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Theory Preliminary Exams: Guide Questions and Resources

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Theory Preliminary Exams: Guide Questions and Resources

Updated Fall, 2015

Preparation for Theory Preliminary Exams should begin early in your graduate program in the department of Sociology and Rural Studies. The procedures for the preliminary exams in theory and methods are provided in the department's Ph.D. Graduate Guidebook. What is provided in these guide questions and resources are suggestions to help you prepare for the theory preliminary exam. Preliminary exams are based on the assumption that you should be familiar enough with the discipline of Sociology, in terms of theory and methods, before you continue in the program. Thus, the preliminary exams are used to determine whether you are ready to continue. The suggestions in this guide include examples of questions and resources that you may or may not find useful in preparing for the theory preliminary exams. It should also be noted that none of the questions listed here are the actual questions which will be used in the exams; they are merely examples of the nature of questions. You are expected to demonstrate higher level thinking (see Bloom's taxonomy -- end of this document) in your answers.

Classical Sociological Theory and General Theoretical Issues

1. **Application of Classical and Other Theories to Current Issues.** You will be expected to apply specific theorists' ideas to selected social problems, current events or general social issues.
2. **Classical Theorists** (specific theories) for which you should generally be familiar: Durkheim (suicide, religion and division of labor), Marx (alienation and stratification), Weber (religion, stratification and bureaucracy), Simmel (conflict and group-affiliation), and Mead. You should be prepared to apply their ideas to a current societal issue.
3. **Paradigms in Sociology.** What are paradigms and how are they different from theories? Be familiar with Ritzer's integrated sociological paradigm in the Appendix to his text, *Sociological Theory*. Randall Collins classifies sociological theories into the "four sociological traditions." Discuss thoroughly all four traditions in terms of their key characteristics and mention several of the theorists connected with each tradition.
4. **Comparative Sociology.** What is comparative sociology and why is it important to theory building in sociology? How did Durkheim's comparative sociology differ from Weber's? What is "generating theory with comparative analysis" according to Glaser and Strauss's method of grounded theory?
5. **Epistemological Foundations and Approaches to Theorizing.** What are some of the main epistemological issues in sociology? What is the difference between the context of investigation and the context of explanation? What is positivism, the nature of the attacks on positivism, and "postpositivism"? How would you describe Weber's method of theorizing in terms of his idiographic focus, and his construction of and use of ideal types? What are the key features of grounded theory? What is the nature of the debates in sociology over structure and agency?
6. **Sociology of Knowledge.** What is the sociology of knowledge and how does this analytical approach help us understand both: a) how we evaluate a theorist's work and b) how we describe how that theorist theorized about social phenomena? Portions of the work of all of these theorists can be described in terms of a sociology of knowledge framework: Durkheim, Weber, Marx, and Mead.

7. **Sociological Canon.** What is the meaning of a sociological canon and what have been some of the debates about the canon? What were the conditions under which Sociology emerged? What was the early 20th century crisis and the nature of the reconstructed American discipline of Sociology that emerged in relationship to this crisis? Summarize the general sociology of knowledge argument made by Lengermann and Neibrugge-Brantley (1998) in *The Women Founders* about the women founders of sociology and the sociological canon.
8. **Collective Action and Social Change.** What are the conditions under which collective action might be possible and explicable according to Weber and Marx? How does Weber's approach compare with Marx's consideration of the conditions needed for revolutionary action? Compare and contrast the theories of societal change of Durkheim and Marx.
9. **Social Stratification and Conflict.** Discuss Weber's theory of class, status and party. How does Weber's theory compare with Marx's theory of stratification? How does Simmel's view of conflict differ from that of Marx?
10. **Structure and Agency.** Discuss Mead's theory on development of the self, the meaning of structure in his theory, and the nature of interaction. As well, what is Mead's theory of emergence and how does it relate to macro structure?

