The “Publishable Paper” option for the Comprehensive Examination: Some Guidelines

The Department's faculty members are aware that embarking on professional careers in sociology increasingly requires authoring peer-reviewed journal articles and other publications of a similar form.

To better enable students to meet this expectation, the Graduate Committee has adopted a means whereby students satisfy requirements for their second (of two) Comprehensive Examinations via the writing of a “publishable paper.” Students pursuing this option will be expected to compose a committee of faculty members in much the same manner as with any Comprehensive Exam, while declaring their intention to develop a paper that will satisfy the examination requirement. They then work with the committee (and especially the committee chair) over a period of time to develop, edit, refine, and submit the paper for approval by the committee. Successful papers need not actually be published, but rather they should be judged by the committee to make a contribution to generalized knowledge in a given field, and to have attained a level of excellence that would warrant publication in a respected sociological or social science journal of some sort. As with the traditional comprehensive exam, the paper must be discussed and defended before the examination committee will approve. The defense should be scheduled in the same way as governs the traditional comprehensive exam.

A key point to keep in mind is that the paper will be expected to demonstrate a broad mastery of a given area of concentration, even as it makes an original argument that contributes to existing knowledge. In a sense, this dual emphasis on both breadth and depth of knowledge is present in the traditional comprehensive exam via the answering of two committee-generated questions. However, in the publishable paper option, additional questions arise which need to be addressed.

One model that students may find helpful is that of the critical review article, much as is found in the Annual Review of Sociology. Though that periodical is very difficult to publish in (and generally features articles by already-established experts), it does provide a model that is relevant here. Essentially, the author makes an original contribution to knowledge by synthesizing existing theory and research, bridging bodies of knowledge that may only rarely be linked, and providing suggested lines of analysis on a given topic that would serve to advance our knowledge of a given field. Reading the ARS will give an abundance of examples. Here, breadth is provided by the panoptic approach that the author provides; the originality or depth stems from the critical analysis, argument about the strengths and weaknesses of existing thinking, and the research agenda that the author suggests.

A second model allows for more in the way of primary data collection or original analysis of existing data. Here, a student might conceivably have a project underway, and wish to bring it to fruition through this mechanism. What is especially important to establish with this second route is that the paper must be
sure to demonstrate a sufficient command of a given and important body of knowledge. It need not cover an entire field (this is difficult to do in an empirical paper), but it must select a topic that is central to a given field, and/or make such a strong contribution to the field as to command attention. What is most important will be the judgment of the committee, of course, but this is the thinking that the Graduate Committee has established as a guide.

A third model might be pursued by the writing of a theoretical paper – i.e., an analysis or interpretation of some important theorists or theoretical questions in ways that make an original contribution to theoretical thinking. Examples of such exegetical analysis can be found in *Theory and Society*, *Sociological Theory*, or *Theory, Culture and Society*. A parallel point would hold for a methodology paper as well. See here *Sociological Methods and Research* for models.

A further question arises as to the role of faculty as collaborators. The point here is that the publishable paper option should, when submitted, be the work of the graduate student. Faculty should support, comment on, and critique papers submitted to them, but for the purposes of the Comprehensive Examination, the work submitted – the writing and the execution of the project – *must* be conducted solely by the student, and should not be a collaborative product. Of course, students and faculty are free to collaborate on the paper subsequent to its submission and approval, but such a collaboration should not occur prior to the completion of the examination process itself.