Fall 2015

Theory Preliminary Exams: Guide Questions and Resources

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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?

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**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).

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<th>Topic</th>
<th>Possible Resources</th>
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Debord, Guy. Society of the Spectacle, Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith  
Eco, Uberto, Travels in Hyper Reality, |
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example and Key Words (verbs)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge: Recall data or information.</td>
<td>Example: <em>Describe</em> Blumer's concept of joint action. Key Words: arranges, defines, describes, identifies, knows, labels, lists, matches, names, outlines, recalls, recognizes, reproduces, selects, states.</td>
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<td>Comprehension: Understand the meaning, translation, interpolation, and interpretation of instructions and problems. State a problem in one's own words.</td>
<td>Example: <em>Provide an example</em> 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.</td>
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<td>Application: Use a concept in a new situation or unprompted use of an abstraction. Applies what was learned in the classroom into novel situations.</td>
<td>Example: <em>Explain</em> Blumer's concept of joint action <em>as it relates</em> to teacher-student interaction in class. Key Words: applies, changes, computes, constructs, demonstrates, discovers, manipulates, modifies, operates, predicts, prepares, produces, relates, shows, solves, uses.</td>
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<td>Analysis: Separates material or concepts into component parts so that its organizational structure may be understood. Distinguishes between facts and inferences.</td>
<td>Example: <em>Diagram</em> joint action (Blumer) <em>as it relates</em> 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.</td>
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<td>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.</td>
<td>Example: <em>Integrate</em> 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.</td>
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<td>Evaluation: Make judgments about the value of ideas or materials.</td>
<td>Example: <em>Justify</em> 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</td>
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