Sample General Exam Questions

Approved for Faculty and Graduate Student Use

Note to Students: These are sample questions taken from past general exams. They are representative of the style and format of typical general exam questions. These questions may help you prepare for your general exam. However, faculty have **no obligation** to use any questions from this list for future general exams and faculty probably **WILL NOT** use any of the questions from this list for any future exams.

Community

Identify and describe the theories of residential attainment. Which theory does empirical research support the most? Why is the concept of community so important to urban social researchers? What are the competing arguments about the important of community?

The concept of community has been much debated in sociology. Give a brief history of the concept and its critics and discuss how two of the following have been used as either alternate or clarifying concepts:
- Social capital
- Civic engagement
- Neighborhoods
- Collective efficacy

The concept of community is notoriously difficult to operationalize and measure. Discuss some of the ways this has been done. You may include some or all of the following: social capital, civic engagement, collective efficacy, neighborhoods, opinion surveys, spatial analysis, census indicators, ethnography, visual sociology.

Deviance and Mental Health

Theories of deviance are often treated as being independent of each other, but there is a great deal of overlap. Draw upon at least two theories to show how theories of deviance can be integrated to develop our understanding of why mental health issues are so often deviantized.

While much of the research suggests deviant behavior is the result of individuals reacting to strained or stressful situations, it is possible that the causal ordering may be reversed. For example, individuals may engage in covert deviant activities in private spaces, but then become strained or stressed once others become aware of their deviant activities. What steps have studies of deviance taken to address this? Explain why the steps taken were adequate or inadequate and how you might address this issue in your dissertation.

Review the research on the social determinants of substance abuse. Make sure to highlight and discuss the key predictors of substance abuse and their differential impacts based on social position or other demographic characteristics. Next, comparing the general sociological research on mental health with research on substance abuse, discuss if substance abuse can be adequately explained by general theories of mental health.

How can macro and micro theories of deviance be joined to explain the importance of context and individual agency in determining whether individuals engage in deviant behaviors?

Some researchers might argue deviant behaviors and to a certain extent mental illnesses are socially constructed and therefore the determination of either may vary due to contextual factors. Given the importance of context, it might be argued that micro theories of deviance and mental illness are not worth exploring at all. Is this a fair argument?

Disaster

The disaster scholarship has been critiqued for methodological shortcomings. Describe the common methods used in disaster research and the common critiques of the methods used in disaster studies. Provide your views on these critiques. Conclude your essay with your assessment the next steps for disaster researchers to improve their methodological rigor.

What is the place of disaster, historically and contemporarily, in the discipline of sociology? What contributions does sociology offer for understanding disaster? In your discussion, include historical growth of the subfield of sociology of disaster and include 2-3 conclusive findings that sociology has provided to understanding human behavior in disasters. Conclude your essay with a brief assessment of future directions in sociology of disaster.

Disaster/Environment

Social vulnerability to disaster has become the predominant perspective within the sociology of disaster field. Begin this essay by defining this perspective. Then pick *two* of the social characteristics listed below and discuss the findings for each within the disaster literature.
1. Race
2. Class
3. Gender

For each factor, address the following questions: What are the observed patterns for each social characteristic in relation to the variations in disaster experiences during each stage of the emergency management lifecycle (mitigation, preparedness, response, recovery)? What are the prevailing explanations for these patterns?

Education

Sociologists have, on the one hand, studied school organization and stratification processes through the use of formal quantitative models, and, on the other hand, through the use of qualitative methodologies (e.g., ethnography, case studies). Explain the distinctive strengths and limitations of these two approaches to the study of school organization and stratification processes.

Write an essay that (1) clearly develops and distinguishes between the concepts of social capital, social networks, cultural capital, and cultural omnivore, and (2) considers the relative importance of each of these concepts to education, social status attainment, and social mobility.

Family

In the past sociology has experienced ongoing debates about culture verses structure. Some sociologists say that culture adds very little to understand family change. While others believe that culture is integral to understanding family change. Given your readings, where do you stand on this debate?

Family can be understood as one of the social institutions, which do not operate independently from one another. How does family interact with other social institutions and how has this changed over time? You can stress the interaction with religion, if you prefer.

Family & Religion

Describe changes in the family. What factors influenced these changes? How does religion fit into family change and how does religion interact with other primary drivers of family change?

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Family is a primary avenue for the reproduction of inequality in society. How does family impact inequality? Is this a social problem? Should steps be taken to reduce the role family plays in reproducing inequality? If so, which steps should be taken?

One stream of research in the sociology of religion treats family-related issues as dependent variables. Summarize several major persistent findings in the literature.

What is the place of religion, historically and contemporarily, in the discipline of sociology? What contributions does sociology offer for understanding religion?

Debates about secularization have dominated the literature with competing ideas about what diminishes both societal and individual levels of religiosity. Discuss theories and ideas about what increases or decreases religiosity.

Gender

Discuss the relationship between power and "gender hegemony?" Start by defining what gender hegemony is. Then discuss the alternative conceptual framework of how gender hegemony operates through masculinities and femininities outlined in the work of Mimi Shippers' "Recovering the Feminine Other: Masculinity, Femininity, and Gender Hegemony." Why is this important for your research? Finally, how do multiple masculinities and femininities fit into this concept?

Explain the way gender is defined within sociological literatures. Begin with West and Zimmerman's Doing Gender and Doing Difference, next move to how more structural theorists have expanded and complicated interactional theories of gender, specifically focusing on structural gender theorists like Risman, Lorber, Yancey Martin, and Connell. Finally explain how gender shapes our lives on an individual, interactional, and institutional level?

