Dear All,

Pursuant to a discussion in last week’s Executive Committee meeting, I write concerning the nature of and rationale for our oral exams (aka “orals” or the “second exam”). As indicated in the Student Handbook, orals are “not intended chiefly as preparation for the dissertation.” Instead, they are meant primarily as preparation for a career as a scholar and teacher in the field of sociology.

Above all, the orals are intended to give students a solid grounding in at least three sub-fields of the discipline. Such grounding should help prepare students both to teach in a variety of areas and to move around in the field as their interests develop in years to come. Typically, of course, the orals will not be unrelated to the field(s) in which a student writes his or her dissertation, but the principal aim of the second exam is to insure that students have a broad, solid foundation in the larger field of sociology.

It is therefore important that the sub-fields be sufficiently distinct that they are not versions of the same field. As noted in the Student Handbook, the PhD Program encourages students preparing for their orals to consult the list of official ASA sections as a guide in choosing oral exam sub-fields. Furthermore, “the chair of the orals committee has the… responsibility of reviewing all three reading lists… and certifying that there is minimal overlap of readings.”

In addition, the reading lists should be substantial, providing a student with a comprehensive overview of the development of a sub-field over time. The lists should thus include landmarks in the early stages of a sub-field’s development as well as more recent contributions and a sense of the current “state of play” in the sub-field. Students should be able to discuss the major questions that have been raised and the answers offered in the course of the sub-field’s history.

Ultimately, to again quote the Student Handbook, “the student ought to be prepared to talk about the relationship between different aspects of the literature and the ways that the various parts fit into the subfield as a whole.” Accordingly, it may be helpful to think about the reading list for a sub-field in terms of a syllabus for a graduate-level course in that sub-field; it is easy to imagine that an orals list in a particular sub-field could have started out as a syllabus from a course taken in the PhD Program.

In developing their reading lists, students should consult with the faculty they have chosen to examine them concerning the individual reading selections as well as the overall size and “shape” of a reading list. Faculty examiners have authority over these matters.

As agreed upon in the Executive Committee meeting of last Friday, September 19, 2013, at the end of this academic year the Curriculum and Exam Committee will review the lists for all oral exams administered during AY2013-14 to try to assess whether these goals are being achieved and to recommend possible future improvements. We regard the oral exams as a crucial part of our students’ education and preparation for their careers as scholars and teachers, and we therefore hope to insure that the oral exams are achieving the goals outlined in the Student Handbook.
Sincerely,

John