Contemporary Sociological Theory

Be prepared to identify key scholars, theories, concepts, moments, critiques, and everyday examples of the following areas of contemporary social theory:

1. **Overall development of Social Theory since World War II**, including major schools, approaches, and trends in sociological theory during this time.
2. **What is Critical Social Theory?** How does it differ from other types of social theory? What is the role of *crisis* in critical social theory? What are general practitioners and differences between French, German, and American Critical Theorists?
3. **C. Wright Mills**, the "promise of sociology", and core tenants of *The Sociological Imagination*.
4. **Progression from Early Modernity to Late/Post Modernity**, including movements or concepts such as Dadaism, surrealism, situationism, cosmopolitanism, globalization, simulacra, risk, reflexivity, knowledge, etc.
5. **Progression from Structuralism to Post-Structuralism in Social Theory**, such as the ability to compare and contrast any two of the following theoretical approaches to social structure: structure as role; structure as organization; structure as distribution; structure as network. Provide examples of theorists whose theoretical work illustrates each of these examples of social structure. What is the role of history, authority, self, symbology, nihilism and negation, and performance in society? Do post-structuralists see structure in society? Provide examples of theorists whose theoretical work illustrates each of these examples of post-structural social theory
6. **Role and Consequences of the Mass Media and Communication Technology in Society.** Key authors include Baudrillard, Castells, and Debord,
7. **The nature and importance of several social processes in a Late Modern society**, including the debate of **Agency vs. Structure** and examples of new and novel approaches to bridge this divide; the transformation of **commodity and commodification** in a late modern society; the nature and importance of **truth and authenticity** in a late modern society; and the nature and importance of power and authority in a late modern society.

8. **Feminism(s)**, including the concepts of gendered performance, gendered hegemony, neo-Marxist, structuralist and interactionist approaches, feminist critique of sociology and social theory, standpoint theory and intersectionality.
9. The **dramaturgical, situationist, ethnomethodologist, and symbolic interactionist approaches** to the study of human behavior, and comparisons and contrasts between these approaches.
10. **Mesosociology**, what is mesosociology and how does theorizing from a mesosociological perspective differ from structuralist and interactionist approaches? How does *new institutionalism* accomplish this?
11. Briefly describe schooling from the perspectives typically covered in a **contemporary sociological theory** class—functionalism, conflict theory, social action theory, interactionism, exchange theory, a critical approach, a feminist approach, a network theory of social structure. Indicate what adherents of each approach would focus on and why.

Resources (You may or may not find these resources helpful; that is for you to decide).

Topic	Possible Resources
General theoretical schools, traditions or paradigms in Sociology	<p>Ruth Wallace and Alison Wolf (2005) <i>Contemporary Sociological Theory: Expanding the Classical Tradition</i>. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson (geared towards undergraduates but with a good coverage of analytical and critical approaches to social conflict).</p> <p>George Ritzer and Jeffrey Stepnisky (2013) <i>Sociological Theory</i>. New York: McGraw Hill (coverage of the integrated sociological paradigm and the best overview of theoretical schools in Sociology).</p> <p>Kenneth Allan (2013) <i>Contemporary Social and Sociological Theory: Visualizing Social Worlds</i>. Thousand Oaks: Sage.</p> <p>Anthony Giddens. (any edition) <i>Central Problems in Social Theory</i>. Berkeley: University of California Press.</p> <p>Randall Collins (1994) <i>Four Sociological Traditions</i>. New York: Oxford.</p> <p>Jonathan Turner (edition 7 or later). <i>The Structure of Sociological Theory</i>. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth.</p>
Application of Classical Theory	<p>Hurst, Charles E. 2005. <i>Living Theory: The Application of Classical Social Theory to Contemporary Life</i>. Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.</p> <p>Peter Kivisto 2011. <i>Illuminating Social Life: Classical and Contemporary Theory Revisited</i>. Thousand Oaks: Sage.</p> <p>Mario Diani 2000. "Simmel to Rokkan and beyond: Towards a network theory of (new) social movements." <i>European Journal of Social Theory</i> 3:387-406.</p> <p>Richard Giulianotti 2005. "The sociability of sport: Scotland football supporters as interpreted through the sociology of Georg Simmel." <i>International Review for the Sociology of Sport</i> 40:289-306.</p> <p>Rory McVeigh and David Sikkink 2005. "Organized Racism and the Stranger." <i>Sociological Forum</i> 20:497-522.</p>
Comparative Sociology	<p>Donatella della Porta. 2008. "Comparative analysis: case-oriented versus variable-oriented research," Pp. 198-222 in <i>Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective</i>, edited by Donatella della Porta and Michael Keating. New York: Cambridge University Press. (Pdf file online).</p> <p>Charles Ragin and David Zaret 1983. "Theory and method in comparative research: Two strategies." <i>Social Forces</i> 61:731-754.</p> <p>B. Glaser & A. Strauss 1967. <i>The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research</i>. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company.</p> <p>Kathleen Eisenhardt and Melissa Graebner 2007. "Theory building from cases: Opportunities and challenges." <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> 50(1):25-32.</p> <p>Philip Michael 1990. "Incorporating comparison within a world-historical perspective: An alternative comparative method." <i>ASR</i> 55:385-397.</p> <p>Jennifer Robinson 2011. "Cities in a world of cities: The comparative gesture." <i>International Journal of Urban and Regional Research</i> 35(1):1-23.</p>
Epistemological foundations and methods of theorizing	<p>C. Pascale 2011. <i>Cartographies of knowledge: Exploring qualitative epistemologies</i>. Sage.</p> <p>Stanley Lieberson 1992. "Einstein, Renoir and Greeley: Some Thoughts about Evidence in Sociology," <i>American Sociological Review</i> 57: 1-15.</p> <p>I. Reed 2010. "Epistemology contextualized: Social-scientific knowledge in a postpositivist era." <i>Sociological Theory</i> 28:1-39.</p> <p>Janet Chafetz 2004. "Some thoughts by an unrepentant 'positivist' . . ." Ch. 17 in <i>Feminist Perspectives on Social Research</i>. NY: Oxford.</p> <p>Fuchs 1993. "Three Sociological Epistemologies." <i>Sociological Perspectives</i> 36:23-44.</p>

