Comps Sharing Event
November 2008

As you are thinking about taking comps, first take a deep breath!! A few of us have compiled some thoughts/answers to questions below that may be helpful for you as you plan your approach to comps. There is a lot of information here- we intend it to be helpful rather than overwhelming, so throw it away if it causes rather than alleviates your anxiety. Also, feel free to talk to any of us about our experiences- we are happy to share. One thing I would like to emphasize is that the concept of equifinality applies to comps. This means that there are infinite ways to approach this unfortunate requirement that will result in success. So as you are reading through others’ approaches, remember that it is best to trust in your own process. Keep in mind that the approach you have used to get you to graduate school thus far is likely to be just as successful as you adapt it to studying for and taking comps... I wasted a lot of energy stressing out that I was not approaching this in the right way as I talked to others about their preparations rather than just trusting that my style would work. –Erin A

What timeframe did you use to study?

Sarah: I was not about to let the comps monster ruin what would possibly be the last summer I would have “free” before internship and then that “real job” thing. I highly encourage you to enjoy one of the benefits of being in school forever while you still can. I stayed at my prac site until the end of June. I took three vacations. I went out. I worked part-time. I didn’t start studying until July, at which point I was hard-core, full-on studying like crazy. It wasn’t bad at first, but come mid-August, I felt like I was a shell of myself. I sequestered myself for so many consecutive days that I nearly had a panic attack when I went out in a very crowded place. It worked, though. I passed.

Jennifer: I tried to start studying in the fall preceding comps. I read one issue of TCP, but since comps were so far away, it was really hard to prioritize that reading. Also in the fall preceding comps, I took all of the abstracts (I printed them out) for the articles we are responsible for, and I “factor analyzed” them into topics. What it turned into was 20 piles of abstracts on my living room floor. I used this organization later when I really started studying as a way to read articles that are related to each other all at one time.

I tried again in January to get serious about reading, but failed again. I did, however, sit down with the electronic materials provided by the previous year’s students to formulate a schema for what their notes and study guides looked like. This helped to calm me and help me visualize. Two weeks before spring semester ended, I got real about studying. I wrote out a schedule of goals for each week leading into August (ex: Read 2 topics this week...). I had a 2 week trip planned for July teens, and so I had a goal to finish the majority of the reading by that time. I was mostly successful in this. In the first week of August I started putting my studyguide together. I would recommend starting this process that early so that you can see what gaps you might have, and fill in as needed. I also spread out my practice questions (see below) throughout this time.

Kati: In the spring semester I began taking an issue of TCP with me to my practicum sites to read when my clients didn’t show. I would highlight the parts that I thought were important so that I could later go back and just take my notes from those parts and not have to reread everything. I found I was able to read almost through a whole year of TCP by doing this.
Liesl: I had the best intentions at the outset of the year, but it became hard for many reasons to stick to it. Unfortunately the month of July was shot for me, which I didn’t know ahead of time so more things got pushed to August than I was comfortable with. I think that beginning to organize yourself and print out the massive amount of articles is something you can easily do during the spring semester without it adding too much stress. Throughout the summer I worked on reading and summarizing. August I left for putting together my study guide, which I aimed to have done 1-2 weeks before the test. The last week I just flipped through and became familiar with where things were in my study guide, and put organizational tabs and such in it. The last 2-3 days I tried to relax and stay away from studying too much! (easier said than done!!)

Erin A: I gathered materials and factor analyzed the abstracts over winter break. I started reading and summarizing around June 10th. I had a rough idea of the time schedule for completing different things (like reading and study guide) and this helped to keep me organized and on track. For example, my goal was to be done reading by August 1st and then to just study summaries. This is more or less what happened, although I did find articles that I read during August just to appease my anxiety.

How did you decide what to read?
Sarah: Since I waited to July to start studying, there was no way I was going to get through all the 2007 articles, so my strategy was to prioritize. I took the major contributions and the support articles in the issue, figuring there would be at least two questions on those. I then made sure I had “hot topic” issues in CP covered—multiculturalism, ethics, CP identity… you get the idea. I used study guides from years past to make sure I had my bases covered in terms of topics to include. I didn’t read anything from the Monitor. Come to think of it, I never read the Monitor. I trusted the successes of the cohorts before me and used their summaries to help with the other two years.

Jennifer: I decided to read everything in JCP and TCP from my year (2007), and pick and choose what seemed relevant from AP and JCD. I did not end up reading everything from JCP, but am glad that I covered the material from TCP thoroughly. I also factor analyzed the entire set of articles, and chose topics that I wanted some additional depth in (for me this included eating disorders, GLBT stuff, Asian-related articles, religion, and probably some other stuff). I really could not get into the attachment literature, and so I worked out a trade with another colleague for some summaries of material I had read in more depth.

