

# **GUIDE TO AREA EXAMS**

**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY  
UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME  
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## **EXAM OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of the area exam is to provide the opportunity and basis for the student to develop a broad expertise in a subfield of sociology, and to recognize that expertise. Having passed the exam, the student will have demonstrated familiarity with the subfield, including a basic knowledge and understanding of its core issues, important literature, and key questions. This demonstration will involve not only the basic knowledge necessary for a literature review, but also the mastery of an independent voice within the subfield.

Three specific goals provide indicators of this mastery. The student's performance in preparation for the exam and upon completion of the exam should demonstrate:

- the ability to interact with professional peers on the basis of shared knowledge and understanding;
- the ability to teach in the field and to organize a new syllabus;
- the ability to develop original research questions.

While the exam should help students prepare for conceiving and writing their dissertation, the exam should stretch the student to go well beyond this narrow (albeit important) objective.

## **EXAM PREPARATION**

It is the student's responsibility to contact the Area Exam committee in their chosen area. Students should schedule a meeting with the Area Exam chair to discuss procedures and expectations regarding preparations for the area exam, since they vary by area (and also change from year to year). The department will also compile and make available a brief description of the basic procedures and requirements for each area.

## **Selection and Formation of Area Exam Committees**

Standing area exam committees will be selected by the department chair at the end of each academic year. Each committee will consist of three faculty members, two of whom must be from the sociology department. Committees will be formed in areas for

which there is the greatest student demand and faculty expertise. A list of area exam committees will be published at the beginning of each academic year.

The formation of examination committees in other areas may be initiated by student petition to the Director of Graduate Studies. The petition must include information indicating: the title of the area, the examinee's name, and the composition of the committee (including the designation of a Chair), all of whom have agreed to serve. The committee must be approved by the DGS before students may proceed with any exam preparations.

After the exam committees are formed, the committee chair will be responsible for reviewing and (if necessary) revising a document that explains procedures specific to their particular area. This document will be submitted to the DGS, and posted on the department web site for interested students.

## **Reading Lists**

Exam committees will choose whether or not to have a standard, publicized reading list for students. If lists are used, such lists can vary from simple starting points for students or a nearly exhaustive list for students to read. However, the purpose of the list should be made clear to students before they begin actively reading for an exam.

## **Expectations**

Whether or not there is a list, each exam committee will create a short introduction to their area's exam outlining the main foci or guiding principle of the area, how the area is organized, and expectations for both the process and the outcome of the exam. The information will be available on the sociology department's web site.

Here's an example of such an introduction from Arizona's Social Psychology reading list:

### **INTRODUCTION**

The attached reading list covers the broad field of sociological social psychology. As defined by the leading sociological journal of social psychology, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, the field includes "the study of the relations of individuals to one another, to groups, collectivities and institutions. . . and the study of intra-individual processes insofar as they substantially influence, or are influenced by, social structure and process."

The reading list is divided into sections to help organize your study. The first section contains general readings that cover the history and systematics of the field and several orienting strategies (or metatheoretical perspectives) that have shaped sociological social psychology. This first section corresponds to the morning portion of the exam, which consists of a set of questions that cover the general readings from which the student chooses two questions to answer. The next section is subdivided into two parts, which correspond to the two afternoon portions of the exam: Social Relations, Groups and Networks; and Role, Self, Identity and Emotion. Each subarea includes a mix of theoretical and empirical papers. The afternoon portion of the exam gives the student a choice of two or three questions in each part, from which the student must choose one question per part to answer. Students are responsible for all readings on this list.

Some readings on this list are drawn from courses offered regularly by faculty members who specialize in sociological social psychology. The remainder have been chosen because they are important to understanding general issues in social psychology or are critical for in-depth understanding of specialized areas covered in our program. Students are encouraged to obtain current syllabi from social psychology faculty for all relevant courses; these syllabi will give a more comprehensive treatment of how each faculty member organizes his or her view of the sub-field, and may point the student to supplemental materials that will aid in interpretation of the readings on this list.

The field of social psychology is characterized by competing orienting strategies and theoretical perspectives, a multiplicity of theories that address similar issues, and empirical research relevant to theoretical formulations. The faculty expects students to demonstrate (1) a firm grasp of meta-theoretical and theoretical issues, (2) the capacity to discuss those issues critically, (3) to demonstrate familiarity with recent research in the field and (4) to assess research evidence with respect to its fit with existing theory and hypotheses.

## **WRITING AND ACCESS TO AREA EXAM QUESTIONS**

It is acceptable and desirable for faculty to have a great deal of discretion in authoring area exam questions. Possible formats include: long essays, short essays, author and/or term identifications, etc. Exam questions may be written either by faculty or students. Faculty may also choose to re-use questions from prior exams on future exams.

However, it should be emphasized that the area exam should NOT be an exercise in memorization and recall. Thus, exams should be constructed in a way that ensures that students go beyond “cramming and purging” material for the majority of the exam.

Area exams from five years prior will be made available to all students in the sociology office. Limiting the availability of past exams to a five year window will give exam committees more latitude in selecting topics and writing questions, while also helping students focus their attention on more recent directions in the field. Exam answers will **not** be made available to students. Students may only gain access to exam answers if they get permission DIRECTLY from the student. Thus, if I share my exam answers with student A, s/he should not give my answers to student B; rather, student B should ask my permission directly.

