

Theory Exam 2025

The questions below constitute the qualifying exam for Theory of Sociology.

To complete the exam, you must answer one question from each of the three sections below in an essay format. Each answer should be a self-contained essay approximately 8–10 pages long (i.e., 2,000–2,500 words). Although you must cite to referenced work in each essay, one comprehensive bibliography for all three questions will be sufficient. You may consult materials from the reading list you've been provided, as well as any other scholarly sources you've read during the exam period.

Section 1: Choose one of the following:

- 1.) There is variation in the ways in which institutions impact individuals' engagement with one another. Yet some sociologists have focused on interpersonal interactions absent institutional influence. Drawing on theory from the symbolic interactionist tradition, how might one describe the nature of interpersonal interactions? Why do symbolic interactionist (and closely related perspectives) view interaction in isolation from institutions? What are the advantages/disadvantages of approaching human interaction from these perspectives? Be sure to engage the concepts that are key to understanding the interactionist approach.
- 2.) In *On Individuality and Social Forms* sociologist Georg Simmel asks the question, "How is history possible?" Simmel's question seems to speak to the significance of history for the development of social theory. In what ways is history and the ability to historicize fundamental for social theory? Are there ahistorical currents in social theory and, if so, how does that alter our understanding of social life?

Section 2: Choose one of the following:

- 1.) Different theoretical traditions conceptualize of power and how it operates differently. Choose two approaches to understanding power and its operation in the social world and compare and contrast the approaches. How are they similar and/or different? What implications do these different ideas have for social research and how we understand the operation of society?

- 2.) “Culture” and “structure,” both often nebulous and ill-defined terms, are nevertheless central to social theory. However, theorists often understand the two terms and their operation and relation to each other differently. Choose at least two different schools of thought on this relationship and explain how each conceptualizes these terms, their relationship to each other, and what each conceptualization implies about how we should study the social.

Section 1: Choose one of the following:

- 1.) Social theory has always mediated between empirical “facts” and normative “values.” What are some the major ways theorists have discussed these two including some novel approaches for interpreting social life?
- 2.) Marx (and the Marxist tradition) held social theory is an emancipatory project. How did Marx(ists) articulate that and what does that mean? What strands of social theory rejected that goal and why? And make a clear case for what the proper role of social theory is regarding emancipation.