Kati: I decided to read all of 2007 for TCP, JCP, and American Psychologist. Then, I went back and read some of the 2005 and 2006 articles for topics that either had a lot of articles or that I viewed were important to Counseling Psychology. I used summaries from others for the articles I didn’t read and if the summary didn’t make sense to me I either threw it out or I went and scanned the article myself. At want point, I reached my saturation for being able to read anymore, so I started working on my study guide and if I felt I was missing something important for a topic I tried just getting the bulk of the information from the abstracts.

Liesl: I focused mainly on TCP and JCP articles, with JCD and AP thrown in whenever they seemed to match a main theme, or were just interesting to me generally. Any major
contributions are bound to show up in comp questions at least once, so I focused on those and then added any other sources I felt would help me write about those topics. Also, I brought in a lot of class material in areas like CP history and major tenets, social justice, and supervision.

_Erin A:_ Nothing from the Monitor. I relied on JCP and TCP mostly and I read just about everything from 2007 and then some areas of interest from 06 and 05. I picked a handful from the JCD list, but I ultimately did not use these much. I did not read much AP, but I love the style of writing in AP so I chose some articles that fit into pet topics (like evidence-based practice and arbitrary metrics) and either read or found summaries for anything that seemed to fit into a CP theme (such as diversity). I did not read things in which I had little interest (such as quantitative methods) and I managed to convince Jennifer to give me a bunch of her summaries in exchange for things that I had read and she hadn’t. Sharing is important!

**How did you allocate your study time?**

_Sarah:_ I studied randomly, as my schedule seemed like it was always changing. I tried to block out time in the morning to study, but I’m more of a night person so I had to adjust accordingly. Hitting the books at 8 a.m. wasn’t exactly my style. I was more apt to study until 2 a.m. instead. Find what works for you.

_Jennifer:_ I am not sure, I think I have blocked this part out. I tried to have a balance between rote reading, summarizing, and practice questions. Sometimes I would choose to read a past student’s summaries on a topic, and then worked to actively change them to my writing style so I would at least have had some active processing/organizing of the information. My process included summarizing an article after reading and underlining. This way I could read at a deep level, but still get the main ideas.

_Kati:_ During Christmas Break (before comp), I factor analyzed all the abstracts for TCP, JCP, and American Psychologist from 2005, 2006, and 2007. Then, I started reading TCP in the spring semester before comp when clients didn’t show. However, I didn’t really start “studying” until the end of May. I would say that from May to August 1st I spent about 20 hrs per week reading articles, summarizing, or working on my study guide. I still found time to go to New York, weed and mulch my garden, run 3 groups at my practicum site, clear out two rooms to be painted, go to APA, and house train a puppy! Life goes on!!! I had my study guide put together by late July, but I would say it took at least 2 weeks to shorten it down to 40 pages! So make sure you leave yourself plenty of time for that.

_Liesl:_ I spent the majority of my time just reading articles. I would read them in batches by topic, highlighting as I went along. Once I read several articles in an area I went back and summarized them. I felt this was most efficient for the way I think so I didn’t spend time summarizing the same info over and over again for each article, but could think more about the ways each was different and focus on that. All of my study time in August went into my study guide (both typing it and making sense of it.) I relied on old summaries from past years and incorporated them with the new literature.

_Erin:_ I find balance to be really important. Therefore, I would not read much more than a few articles a day. I balanced my time between reading, summarizing, and reading old summaries
and making decisions about what to cut based on abstracts and what to put into the read later category. I found organizing the information to be just as important as reading it, so I did not read every word of every article, but rather focused on what the main point was that would help me answer a question.

**How many practice questions did you do?**

*Sarah:* I did two practice questions, but those were mainly so I could time myself. Again, not starting studying until July did not leave a whole lot of time for doing “extras” (haha) like practice questions. I hate academic writing, so I had a natural aversion to doing these anyway. I looked through all the prior questions I could get my hands on and identified exactly what I would have to address in each one (e.g., the positives/negatives of an approach, a solution to the negatives). You need to address every aspect of the question (duh), but it is very easy to get caught up in what you think they are asking versus what they are actually asking.

