrate, and identify key issues in the different areas and understand whether and how they have been addressed. The student may be asked to specify avenues for future research. The student should demonstrate an understanding of how the different areas fit together. Then, the student needs to communicate this knowledge and understanding to others clearly, accurately, and in a way that is intellectually stimulating. Students will present their knowledge and understanding in writing and in person during the oral portion of the exam. With this format, all of the program faculty evaluate the written portion and participate in the oral portion of the exam. More guidelines for this option are available on request.

Option 2: Defense of a major area paper. This option involves writing a review article on a topic of your choice. Each student opting for this format is encouraged to consult with relevant faculty, before writing the proposal, to develop a paper that best fits within his or her overall program of study. It is most helpful if it is close to your dissertation topic. Instead of having all members of the program evaluate the students' comprehensive exam (as we do with the standard exam format), all program members will evaluate a brief (2-3 pages of text, not including references) proposal describing the goals of the paper. In addition, the student will include a reference list of as many pages as needed, so the faculty may see the literature the student has reviewed and perhaps suggest other references. The faculty will assess whether the proposal has the potential to make a valuable contribution to the field. If not approved, the student will receive feedback in order to create a more acceptable proposal and resubmit until approved. If approved, the student will form a committee consisting of a chair (one of the program faculty) and two other faculty members (at least one of whom should be outside of our program). Once approved, the student writes the paper independently without feedback. When the paper is completed, the student presents the committee with the paper at least 2 weeks in advance of the oral defense. The committee will read and evaluate the entire paper and participate in the oral defense. (See suggested procedures on the next page.)

General models for the comps paper are *Psychological Bulletin* review articles, *Psychological Review* articles, and *Personality and Social Psychology Review* articles. These three models provide considerable latitude for papers with different structures and goals. In general, the paper should provide a thorough, comprehensive, and integrated review of the theoretical and empirical literature on some important social psychological problem. ***The paper should offer original insights, perspectives, or new critiques of the area.*** It is quite possible that the paper will be suitable for publication. Because this paper is a type of comprehensive exam, the thinking that goes into the paper should be mainly independent, representing the student's ideas without substantial feedback from faculty until the paper is defended. This option takes considerable self-discipline on the part of the student.

Although specific research may be proposed, this is not a necessary component. Often, but not necessarily, this paper will serve as the basis for dissertation work. (It is not, however, simply a proposal of dissertation research.) Students find it helpful to write a critique of an area that helps suggest a dissertation topic. There is no formal limit on the length of the paper, but the recommended length is <u>no more than 50 pages</u>. In the oral exam, the student answers questions pertinent to the major area paper, but the exam is not limited to the paper, only focused upon it. The oral exam is broadly comprehensive, not just a defense of proposed dissertation research. Assessment of the student's performance on the exam will be based on the committee's judgments about the quality of both the comps paper and the oral exam.

Below is an example of procedures to follow. These are meant as guidelines, not hard rules. It is expected that the paper will take no longer than 6 months from the time the student chooses the option to the date of the oral defense.

Example Procedures for option 2:

- Talk with faculty members to help student assess whether the area of interest is feasible for a comps paper.

- Choose a faculty member to chair committee (with faculty member's agreement). It is recommended that the student consult with the committee chair regarding the suitability of the topic given the student's overall program of study.

- Submit proposal to program faculty; choose 2 committee members.

- If necessary, submit further drafts of the proposal based on social faculty feedback.

- Once the proposal is accepted, make an outline of the paper based on your expectations. This will help you break up the paper into smaller components so that each smaller task will not seem as daunting.

- Make a habit of setting aside time to do literature searches and reading relevant literature [at least 1-to-2 hours a day for no less than four-to-five days a week].

- Sets reasonable writing goals for yourself based on the relatively small component parts derived from your outline.

- Coordinate schedules with committee members to set up the meeting for the defense. Give committee time to read the paper. Perhaps 10 days to 2 weeks would be sufficient, but ask your committee to be sure. Distribute paper to committee.

- Prepare for oral defense of comprehensive paper. GOOD LUCK!