Sociology of Knowledge	<p>Lengermann and Neibrugge- Brantley. 1998 in <i>The Women Founders: Sociology and Social Theory, 1830-1930</i>.</p> <p>Merton, Robert. 1970 "Paradigm for the Sociology of Knowledge." Pp. 342- 372 in <i>The Sociology of Knowledge: A Reader</i>, edited by James E. Curtis and John W. Petras. New York: Praeger.</p> <p>Kuklik, Henrika. 1983. "The sociology of knowledge: Retrospect and Prospect." <i>Annual Review of Sociology</i> 9:287-310.</p> <p>Swidler, Ann and Jorge Ardit. 1994 "The new sociology of knowledge." <i>Annual Review of Sociology</i> 20:305-329.</p> <p>Ashley and Orenstein (any edition) <i>Sociological Theory: Classical Statements</i>. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson.</p> <p>Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann 1967. <i>The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge</i>. Garden City, NY: Anchor.</p> <p>Foucault, Michael. 1972. <i>Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language</i>. New York: Pantheon Books.</p>
The Canon	<p>Lengermann and Neibrugge- Brantley 1998 in <i>The Women Founders: Sociology and Social Theory, 1830-1930</i>.</p> <p>Connell, R.W. 1997 "Why is classical sociology classical?" <i>American Journal of Sociology</i> 102:1511-1557.</p> <p>Inglis, David 2009 "Cosmopolitan sociology and the classical canon: Ferdinand Tönnies and the emergence of global Gesellschaft." <i>British Journal of Sociology</i> 60(4):813-832.</p>
Collective action	<p>Sabia, Daniel R. 1988 "Rationality, Collective Action, and Karl Marx." <i>American Journal of Political Science</i> 32: 50-71.</p> <p>Collins, Randall. 2001 "Weber and the Sociology of Revolution." <i>Journal of Classical Sociology</i> 1:171-194.</p>
Social stratification and conflict	<p>Any edition of Kerbo's text, <i>Social Stratification and Inequality</i>.</p> <p>Stallings, Robert. 2002 "Weberian political sociology and sociological disaster studies." <i>Sociological Forum</i> 17:281-305.</p> <p>Gane, Nicholas. 2005 "Max Weber as Social Theorist: 'Class, Status, and Party.'" <i>European Journal of Social Theory</i> 8:211-226.</p> <p>Simmel, Georg. 1955 <i>Conflict & the Web of Group-Affiliations</i>. NY: Free Press.</p>
Structure and Agency	<p>Hays, Sharon. 1994 "Structure and agency and the sticky problem of culture." <i>Sociological Theory</i> 12(1):57-72.</p> <p>Mills, C. Wright. 1959 <i>The Sociological Imagination</i>. New York: Oxford (structure vs. agency, grand theory and intellectual craftsmanship). Stephen Fuchs. 2001 "Beyond Agency." <i>Sociological Theory</i> 19(1):24-41.</p> <p>Williams, G. H. 2003 "The determinants of health: structure, context and agency." <i>Sociology of Health & Illness</i>. 25(3): p131-154.</p> <p>Han-Yin Chang, Johannes. 2004 "Mead's Theory of Emergence as a Framework for Multilevel Sociological Inquiry." <i>Symbolic Interaction</i> 27:405-427.</p> <p>Peter L. Callero, 1994 "From Role Playing to Role-Using: Understanding Role as Resource." <i>Social Psychology Quarterly</i> 57 (3): 228-248.</p> <p>Hays, Sharon. 1994 "Structure and Agency and the Sticky Problem of Culture." <i>Sociological Theory</i> 12 (1): 57-72.</p>
Orienting strategies and unit theories. What is theory growth?	<p>Wagner, David G. and Joseph Berger 1985. "Do sociological theories grow?" <i>American Journal of Sociology</i> 90(4):697-728. Pp. 697- 709, 720-728. Martti Kuokkanen and Jukka Savolainen 1994. "The growth of sociological theories." <i>Quality and Quantity</i> 28(4):345-370.</p> <p>Joseph Berger, David Willer, and Morris Zelditch 2005. "Theory Programs and Theoretical Problems." <i>Sociological Theory</i> 23(2):127-155.</p>