*Jennifer:* I did a lot of practice questions, and I am glad that I did. I started with a topic that had only four articles, and I gave the abstracts to Charlie, who was willing to write me a question for that limited topic. I found the process of writing and integrating to be very helpful. I asked Charlie for a few more “real” questions (not prompted by a topic of my choosing), and then got some from Sue. I also asked Dr. Queener, Linda, and Dr. Tokar. This way I could be reading and doing a practice question (or set of 2 from 3 questions) every week. This worked for me, I do not think anyone else asked for so many questions, but I liked getting the different styles of feedback from the different faculty members. I think I did around 9 practice questions in total. One of these I did in CAS 319 as a way to prepare myself and visualize doing it on the official day.

*Kati:* I chose to not read the previous years comps questions so that I could simulate comps by looking at the three choices for one of the sessions and choosing one to answer (I know you actually have to choose 2, but I think it worked as some systematic desensitization). So, I chose 2 total practice questions from previous years and received feedback from my advisor. Then, my advisor also gave me 3 other practice questions, so I did a total of 5 and only received feedback from my advisor. I didn’t do any practice questions until I had a working study guide so I felt this was a good compromise. I gave myself a maximum of two hours for each practice question, which is a little bit longer than what you actually have on the day of comps but I figured I wasn’t familiar with my study guide yet. By the 5th practice question, I felt confident in my ability to write and to construct a coherent answer. I completed all my practice questions before going to APA because I knew trying to squeeze any more in would just increase my stress level.

*Liesl:* Not a single one. I wish I would have in some ways just to take my stress level down on my first real answer. I even asked for questions from my advisor…but I just didn’t leave myself enough time to do them.

*Erin A:* I did about 8-10 practice questions. I started with these early (maybe mid-Julyish) and continued doing a couple each week or so because I found that the process and feedback was helpful and it gave me a strong sense of self-efficacy for approaching comps style questions. I often did questions in a simulated comps environment and I always completed questions within 1.5 hours. I tried to do questions from each of the four areas (research, theory, etc.) so that I
could figure out. I found it very helpful to do some before my study guide was completed
because this gave me a better idea of what to include and what was unnecessary to have.

What things seemed to be helpful?
Sarah: I like making lists, so I made a list of all the topics I needed to cover, posted it over my
computer, and crossed them off one by one. It was far easier to work topic by topic than issue by
issue.

Jennifer: Feedback and practice questions. Checking in with my advisor, Charlie. Venting with
other students, and sharing some of the load. Vacation. Reading while sun-tanning. Setting goals.
Having well prepared good/bad quant and good/bad qual. I would recommend including details
of the procedures, statistical techniques and sample characteristics in your study guide for these.

Kati: The most helpful thing for me through comps was to take the approach that I was going to
listen to myself and my body and follow whatever path lead me to the least amount of stress. So,
I tried different approaches and paid attention to my stress levels. I found that reading articles by
the pool was fantastic and made it seem like it wasn’t work. In addition, I made a pact with
myself that I wouldn’t let myself jump in the pool until I had completely read through an article
and it was HOT! One of the main things that stressed me out was thinking that if I didn’t pass I
would be “wasting” an entire year and it would be putting my “real” life on hold for another year.
So, my reframe on that one was if I didn’t pass comps then I would just get pregnant and take a
year off to start a family. I don’t know if I actually would’ve done it (and we’ll never know
now!), but it definitely reduced my anxiety. Make sure you have your own Plan B so that you
can put Comps in perspective.

Another helpful thing that I did was that before I started reading all the other articles, I
cut all the articles for 2007 out of the journals and then I factor analyzed those into topics. Once I
had placed all the articles into their respective topics, I hole-punched them and placed them in 2
– 3inch binders. I knew that throughout the summer I would be traveling back and forth from
Canton and Dayton to see my husband and it was important for me to be able to take enough
articles so that I wouldn’t feel like I was going to run out. Putting the articles in binders helped
me to keep the articles “contained” and gave me a sense of control over them & they were easy
to transport.

Before starting to take notes & putting together my summary, I also looked at others’
approaches and took what I liked from each approach. For example, I liked having the main
topics bold, citations in blue, and sub-topics italicized for ease of finding the information I
needed.

All the information that we received from previous Comps Passers was very helpful,
however as everyone had their own approach it was sometimes difficult to find the summaries
that I wanted. So, in order to make this easier, after I had placed all the information from the cd
on my computer, I then downloaded Google Desktop, which allowed me to search my entire
computer (similar to a Google Search). So, instead of wasting time trying to find a summary and
getting frustrated, I would just type in the name of the author and find all the summaries for that
article quickly. I would then compare each summary and take the information from each that I
thought was most important, or made the most sense to me.
Liesl: Organizing my study guide in a user friendly way. I really spent a lot of time on this. I even tabbed things in different colors so I could find it easily. I had no idea ahead of time how much I flipped through it quickly and relied on the tabs I had made. The other really useful thing for me was making an outline of my answer before actually typing it. I made an outline in my word document, and then filled it in. I also scratched notes about citations as I flipped through my packet so I could find them easily again.

