The Doctoral Comprehensive Examination in Counseling Psychology

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Almost all graduate programs in counseling psychology have comprehensive exams. The main purposes of the exam are usually stated as (1) providing a way for students to integrate their education; (2) screening for minimum knowledge; (3) providing a learning experience for students; and (4) testing for extemporaneous writing skills. Although comprehensive examinations are ubiquitous in clinical and counseling doctoral training programs, criticisms have been described in the literature.

Some academics have challenged the need for comprehensive exams at all. The exams originated in an era when there were no course work requirements, and the standardization of coursework in modern graduate education may make the exam unnecessary. It may be possible to make the case that if students get good grades in their courses, why is an additional evaluation process necessary? Another argument is that the exams may cause undue anxiety in graduate students if the purpose of the exam is unclear (Tomeo & Templer, 1999). Typically doctoral students must pass the comprehensive examination to continue in their program, so the pressure to pass can be intense.

There are few published studies in professional journals on comprehensive exams. The first survey of exam practices among counseling programs was conducted by Thomason, Parks, & Bloom (1980). They surveyed 95 programs and found that all of the respondents reported having comprehensive examinations, and 59% of them used essay tests for the exam. Only five programs reported the use of both written essays and competency-based experiential exercises. While competency-based exams are probably more valid that essay exams, their infrequent use is probably due to the fact that they are much more time consuming than written exams, and the grading of such exams may be even more subjective that the grading of written essays.
A national survey of 138 counseling psychology programs provided some information on common practices (Peterson, Bowman, Myer, & Maidl, 1992). Note that this survey was conducted in 1992 and the return rate was 41%. According to the survey results, most programs provide students with procedural information and consultation with their advisor to help them prepare for the exam. Few programs give students a required or recommended reading list. Most programs use a one-day format with a time limit of from three to eight hours. Most programs have written procedures for evaluating the exams. Most programs consider content the most important criteria for grading, followed by writing style, organization, readability, references, and professional language.

The results of the national survey indicated that options for students who fail the exam vary. About half of the programs require students to retake the failed portion of the exam, and about one quarter of programs require the student to retake the entire exam. Most programs have appeal procedures for students wishing to appeal the outcome of the exam. Most programs have a written purpose statement for the exam. Student anxiety can be reduced by providing students with clear information about the purpose of the exam and how to study for it. The outcomes or objectives to be measured should be clearly stated. Most programs require the completion of the exam before students make a dissertation proposal.

Half of the programs surveyed have written procedures for evaluating comprehensive examinations. Written procedures for grading increase scoring reliability and help students prepare for the exam. Faculty graders should all use the same standards to improve the consistency of grading. Grading criteria should be provided to students in advance of the exam so they know exactly how their responses will be evaluated.

Suggestions for Improving the Exam Procedure

Nationwide, most doctoral programs in counseling and clinical psychology have fairly similar procedures for the doctoral comprehensive examination. While this consistency suggests that most programs are relatively content with their procedures, of course there is always room for improvement.

Rather than giving students a recommended reading list, it might be better to simply say that the textbooks used in the required courses are the recommended reading
to prepare for the exam. This would eliminate the need to update the reading list every year or two. Faculty who write the exam questions would be familiar with the textbooks used in the relevant courses and could ensure that the textbooks provide the answers to the questions on the exam.

Graduate programs should have a well-written statement of the purpose of the exam. For example, currently the statement on this in the Northern Arizona University Department of Educational Psychology handout titled “Counseling Psychology Comp Exams Guidelines” says “The comprehensive examination is an intensive examination designed to test your ability to integrate information from a variety of sources in order to develop a thorough understanding of the presenting issues in a simulated case study.” This statement could be expanded be more specific about the learning objectives of the exam.

In order to improve the reliability of the case study question, a case from the DSM casebook could be used. Since the cases are presented with an expert analysis and a statement of the correct diagnosis, there would be no question regarding the correct response. Additional case material such as standardized test scores that would be consistent with the diagnosis could be created.

