

## General Preliminary Examination

### Sample questions from past exams

1. Pick one major conceptual or theoretical contribution each from Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. First, describe the contribution in the authors' terms; that is, what did each author think was important about the concept or theory? Second, show how more recent sociological theory and research continues to make use of each of these contributions. Third, discuss the extent to which these contributions from Marx, Weber and Durkheim require adjustments/elaborations in response to changing social conditions.
2. A fundamental tension in sociological theory is between those who think that behavior is structurally constrained and those who see the importance of "agency" in explaining social change. Take any subfield of sociology and discuss the difference between the structure and agency perspectives on some topic within this subfield. Has there been a synthesis of these two perspectives? If yes, how? If no, is a synthesis possible?
3. The publication of Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race* prompted changes in theorizing about racial inequality. Summarize Wilson's contributions to theories of racial inequality, and then discuss how two or more scholars have responded—both theoretically and empirically—to Wilson's conclusions. In your view, what are the strengths and weaknesses of these different theoretical perspectives?
4. Over the last 50 years, patterns of gender relations have changed drastically in the United States (e.g., family life, the world of work, political representation). Pick two areas of change, and then, for each area: (1) describe it empirically (i.e., *what* has changed?); (2) account for it using two different theoretical perspectives\*; and (3) take a position on which theory is most persuasive. Finally, discuss the extent to which the theories you have chosen can explain both changes, or the extent to which different theories are applicable for the different changes.
5. The students in your introduction to sociology class insist that racial and ethnic inequality in the United States come primarily from individual bigotry. How would you convince them of the structural and institutional bases of racial and ethnic inequality? In your answer, choose three social institutions (e.g., the economy, the criminal justice system, the educational system, etc.), and explain how these institutions contribute to the maintenance of racial and ethnic inequality. Cite both theoretical arguments and empirical findings in your answer.
6. Sociologists often carry out research by employing positivist approaches—those that privilege more or less objective observation of social phenomena—and interpretivist approaches—those that privilege the interpretation of the meaning of social phenomena. Describe at least three studies that employ a relatively positivist approach and at least

three that employ a relatively interpretivist approach. Compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches and how each contributes to sociological knowledge. Be sure you use concrete examples from the six studies that you choose. Finally, pick at least one study that attempts to combine positivist and interpretivist approaches. For this last study, evaluate how effectively the two approaches are combined.

7. Much sociological theory is concerned with how individuals are linked together, not always harmoniously, in society. Using the writings of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, compare and contrast these theorists' views on social cohesion and conflict.
8. Describe changes in family forms since World War II and discuss how they are linked to economic conditions and processes. Cite both theoretical and empirical research.
9. How did Marx, Weber, and Durkheim differ in their analysis of capitalism in their own historical period(s)? How would each explain recent developments in global capitalism?
10. Many scholars on the reading list theorize how power is exercised. Compare and contrast the approaches of three of these scholars, using at least one from Part I of the list.
11. Describe how two social institutions maintain gender inequality in the contemporary United States. Be sure to discuss whether these institutions operate as independent forces or whether each has implications for the other.
12. Discuss the commonalities and divergences in three scholars' perspectives on the social forces that maintain racial inequality. Which approach do you find most compelling, and why?
13. Eight years from now, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim will each have been dead for at least a century. It is conceivable that the social world has changed so much that their writings are no longer useful for sociological theory and research. Write an essay that first summarizes the fundamental contributions to social thought of **TWO** of these thinkers. Then make an argument, using examples from research, for how their perspectives continue to be useful for understanding one or more empirical sociological questions.
14. Race, gender and age are the most visible of status defining characteristics. To what extent are their consequences similar for social behavior and opportunity? To what extent are they different? Cite relevant research.
15. William Julius Wilson noted in a 2009 essay that it is "extremely important to discuss how race and poverty are framed in public policy discussions." Why is this an important issue when considering public policy? Take a current issue, such as poverty, unemployment, or teen/out-of-wedlock pregnancies. Discuss competing ways in which this issue is presented in public policy discussions, and clarify how framing influences policy alternatives. Cite relevant research in your discussion.

16. The relationship between theory and empirical research has been described as a cycle in which theory generates hypotheses that can be tested empirically and the outcome of empirical research leads to the reformulation of theories. Is this an accurate description of the discipline of sociology? Give specific examples of research to support your answer.
17. Four mechanisms for enforcing inequality are the economy, violence, segregation, and ideology. Discuss the operation of these mechanisms of social control for race, class, or gender.
18. What is racism? Much of the research on race and ethnicity focuses around this term, but there is not necessarily agreement on its meaning, cause, or resolution. Compare the definitions of racism from at least two scholars and explain which definition of racism is most useful for research on racial and ethnic inequality and why. Make sure to include a discussion of racism's cause(s) and resolution(s) from both perspectives.
19. Despite changes, men and women continue to have distinct experiences in families. What structural forces maintain that distinction? How? Be sure to note how class affects these gendered experiences.
20. One challenge in sociology is linking macro structures and micro interactions. Compare and contrast how two scholars have dealt with this theoretically and empirically.
21. Inequality has risen sharply in the last few decades in the US. How would Marx, Weber, and Durkheim explain this change?
22. Choose three theorists and describe their conception of the relationship between the individual and society. Discuss their views on the ability of individuals to shape society and vice versa.
23. Sociologists often state that race is a “social construction.” Using readings from the list, explain what this statement means and how scholars theorize the existence of racial inequality in light of it.
24. What is social class and how is it reproduced? Use the work of Marx and two other scholars in your answer. State which concept of class (and class reproduction) you find most compelling and why.
25. The students in your Introduction to Sociology class claim that gender equality has, for the most part, been achieved, and they say they're tired of talking about gender. Using readings from the list, how would you convince your students of the continuing importance of gender? (Make sure to address the structural/institutional bases of gender inequality.)

26. If you could invite three important social theorists (living or dead) to your house for dinner, who would they be and what sociological topics would you discuss? Make sure to draw from your reading list in support of how you imagine this conversation would go.
27. A recent trend on Twitter in response to the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri is #FergusonSyllabus. This trend is meant to identify important readings on race, class, and gender inequality. Choose at least five readings from your list that provide a sociological perspective on Michael Brown's death and the events in Ferguson, Missouri. Make sure to explain your choices and connect them to these current events (do not just summarize the readings).
28. Has the gender revolution stalled? Provide ample evidence for your answer. What must be done to bring about greater gender equality in the US?
29. How would you conceptualize and define the class structure of an advanced industrial society? Be specific in discussing the criteria that underlie your conceptualization. Critically compare and contrast your conceptualization to two theorists from your reading list.