Erin: Talking with others minimally about the process (not in too much detail, because each time I would talk in specifics with Jennifer, who was inappropriately advanced in her studying, I would have to breathe into a paper bag ;) ) and knowing that they were freaking out also was helpful because it normalized my own distress. I maintained a pretty active social life, regularly going out for drinks and fun with my friends. I spent time with my non-grad student friends because their lack of insight into the importance of this exam helped keep me grounded- it really is not that big of a deal. I also complained and whined to them, which was gratifying because then they would tell me how smart I was (©) and that they knew I was going to pass without a problem. I studied while laying in the sunshine every day and got a killer tan which made the whole thing much more enjoyable. I also traveled on the weekends and found that giving myself permission to have fun and forget that I was a student was good. Ultimately, I have to be honest that it did not disrupt my life that much.

What was a waste of time?
Sarah: Trying to know absolutely every article. Yes, it’s important to be well-versed and familiar with the material, but don’t obsess over not knowing 100% of every article. You’ll only frustrate yourself.

Jennifer: The whole thing! Many AP articles. Stress.

Kati: I don’t know that I would say anything I did was a waste of time as I gave myself permission to trust my own judgment and NOT read those articles that I felt were unimportant, tangential to CP, and/or that I was clearly not interested in and didn’t think I would remember. At one point I did feel that factor analyzing the abstracts was a waste of time because I then had to also factor analyze the actual articles for 2007, but doing so allowed me to go and look at the abstracts of what I was missing for 2006 and 2007 so I could go and find summaries for those articles.

Liesl: The biggest waste of time for me was reading articles that had nothing to do with the questions. You can’t necessarily know this ahead of time, but I may have been able to guess better and streamline my reading. Also, procrastinating on my initial organization cost me valuable time when I really needed it. The time I spent stressing without being productive cost me valuable hours near the end.

Erin A: Stressing out and worrying that I was behind others. Reading articles that I was not interested in.

How did you organize your study guide?
Sarah: I started my study guide a week and a half before the exam. I was fine with that, but everyone is different. I organized the hell out of mine and suggest indulging the OCD side of you in a trip to Office Max. You’ll appreciate it later. Binders are great. Don’t double side your pages—this is not the time to be concerned about trees. I suggest taking out the pages you will need for each question so you don’t have to worry about flipping back and forth through your study guide when you’re on the clock.

Looking at other people’s study guides is helpful, but I recommend doing so with caution. My study guide was written in abbreviations that I could understand, but may be deciphered differently by someone else. If you see something on a study guide that looks like it could be a valuable article, look it up yourself and then decide if you want to use it. I found some great articles from 1998 that I used in my answers. Remember, your references don’t have to be from the required reading years to count.

Jennifer: By topic area. My first page is a table of contents (Word will do this automatically for you), with page numbers associated with each topic. Then I also put tabs on the pages with major topics so I could flip to them easily. I put it into a 3-ring binder.

Kati: I organized my study guide into the 4 overarching themes: Profession/Ethics, Theory, Practice, and Research. I figured that there is a large emphasis on integrating each of these 4 themes within your answer, so as I wrote my answers I could make sure that I cited something from each section. Then I inserted all the information that I had received in courses: Ethics, Voc, Quant, History of CP, Individual Differences, Research Methods, Objective Personality (and any theories or important concepts from Social Psych, Social Cog Psych, Cog Psych, and BioPsych—I didn’t have a lot from these, but I wanted to be able to provide a citation if needed. So, I tried to only include those things that really stuck with me from the classes. Finally, I inserted the important aspects from my summaries. After doing a few practice questions, I was able to prune down my study guide and feel more comfortable about throwing stuff out that I didn’t think I would use and reducing the redundancy in citations. I think it would be a good approach in making your study guide to first include a summary of whatever article made the most sense for you within a topic, and then for citations after that to only include new information that adds to the original article.

Liesel: The first draft of my study guide was 85 pages, because I allowed myself to type information unencumbered by length. Then I went back and cut out what I could to shorten it. This worked best for me because I tend to find it easier to cut things out at the end than to add them. I organized my study guide similar to those I had seen from previous years. The way one person had organized it made sense to me, so I started from their list of topics and added the new ones. I also split larger areas into smaller chunks so I could find what I needed quickly (i.e. Multicultural issues was split further by race, gender, age, SES literature). I tabbed everything clearly, and put topics in order that clustered together in my mind.