It may be useful to have a discussion on the purpose of the exam question regarding writing a literature review on a pre-selected topic. As currently stated the topics may be too broad for a short literature review. Also, if students write the paper prior to the exam, and then reproduce it from memory during the exam, what is really being measured? If the purpose is to measure the student’s ability to review the literature on a topic and write a literature review, perhaps they could write it prior to the exam and turn it in at the exam. Otherwise they are being asked to memorize journal article citations, which seems unrelated to real-life clinical practice.

It may also be useful to have objective grading criteria for the questions on the comprehensive examination. For example, how much weight should be placed on accuracy of content, writing style, organization, etc.? What is the cutoff point for passing a question? How many faculty should grade each question? What should be done if there is no consensus among graders? Grading rubrics could be developed and provided to students in advance.
Proposed Rubric for Grading

Making the grading of comprehensive examinations more objective would increase the reliability of the exam. For example, the following is a suggested start toward writing a rubric for grading the responses. Currently the examination has four questions, with one hour of writing time devoted to each question. For each question, suggested grading criteria with point values are provided.

Question 1: Case Study: Assessment and Diagnosis
(50 points; 10 points each part)
1. Accuracy of diagnostic impression
2. Rationale for the diagnosis; differential diagnoses
3. Accuracy of WAIS-IV interpretation
4. Accuracy of MMPI-2 interpretation
5. Accuracy of SDS interpretation

Question 2: Case Study: Counseling Theory and Treatment Planning
(50 points; 10 points each part)
1. Adequacy of summary of client’s background, issues and functioning
3. Adequacy of statement of treatment goals.
4. Adequacy of theoretical orientation and suggested techniques.
5. Adequacy of attention to ethno-cultural issues.

Question 3: Supervision and Ethics
(50 points; 10 points each part)
1. Adequacy of description of issue 1
2. Adequacy of description of issue 2
3. Adequacy of response to area of competence question
4. New: Another ethics case: graded based on adequacy of response
5. New: Another ethics case: graded based on adequacy of response
Question 4: Current Literature Review
(50 points; 10 points each part)
1. Accuracy and adequacy of content
2. Quality of student’s analysis of the prior research reviewed
3. Thoroughness of content
4. Writing skills: spelling, punctuation, grammar, organization, etc.
5. References in APA style

Three faculty graders would read and score each examination. The four scores for the four questions on the examination would be added together, and scores above the 80% cutoff (or whatever percentage was agreed upon) would be Passing. In a similar way, scores could be calculated for each of the four parts of the exam to determine if each part was passed. If a student passed overall but fails one question, the student could be required to re-take the failed question.

As described above, the exam as a whole has four parts with 50 points per part, for a total of 200 points:

80% of 200 points = 160 points = minimum score to pass  
<160 points = Fail

Each individual question has five parts with 10 points per part, for a total of 50 points:

80% of 50 points = 40 points = Minimum score to pass  
<40 points = Fail

Innovation in Academia

As mentioned earlier in this paper, not all faculty are satisfied with current practices regarding the comprehensive examination in counseling. While it can be difficult to change practices that have a long tradition in academia, new ideas should be welcomed and investigated for their potential benefit.

An example of a proposed change in a different, but related area may be instructive. The dissertation is the culminating project required for doctoral students in Ph.D. and Ed.D. programs. The dissertation is typically a report on original research conducted by the student and is often hundreds of pages long. One rather radical suggestion for changing the dissertation to make it more relevant to the actual job activities of academics is to require
students to conduct a research project and then write it up as a journal article that would be submitted to a professional journal for potential publication. Instead of a book-length manuscript which is typically un-publishable, the doctoral student produces a paper that may result in their first professional publication. This procedure is already in use at UCLA and the University of Michigan, and an APA official has described it as innovative and useful (Winerman, 2007).

If an academic requirement as common and traditional as the dissertation is being examined for its usefulness, then perhaps the requirement for the written comprehensive examination can also be reevaluated. Academics should always be striving to make the educational experience as valid, reliable, and useful as possible for their students.

References