Scientific sociology	Wallace, Walter L. 1971. <i>The Logic of Science in Sociology</i> . Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
Critical Feminism	Judith, Butler. 1988. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution – An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." <i>Theatre Journal</i> , Vol. 40, No. 4. pp. 519-531. R.W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity – Rethinking the Concept." <i>Gender and Society</i> 19; 829-859 Kaplan, Ann. 1983. Is the Gaze Male?. Chapter 7 from <i>Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera</i> . Routledge. Millett, Kate. 1970. <i>Sexual Politics</i> Collins, P. H. 1992. Toward a New Vision: Race, Class and Gender as categories of analysis and Connection. <i>Race, Sex and Class</i> 1(1): 25-45. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. 1984. Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses. <i>boundary 2</i> , 12(3):333-358. Smith, Dorothy E. 1974, Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology. <i>Sociological Inquiry</i> , 44: 7–13.
New/Neo-Institutionalism and mesosociological	Ingram, Paul and Karen Clay. 2000 "The choice-within-constraints new institutionalism and implications for sociology. <i>Annual Review of Sociology</i> 26:525-546. Stinchcombe, Arthur. 1997 "The virtues of the old institutionalism." <i>Annual Review of Sociology</i> 23:1-18. Gamson, Joshua. 1996. "The Organizational Shaping of Collective Identity: The Case of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in New York," <i>Sociological Forum</i> 11(2): 231-261. (Joshua Gamson describes how theorizing from a mesosociological approach differs from structuralist and interactionist approaches. This article also describes how an analyst would study a social field from a cultural new institutionalist perspective). Ch. 9 - Ronald Jepperson 2002. "The development and application of sociological neoinstitutionalism." Pp. 229-266 in <i>New Directions in Sociological Theory</i> , edited by Joseph Berger and Morris Zelditch. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.
Critical Sociology	Ben Agger.1991 "Critical Theory, Poststructuralism, Postmodernism: Their Sociological Relevance." <i>Annual Review of Sociology</i> 17 :105-131 Cordero, Rodrigo. 2014. Crisis and critique in Jürgen Habermas's social theory <i>European Journal of Social Theory</i> . vol. 17 no. 4 497-515 Ritzer, George. 2013. <i>Sociological Theory</i> . New York: McGraw-Hill Education (esp. sections related to critical theory)
The micro/ macro debate, the structure/agency debate, and the social realist/interpretivist debate	Fine, Gary. 1993 "The sad demise, mysterious disappearance, and glorious triumph of symbolic interactionism." <i>Annual Review of Sociology</i> 19:61-87. Turner, J. 1986. Review Essay - The Theory of Structuration <i>American Journal of Sociology</i> 91 (4) 969-977. Giddens, Anthony. 1984 <i>The Constitution of Society</i> . University of California Press Susen, Simon Critical Notes on Habermas Theory of Public Sphere. <i>Sociological Analysis</i> , 5(1), pp. 37-62. Habermas, Jurgen <i>The Theory of Communicative Action</i> , Volumes I and II. Goffman, Erving. 1974. <i>Frame Analysis: An Essay on Organization of Experience</i> . Boston: Northeastern University Press.