Erin A: I organized it by topic area and I alphabetized and tabbed the topics for easy access. I used a beautiful green binder which made me happy and I kept a picture of my son inside. These topics/themes were broader than what I had at the beginning of studying, but still pretty specific. I also looked at previous guides and used some of their ideas—why do more thinking than absolutely necessary? An example of my topics: assessment, attachment, college students,
counseling and psychotherapy, positive psych, CP issues, Disorders, etc. I highlighted also, which helped me to find stuff more quickly. Ultimately, my themes are probably different than others, but it only has to make sense to me, so it worked really well. Another thing I did was cut out unnecessary letters from words and develop short-hand ways to represent common words/ideas. I would probably not be able to make much sense out of it now, but it saved space at the time and I knew what I meant on exam day!

**What were the most important things to focus on?**

*Sarah:* Like I explained with how I decided to study, I focused on the central concepts of CP. Not to be totally reliant upon them, but you’re pretty much guaranteed to have questions on voc, multiculturalism, CP identity, gender, issues in race/ethnicity. Have those in your back pocket.

*Jennifer:* Knowing a few things well that I could use in almost every comps answer. Things like the definition of a scientist-practitioner, or models for counseling. It was important to have a structure to the responses. The Handbook of CP articles were important for me. Cite one in every response if it is relevant somehow. Use your course notes, include the highlights from classes in your study guide.

*Kati:* The most important things that I focused on were those articles/topics that related to CP. Identity [so that would include Scientist-Practitioner Model, Voc, Social Justice, Multiculturalism, Positive Psychology, Prevention (& Culturally Relevant Prevention)], Important Forces in the Profession itself [Managed Care, Prescription Privileges, Evidence-Based Practice, and Globalization], any topic that had large amounts of articles, or articles that were written either by faculty or past CPCP students.

*Liesel:* The advice I got was to always think like a scientist-practitioner, and what it meant to be a counseling psychologist. This led me to focus on areas that make CP what it is (social justice, promoting diversity, vocational) and studies about efficacy of treatments. I think overall, the most important areas to focus on are generally those covered in the major contributions in TCP and JCP from the last 3 years. Those topics came up in several questions, and could have been incorporated in answers for any of the questions.

*Erin A:* I agree with Liesl’s answer in that how to think like a scientist-practitioner was really helpful. I found that figuring out how to apply the research I was reading to practice issues was helpful- I don’t want to be a researcher, so I did not answer my questions as a researcher might but more as a practitioner who is informing applied work with empirical and theoretical literature. The TCP issues were also important because several of the questions spoke directly to information that could be pulled from there. Ethics were important- I used summaries from other people because our ethics course was not as exhaustive in the coverage of the literature. The general principles more than the specific codes were handy in many answers.

**What do you know now you wish you knew then?**

*Sarah:* I would have started studying a little sooner. The zombie-like state I was in for all of August was horrible (I burned mac and cheese), but studying 12 hours every day was my only option to get things done. After a while, you don’t realize that you’re studying all day and all
night. I used to think that the whole "self-care" thing was overrated and didn’t apply to me, but I think I would have had a clearer mind had I tried to balance my life a little more.

Jennifer: I learned at some point in August that comps is structured around 4 main topic areas: Practice, Research, Ethics, and Theory. I know it is in the memo, but I did not really get it. I think it would have been helpful to factor-analyze the articles into these 4 topics, and then subdivide from there. The faculty writes the questions assessing your fluency in each of these four topics. They also apparently arrange the question presentation such that you are required to answer 1-2 from each of these four topic areas. I did not really **know** that until late in the game. I might then have structured my study guide in this way, and it would have been easy to see where I might need to do more reading to fill in gaps.

Kati: I think that I only realized the "holes" in my studying after it was too late to fix them. Making decisions about what you’re going to read, what you’re going to focus on, and what you’re going to include in your study guide does impact what information you can draw on to answer questions. I would recommend trying to make sure that you have in-depth information for at least one article in each topic (including the methodology, limitations, strengths), and then balance that out with breadth. I know in most of my reading I didn’t really pay attention to the methodology but rather attempted to get the gist of the article and think about how I could actually use the information. While I did pass, this approach could have been a major liability as there was often at least one question in each session that I knew that I just couldn’t answer because I didn’t have the information in my study guide that I felt I needed in order to properly answer the question.

Other than that, I wish I would’ve known some things about oral comps (see handout for oral comps for my reflections on this).

Liesl: The questions they would ask! 😊 No really though, that my stress level would really impact my ability to think clearly at first. I was convinced I bombed the first question, mainly because I got nervous enough that I didn’t allocate my time well. I felt like it through off my whole first day. I wish I knew what a mental game it really was. The information is there, we have taken the classes and know what we are talking about. You just have to relax enough to let it get out onto paper.