Health/Mental Health

Review the research on the social determinants of substance abuse. Make sure to highlight and discuss the key predictors of substance abuse and their differential impacts based on social position or other demographic characteristics. Next, comparing the general sociological research on mental health with research on substance abuse, discuss if substance abuse can be adequately explained by general theories of mental health.

Pick two of the social factors listed below and discuss their relationship with mental health.
   a. Race
   b. SES
   c. Social Networks
   d. Gender
   e. Work
   f. Family and Marriage
   g. Religion

For each factor, address the following questions: What are the patterns of the social factor and mental health? What types of psychological problems (e.g., depression, anxiety, schizophrenia, etc.) is the social factor generally associated with? What are the prevailing explanations for these patterns? Discuss possible explanations of the effect of your chosen factor on mental health (i.e., provide or own assessment of the prevailing explanations).

Review the empirical evidence on racial/ethnic disparities in health. First, summarize the overall research on the relationship between race/ethnicity and health along with possible explanations. Second, develop and provide rationales for additional mechanisms that might account for this relationship. Finally, what do you consider the most important directions for future research, particularly considering the goal of ultimately reducing race/ethnic disparities in health?

Recent research on health disparities suggests that contextual-level factors in the neighborhood environment independently influence the health and well-being net of individuals-level factors. Discuss and evaluate the evidence linking neighborhood context to the health and well-being of residents. If neighborhood characteristics influence health, why do they; that is, what are the mechanisms? What are some of the major methodological challenges associated with studying the effects of neighborhood environment on health?

Health and Inequality

What is the place of health, historically and contemporarily, in the discipline of sociology? What contributions does sociology offer for understanding human health?

One stream of research in medical sociology treats health as a dependent variable. Summarize 3-5 major persistent findings in the literature.

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Review the empirical evidence on racial/ethnic disparities in health. First, summarize the overall research on the relationship between race/ethnicity and health along with possible explanations. Second, develop and provide rationales for additional mechanisms that might account for this relationship. Finally, what do you consider the most important directions for future research, particularly considering the goal of ultimately reducing race/ethnic disparities in health?

Describe the key sociological approaches to explain social inequality. In your essay, compare and contrast these approaches. Which argument do you find most compelling? Why?

Sociologists have a longstanding interest in the study of social mobility and attainment. Compare and contrast the key perspectives that have been employed to explain social mobility. Which argument do you find most compelling? Why?

Develop a research proposal. In doing so, make sure that you develop hypotheses and propose a research design that will test your hypotheses.

In a well-crafted essay, explain the link between socioeconomic status and health outcomes. What are the key levels of analysis used to examine this relationship? Based on your reading of the literature, what level of analysis is the most important? If you were a health policymaker, at what level would you direct your precious resources to improve health disparities?

Inequality

Sociologists have a longstanding interest in the study of social mobility and attainment. Compare and contrast the key perspectives that have been employed to explain social mobility. Which argument do you find most compelling? Why?

Race

Describe the historical evolution of the modern American concept of "race" from colonial times until the present. Be sure to include discussion of whiteness in your answer.

After the election of Barack Obama as President, some Americans claimed the US was a "post-racial" society. Do you agree with such a claim? Why or why not? Please draw exhaustively on existing scholarly work (i.e. the reading list) to support your argument.

Discuss the origins of the concept of intersectionality, briefly. Then provide a thorough discussion of how the concept has evolved in the sociological literature both theoretically and methodologically. Detail how you plan to use intersectionality in your research.

Religion

What is the place of religion, historically and contemporarily, in the discipline of sociology? What contributions does sociology offer for understanding religion?

Social Capital

In Distinction, Bourdieu summarizes practice with the following equation:
[(habitus)*(capital)] + field = practice
Explain each of the components of this equation. Based on your knowledge of Bourdieu's work and other theorists' criticisms of it, is the equation above adequate for explaining social practice? If yes, provide a concrete example of how the components result in practice. If no, describe how you would change the equation.

According to the authors on your reading list, how do people use culture to define their class identities? How do people use culture to prevent others from becoming part of their social class

group? Finally, discuss whether cultural boundaries between social groups in the United States have strengthened or weakened over time.

What is a cultural omnivore? How has omnivorous been measured in research in the sociology of culture? Discuss whether the existence of cultural omnivores indicates that the taste for highbrow culture no longer serves as a status marker.

What are the main arguments of the production of culture perspective? How do sociologists who believe the reception of culture perspective criticize the production perspective, and what alternative understandings of culture do they provide?

Compare and contrast the various 'capitals' that you have encountered in your readings (e.g. social capital, cultural capital). In your essay, apply each of the capitals to explain social inequality in the U.S.

The concept of social capital is often said to have two distinct meanings; one proposed by Robert Putnam and the other by Nan Lin. Suppose you want to measure the degree of "social capital" from these two different aspects. Explain how you proceed to come up with scales of social capital, referring to your sample (including unit of analysis), example questions for each scale, the process of reliability check, and your expectation of the relationship between the two scales, preferably referring to how they have been measured in the past.

Social Psychology

Review the social psychological research on the interplay between identity, emotions, and behavior. After you provide a general review, 1) discuss the ways in which identity processes have been utilized to understand online social interactions, 2) highlight the gaps in the empirical research in this area, and 3) discuss the potential for applying social psychological theories of self, identity, and emotion to online social interaction.

Describe and review the "three faces" of social psychology. In your review, discuss the relationship between perspective and method. Finally, to what extent are these three perspectives mutually exclusive? Provide examples from theory and research in the field of social psychology to support your position.

Urbanization

How are the process of suburbanization and gentrification similar and different from each other?