Theory Preliminary Exams: Guide Questions and Resources

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**

1. Answer the following questions with regard to sociological theory.

   - What is sociological theory?
   - How do unit theories differ from orienting strategies?
   - Identify and describe three formats (schemes) for theorizing.
   - Be prepared to draw a visual representation for a set of propositions like the following: Among Mexican workers in the United States, …
     
     P1: There is a positive relationship between the number of relatives living in the community of residence and amount of involvement in that community’s cultural events.
     
     P2: There is a negative relationship between amount of knowledge of American ways and amount of involvement in the community’s cultural events.
     
     P3: There is a negative relationship between amount of involvement the community’s cultural events and the probability of returning to Mexico within the next two years.
     
     P4: There is a negative relationship between amount of knowledge of American ways and the probability of returning to Mexico within the next two years.

2. According to C. Wright Mills, what does a social analyst need to do to accomplish the promise of sociology? In detail, identify and describe how three contemporary sociologists have done this.

3. Answer the following questions with regard to social action theories.

   - What is social action?
   - What are the general features of all social action theories?
   - Compare and contrast Parson’s Structure of Social Action and contemporary rational choice theory.
4. Answer the following questions with regard to theories of social interaction.
   • What is social interaction?
   • Compare and contrast the following approaches for understanding social interaction in social situations: situationist approach to symbolic interactionism (Blumer); social coordinationist (search for generic social processes) approach to symbolic interactionism; dramaturgy; and ethnomethodology.

5. Answer the following questions with regard to theories of social structure.
   • From the perspective of structural sociology, what is sociology?
   • 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.

6. What is mesosociology? How does theorizing from a mesosociological perspective differ from structuralist and interactionist approaches? How does new institutionalism accomplish this?

7. Describe and give examples of a sociological approach to social cognition.

8. Describe and provide examples of a sociological version of emotions.

9. 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. For instance, indicate what adherents of each approach would focus on and why.

10. Answer the following questions with regard to European Social and Sociological Perspectives:
    • What are the main ways sociological theory and social theory differ?
    • Describe the main features of French Structuralism?
    • Describe the main features of Berger and Luckmann’s social constructionism.
    • Describe the main features of Pierre Bourdieu’s structural constructivism.
    • What is critical theory? Describe the main features of the Frankfurt School’s version of critical theory.
    • In what ways did Jurgen Habermas modify critical theory?
    • Describe how post-structuralism differs from structuralism. Describe how Michel Foucault’s social theory is an example of post-structuralism.

11. Theoretical debates have been a central dimension of contemporary sociology (macro-micro problem; the problem of structure and agency; the problem of social order; etc). Describe the structure-agency debate in detail.

12. Answer the following questions with regard to Scientific Sociology: What are the main features of scientific sociology? Hint: describe Wallace’s Wheel in general terms. From the perspective of scientific sociology, what are the characteristics of a good theory? Describe the language of theorizing. How is inductive theorizing done? How is deductive theorizing done?

13. Answer the following questions with regard to Conflict Theory:
    • Compare and contrast analytic and critical perspectives of social conflict.
    • Describe the general features of Lewis Coser’s explanation of the functions of social conflict.
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<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Possible Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Reference</td>
</tr>
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<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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|                                              | Ashley and Orenstein (any edition) *Sociological Theory: Classical Statements.*  
| Social stratification and conflict           | Any edition of Kerbo’s text, *Social Stratification and Inequality.*  
|                                              | (structure vs. agency, grand theory and intellectual craftsmanship).  
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<tr>
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<td>Example and Key Words (verbs)</td>
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| Knowledge: Recall data or information. | Example: *Describe* Blumer's concept of joint action.  
Key Words: arranges, defines, describes, identifies, knows, labels, lists, matches, names, outlines, recalls, recognizes, reproduces, selects, states. |
Key Words: comprehends, converts, defends, distinguishes, estimates, explains, extends, generalizes, gives an example, infers, interprets, paraphrases, predicts, rewrites, summarizes, translates. |
| Application: Use a concept in a new situation or unprompted use of an abstraction. Applies what was learned in the classroom into novel situations. | Example: *Explain* Blumer's concept of joint action as it relates to teacher-student interaction in class.  
Key Words: applies, changes, computes, constructs, demonstrates, discovers, manipulates, modifies, operates, predicts, prepares, produces, relates, shows, solves, uses. |
| Analysis: Separates material or concepts into component parts so that its organizational structure may be understood. Distinguishes between facts and inferences. | Example: *Diagram* joint action (Blumer) as it relates to teacher-student interactions in class.  
Key Words: analyzes, breaks down, compares, contrasts, diagrams, deconstructs, differentiates, discriminates, distinguishes, identifies, illustrates, infers, outlines, relates, selects, separates. |
| 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. | Example: *Integrate* 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.  
Key Words: categorizes, combines, compiles, composes, creates, devises, designs, explains, generates, integrates, modifies, organizes, plans, rearranges, reconstructs, relates, reorganizes, revises, rewrites, summarizes, tells, writes. |
| Evaluation: Make judgments about the value of ideas or materials. | Example: *Justify* 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. |