Erin A: I wish someone who had taken them before had said to me that I should relax because it is not that big of a damn deal and it is not that hard to pass, so I am saying this to you all now. If I passed, anyone can pass. If you are a good writer- use this to your advantage. If you are not, you need to start improving your writing now because it will help you later on. You don’t have to know/read everything- focus your energy on synthesizing the information and understanding the bigger picture- that is what is important to communicate in answers. It is not a contest to see how many citations you can include- it is more important to communicate to the readers that you understand how the material fits in the bigger picture.

What were the actual days of comps like?
Sarah: Awful. Truly truly painful. I won’t lie. At the first break, I seriously contemplated whether or not I wanted to go back for the remaining sections. My cohort wouldn’t have let me go through with that, though 😊 (much love, ladies!). Liesl, her husband, and I went out for
dinner Thursday night. I needed that opportunity to get out of my head instead of stewing alone in my apartment coated with comps materials. Emotionally, I felt much better going into Friday, which I think helped my performance.

Jennifer: I think I was a bit pale on the first day. I brought a lot of various grazing foods (nuts, dried fruit, bagel, crackers...) so that I would not be hungry. We all came in, and found a computer, and talked a little, and for me I tried to avoid looking at anyone. Then the first questions get handed out, and we all started working. We all had different styles of approaching this task. I spent about 20-30 minutes outlining on a notebook how I wanted to go about answering a question. I would also look up the articles I wanted to reference at this time. It was hard to be patient with my style, because I could see most others’ screens and see that they had multiple pages typed by the time I would put anything on the screen. But then I would type in an organized stream of consciousness that worked for me. People would stop out to use the restroom, and I went to ask a question of the faculty member who was available if needed.

I really liked eating with others at lunchtime, because I did not want to be alone. It was also nice to know that we had all lived through a session, and it was something do-able. That night inbetween sessions, my husband took me out to dinner, and then I went to bed. I did not study that night. I think the second day heading into the second session was tough, because I just wanted to be done.

Kati: The actual days of comps were long and tiring (after all you are thinking intensely and typing for a good 7 hours!). The most difficult thing for me was that even though I was confident and felt good about my answers, for some reason I felt extremely nauseous. I felt like my body was betraying me because I didn’t really feel stressed or anxious. So, I stuck with how I had approached comps so far and paid attention to what helped me feel better. I found that mints really helped reduce the nausea and I ate a lot of fruit because it appealed to me. I forget what I actually did, but I made sure to have something relaxing and fun to do Thursday night to get my mind off of comps (actually I think I took a bubble bath and read a book for fun!).

Liesl: The first day was somewhat more stressful. I felt like I messed up in the first session, and let it get to me. During the break though everyone was really encouraging, and it helped me to calm down. I enjoyed the feeling of all being in the same room, because it felt like a team working towards the same goal. In my preparation it never really hit home that we would all be in the same room to commiserate our misery, which was helpful. The days were truly long, but FLEW by. I remember walking in not knowing how I would be able to sit in that one chair from 8-4:30...but it went quickly because we were all so focused. One thing that was really important was making sure I got enough sleep the night in between. I was more tired than I even knew after the first day...and if I hadn’t been able to rest up it would have been much harder to get through Friday.

Erin A: I found it to be pretty awful- way too long and exhausting. It is bad enough to have to do it for one day, let alone two! After the second day, I almost opened the door and stepped out of the car on the highway (I was not driving, and I was wearing a seatbelt- pshaw!) because I was sooo mentally drained I was not thinking clearly. I had a mantra and I had a picture of my son and an inspirational note that my mom had given me- I looked at these often during the testing. I had lots of snacks with me and was prepared for any eventuality (dry lips, craving for diet coke,
etc.), but I ended up eating hardly anything. Earplugs were a must- the sound of the typing was like rain falling on the roof when I was wearing these, which made it easier to ignore and I was able to focus on the task at hand. During the lunch break each day, I would eat and then I walked around campus with my ipod playing. This was a necessary regrouping exercise for me and I found it to be helpful. Talking to others during this time was not helpful for me, because we all approached the questions so differently and what I thought was challenging, others found to be easy. I did not take my study guide home with me after the first day- I let myself decompress and drank a glass or two of wine as I chatted with my parents about trivial, entertaining things.