## **EXAM SCHEDULING**

We will have four days each semester in which area exams may be taken. These dates will be announced well in advance of each academic year. For fall 2009, area exams can be scheduled for either September 9-10<sup>th</sup> OR October 28-29<sup>th</sup>. For the spring 2010 semester, area exams may be scheduled for either January 27-28<sup>th</sup> OR March 17-18<sup>th</sup>. Summer exam dates for 2010 will be announced in Jan 2010. Exams will begin at 8am and end at 12pm.

Students who are interested in signing up to take an exam must inform Pat Kipker at least four weeks in advance of their intentions. This advanced notice will ensure that the ninth floor lab in Flanner is reserved for exam takers, and other students who use the lab can make alternative arrangements.

## **EXAM CONDITIONS**

As a matter of fairness to all students, the exam conditions and format should be fairly similar across all areas in the department. All students will be asked to complete the exam under three conditions:

1. There will be **no access** to books, articles or any printed or electronic material that has not been authored by the student during the examination. This means that the exam will be of a “closed book” format. The above includes *all* material that is written by the student prior to taking the exam, such as notes taken after reading the assigned material. This means that student-written notes will *not be allowed* into the examination room. Bringing student-authored notes into the exam will be considered a violation of the code of conduct. However, students may use reading lists provided by area exam committees as a reference to help remember names, years, of articles/books during the examination.
2. All exams will be taken in the ninth floor computer lab in Flanner Hall. For the exam, the computers will be disconnected from the internet and campus network drives. Students will save all of their work to their computer’s hard drive and e-mail their answers to Pat Kipker after the exam has ended. **Examinations may not be administered in student offices, or in non-designated faculty offices. This means that “take-home” exams, in which the student is given the questions and is allowed to complete them outside of the department do not correspond to the expected exam format. Also, this means that exams for all areas will take place in a similar setting under similar circumstances as outlined above.**
3. The student will have a total of eight (8) hours to complete the exam. The exam will take place in **two days**, with the student being allotted four (4) hours to complete two of the exam questions for that day. A designated person will be in charge of collecting the answers for the student. The answers will be stored in an electronic disk **and** printed in hard copy and passed to the designated person. After the end of the each time period, the student may no longer have access to those answers and the student is **not allowed** to further edit and revise those answers.

## **GUIDELINES REGARDING CITATIONS, PLAGIARISM**

Students taking any area exam are expected to abide by the University's Graduate Student Academic Integrity code of conduct in its entirety.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of preliminary examinations, the most relevant section of this academic integrity code is:

Violations of academic integrity may occur in classroom work and related academic functions or in research/scholarship endeavors. Classroom-type misconduct includes the use of information obtained from another student's paper during an examination, plagiarism, submission of work written by someone else, falsification of data, etc. Violation of integrity in research/scholarship is deliberate fabrication, falsification, or plagiarism in proposing, performing, or reporting research or other deliberate misrepresentation in proposing, conducting, reporting, or reviewing research. Misconduct does not include errors of judgment, errors in recording, selection, or analysis of data, differences in opinions involving interpretation, or conduct unrelated to the research process. Misconduct includes practices that materially and adversely affect the integrity of scholarship and research.

This means that all material included in answer to an area exam question must be original work by the student. The student's answer may not contain any passages or material not written by the student on site and may also not contain any third party material which is not given proper credit using expected citation standards in sociology. The chair of each exam committee must make explicit to each student what those citation standards are. **Inclusion of any outside material not directly authored by the student without any indication that this material has been written by somebody else will be considered plagiarism and may result in severe penalties including exam failure and possibly expulsion from the graduate program.**

Expectations regarding the thoroughness of citations will vary by areas, and students should consult the area exam chair for clear guidelines on this topic.

## **EXAM RESULTS**

### **Time for Decision**

Students should expect to get the results of their exam no more than two weeks after their exam date. The area exam chair should check with committee members to be sure that this time frame is feasible before scheduling exams.

### **Exam Results**

Faculty can assign three grades to exams: pass with distinction, pass, and fail. "Pass with re-writes" and "conditional passes" are strongly discouraged because the revision/re-writing process does not match the original exam conditions and format. It also becomes rather difficult to adjudicate how much revision is acceptable to fall into

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<sup>1</sup> Available at: [http://graduateschool.nd.edu/html/policies/#academic\\_integrity](http://graduateschool.nd.edu/html/policies/#academic_integrity)

this gray area between passing and failing. If a student did poorly on the exam, s/he should fail and be asked to re-take it because that is in his/her best interest. It also ensures that the department maintains high standards and communicates these expectations to our students. If the committee was unhappy with part of the exam, but ultimately thinks that the exam is a “pass,” they may ask him/her to rewrite an answer. However, this should be optional, and not connected to the decision to pass or fail the student.

### **Consequences of Failures**

If a student fails two area exams, s/he will be terminated from the program. (N.B., This will take effect immediately after the DGS learns the exam results, which may be mid-semester). Students who fail an area exam will not get preferential treatment in re-scheduling exams; they will have to wait until the next semester to re-take the exam, along with other students in that area.

### **Feedback for Students**

Students are entitled to receive detailed feedback on their performance. Area exam committee chairs should schedule a brief meeting to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the student’s exam answers. Preferably, students should receive some general feedback on the strength of their writing and thinking, as well as specific feedback on the quality of particular questions. All committee members should provide feedback either directly to each student (in writing or in a meeting) or to the area exam chair.