<p>Modernity, Reflexive Modernity, Late Modernity, Post- Modernity</p>	<p>Beck, Ulrich. 2000. The cosmopolitan perspective: sociology of the second age of modernity ⁷ <i>British Journal of Sociology</i> Vol. No. 51 Issue No. 1 pp. 79–105</p> <p>Beck, Ulrich. 2006. - Living in the world risk society, <i>Economy and Society</i> Vol. 35 (3): 329-345</p> <p>Beck, Ulrich, 1992. <i>Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity</i>. Sage</p> <p>Bonnet, A. 1992. "Art, ideology, and everyday space: subversive tendencies from Dada to postmodernism" <i>Environment and Planning D: Society and Space</i> 10:69-86.</p> <p>Giddens, Anthony. 1990. <i>The Consequences of Modernity</i>, Polity Press.</p> <p>Warner, Peter. 1994. <i>A sociology of Modernity: Liberty and Discipline</i>. Routledge</p> <p>Wacquant, Loic J. D. 1989. "Towards A Reflexive Sociology: A Workshop with Pierre Bordieu." <i>Sociological Theory</i>. 7 (1) 26-63.</p>
<p>Sociology of Mass Media and Technology</p>	<p>Baudrillard, Jean. 1995. <i>Simulacra and Simulations</i>. University of Michigan Press</p> <p>Castells, Manuel <i>The Rise of the Network Society: The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture Volume I The Network Society</i>. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009</p> <p>Debord, Guy. <i>Society of the Spectacle</i>, Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith</p> <p>Eco, Umberto, <i>Travels in Hyper Reality</i>,</p>

Bloom's Taxonomy as Related to Preliminary Exam Questions in Sociological Theory

<p>Preliminary exam questions in Sociological Theory should test students on their higher level thinking skills. Here are some examples using Bloom's taxonomy (application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation). Category</p>	<p>Example and Key Words (verbs)</p>
<p>Knowledge: Recall data or information.</p>	<p>Example: <i>Describe</i> Blumer's concept of joint action. Key Words: arranges, defines, describes, identifies, knows, labels, lists, matches, names, outlines, recalls, recognizes, reproduces, selects, states.</p>
<p>Comprehension: Understand the meaning, translation, interpolation, and interpretation of instructions and problems. State a problem in one's own words.</p>	<p>Example: Provide an <i>example</i> of Blumer's concept of joint action. Key Words: comprehends, converts, defends, distinguishes, estimates, explains, extends, generalizes, gives an example, infers, interprets, paraphrases, predicts, rewrites, summarizes, translates.</p>
<p>Application: Use a concept in a new situation or unprompted use of an abstraction. Applies what was learned in the classroom into novel situations.</p>	<p>Example: <i>Explain</i> Blumer's concept of joint action as it <i>relates</i> to teacher-student interaction in class. Key Words: applies, changes, computes, constructs, demonstrates, discovers, manipulates, modifies, operates, predicts, prepares, produces, relates, shows, solves, uses.</p>
<p>Analysis: Separates material or concepts into component parts so that its organizational structure may be understood. Distinguishes between facts and inferences.</p>	<p>Example: <i>Diagram</i> joint action (Blumer) as it relates to teacher-student interactions in class. In doing so, identify, describe, and show how the concepts and constructs relate to one another. Key Words: analyzes, breaks down, compares, contrasts, diagrams, deconstructs, differentiates, discriminates, distinguishes, identifies, illustrates, infers, outlines, relates, selects, separates.</p>
<p>Synthesis: Builds a structure or pattern from diverse elements. Put parts together to form a whole, with emphasis on creating a new meaning or structure.</p>	<p>Example: <i>Integrate</i> Blumer's concept of joint action with structural role theory's concepts of status and role as they relate to teacher-student interactions in class. In doing so, identify, describe, and show how the concepts and constructs relate to one another. Key Words: categorizes, combines, compiles, composes, creates, devises, designs, explains, generates, integrates, modifies, organizes, plans, rearranges, reconstructs, relates, reorganizes, revises, rewrites, summarizes, tells, writes.</p>
<p>Evaluation: Make judgments about the value of ideas or materials.</p>	<p>Example: <i>Justify</i> which is better at explaining student-teacher interactions in class, Blumer's concept of joint action or structural role theory's concepts of status and role. Key Word: appraises, compares, concludes, contrasts, criticizes, critiques, defends, describes, discriminates, evaluates, explains, interprets, justifies, relates, summarizes, supports</p>