**Any final words of wisdom?**

**Sarah:** Your family and friends will understand your temporary abandonment and comps-induced haze. I forwarded my family and a few friends a great article Nadia Hassan emailed to the comps-takers about how to survive the exam and studying process. It takes a while to get over comps, too. I found myself typing in abbreviations when writing emails. Give yourself a break afterward, but not too long—remember, you have AAPI’s to fill out! I’ll be honest—I failed a question. I know exactly which one it was... one I thought I would “like,” but it turned out that I was having difficulty supporting it, which I realized about half way through and didn’t have time to start another. Bottom line is that I passed. I had a contingency plan worked up for next year in case I didn’t pass and wouldn’t be applying for internship. That was somewhat comforting to have in the back of my mind.

**Jennifer:** Don’t forget about orals! My orals team was like a firing squad, each taking turns asking questions, with no interaction between them, and minimal interaction with me beyond asking the question. I would recommend reviewing your study guide, and having a few articles that you know (including the methods, and sample and specific results) backwards and forwards. It was a little disconcerting, but in the end they had positive feedback.

Remember, comps is something that they want us to pass. Find a study style, a writing style, and a stress reducing style that works for you. We all had very different methods, and we all passed. It is a big deal, but it is not something to lose yourself over. Remember, after passing comps there are other trials that are still to come, it is just one step in the road. 😊

**Kati:** Find your own approach that works for you, trust yourself, and remember that there are more important things in life than comps!

**Liesl:** Relax and be yourself. By this point you know your learning style, don’t fight it- USE IT! It has worked for you so far, keep going with it. This also means that others may study or organize in different ways than you. Although that can be stressful, keep reminding yourself to focus and learn in the ways you know work best for you. I used a reward system for myself. I set out a certain number of articles for each day. Once I got them done I relaxed and did something fun. By balancing this I felt ready the next day to get through another stack of material.

**Erin A:** Let me reiterate my most important point- there is no right way to approach this silly exercise. Trust the process that has worked for you up until now and don’t stress out because you are all going to pass... it truly is not that difficult. Looking back, I found the preparation to be helpful to my professional development, because I got to know about a lot of areas of scholarship
with which I was previously unfamiliar. Look at this as a way to learn more and become a better-rounded psychologist rather than as an exam.
# Reflections on Oral Comps

Traditionally, not a lot of attention has been paid to oral comps (especially in comparison to written comps). I think this is partly due to the impression that no one really fails orals, but regardless of that you still want to do your best and present yourself well.

**Struggles with Orals:**

The Oral comprehensive exam is very different than the written comps – I know this sounds obvious, but it’s often forgotten or underestimated. Most of us spend all of our time preparing for written comps and relatively little preparation goes into oral comps.

**Here’s How I see it Currently:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Written Comps</th>
<th>Oral Comps</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparation</strong></td>
<td>You read your butt off and spend copious amounts of time putting together your study guide and paring it down to 40 pages</td>
<td>Often advisors recommend looking over your study guide, but you can't actually bring your study guide into orals, by the time you know you’ve passed written you’re too busy with school to adequately prepare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Many try numerous practice questions (which is highly recommended)</td>
<td>There is no practice involved, and you often have no sense of the kind of questions you will be asked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You receive feedback on the practice questions regarding content, writing style, presentation, etc…</td>
<td>You receive no feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Day of Taking Exam</strong></td>
<td>You have 3 ½ hours to answer two questions of your choosing – that means you get to not answer one from each set</td>
<td>You're asked numerous broad questions to which you’re supposed to somehow ground your answer in the literature, and you don’t get to opt out of questions unless you find a very clever way out of it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You can take more time to think out your response before you start writing and can edit things as you go</td>
<td>You have to buy yourself time to think – but there’s more pressure to respond swiftly compared to the written exam <em>(at least that’s my experience)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>You don’t get immediate verbal and nonverbal feedback</td>
<td>You immediately get verbal and nonverbal feedback which can be either helpful or hindering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Finding out the Results</strong></td>
<td>Two weeks after the professors get the answers to the questions (or when they can all arrange a time to meet)</td>
<td>You are asked to leave the room immediately after orals and stand in the hallway until they are ready to tell you whether you passed or not. <em>(highly anxiety provoking!)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
So, how can you better prepare for the oral comprehensive exam so you have a positive experience?

1. Consider the type of exam you are taking and prepare accordingly.
   a. The oral comprehensive exam is an “Oral” exam and requires a different set of skills than the written.
      i. I know this sounds obvious, but it is definitely something that I underestimated. For example, all of my studying and preparation were geared toward a written exam. When I wrote my practice questions and answered the comps questions I often wouldn’t write from start to finish, rather I would just write whatever part I was thinking about in the moment.
      ii. This strategy worked well for me on the written exam, but the same style in orals led to me appearing like I was contradicting myself and not thinking linearly.
      iii. In addition, I read articles didn’t really commit the names and years to memory because names don’t stick with me, which worked fine during written comps because they were in my study guide, but it didn’t work well in orals where you are not allowed to have your study guide with you.

2. Prepare before written comps & before your schedule gets crazy busy again!

3. Know your own strengths and weaknesses.

4. Consider asking to be able to practice with your advisor – I don’t think this has ever been done, but I think it would have been tremendously helpful for me.

5. Look at past written comps questions and practice verbally responding to them without using your study guide. Imagine that you’re giving 5 minute “stump” speeches like they give in politics or giving a beauty pageant speech – you’re solving all of CP’s woes in just 5 minutes while still trying to throw in citations from the literature! \(\textit{at least that’s what it felt like to me}\)

6. Look at the list of oral comps questions (at least the gist of the ones I remember being asked) Keep in mind that each individual oral comprehensive exam can be very different depending on what you say and the questions your committee thinks of as you speak.
   a. What are your plans for internship and dissertation?
   b. Where do you see yourself in the next five to ten years?
   c. How do you balance positive psychology with the negative impacts (e.g., the stigma of diagnosing) associated with managed care?
   d. How would you go about helping someone else to overcome perceived conflicts between valuing religious diversity and sexual diversity?
   e. How would you try and change the system of managed care?
   f. What are some of the practical things you took away from all of your comps reading?
   g. What statistical analysis do you view as being the most limited?
   h. Of all the articles you read what are the articles that stuck with you?
   i. How do the current articles on SCCT contribute to the theory?

7. \textbf{Think BEFORE you speak}

8. Some advice that was helpful was to treat oral comps like an internship interview.
9. If you feel that the interview is not going well and/or you’re really anxious and nervous acknowledge it and don’t try to cover it up.

Reflections from Jennifer

"Tell us about where you see yourself 5-10 years from now..."

Based on my stated goal of balancing research and practice: "Tell us about an article in the literature that you think does a good job of balancing research and practice" - they wanted something specific, they were not satisfied by my general statements. be ready with multiple citations that you know backwards and forwards (rather than what worked for written as more general findings of the articles and how they contributed to the general trends of the field).

"The literature covered a lot of quantitative methods and reasons that various techniques were good. Tell us about any quantitative methods that you think are over-rated, and why." follow-up: "Tell us about a specific article that misused the statistical method."

"What would you say to those who criticize qualitative research as not being scientifically rigorous enough?" follow-up: "Tell us what you might say to those who have concerns about the validity of qualitative research." (obviously I did not do a good job the first time around of answering this question)

"Where do you see the field going based on the literature of the past 4 years?" follow-up: "Based on this, imagine that you are the training director of our program, what changes would you make to the program to ensure that it goes in the same direction?"

"What was a question you were expecting to see on the written exam and were surprised that it was not there?" follow-up: "What would be your answer?" - be careful what you wish for!

(I would also add to be careful what other people wish for! The SCCT question I received was a result of Jennifer's wish ;-) - Kati)

These questions did not seem to come from the literature. They were just random. The format of my experience was that they each took turns asking me a question, there was no dialogue among them. They also did not give me any non-verbal feedback about whether I was on the right track in my answers or whether I was answering the question. They simply would ask another follow-up or move on to the next questioner. :)

Not a pleasant experience. I did pass. :)
~Jennifer

Reflections from Erin A on Orals
Kati and Jennifer have provided some helpful thoughts about orals. I really believe that the experience depends so much on who your orals committee is. When you find out who you are facing, make sure to talk to others who had a similar committee in order to understand their experience. Ultimately, I believe they simply want to see that you can take a position and support it with a rationale and that you present yourself professionally. I walked out of orals not feeling happy about the experience, but I passed. For me, the most difficult thing was talking about dissertation— they wanted specifics and I just wasn’t there yet. So, I recommend having at least a defensible and somewhat specific plan for what to say about your dissertation. I almost think it would have been better to say I had no plan than to muddle my way through a description of an on-the-fly dissertation idea. Also, try to relax… I worked with the rapport I had already built with my committee (Tokar, Hardin, & Rogers) and tried to make jokes (not dirty ones, of course 😊). Even though I probably was not funny in the slightest, my smiling and light-heartedness probably made the environment more pleasant for everyone.

(*skip results sections

40 pp single spaced 1" margin, 10 pt font
- tabs - organize, cross-referencing

Major Contributions *Supporting (+ author's final response)

Gelso (1979) Trace comm factors

Minor Contribution *Acknowledging (author's final response)