

Cultural Sociology Exam Guidelines

Revised May 2020 (Terence McDonnell Chair)

OVERALL SCOPE OF AND EXPECTATIONS FOR THE EXAM

Cultural sociology aims to analyze and account for processes of meaning making in a variety of social contexts. The goal of this exam is to provide the opportunity for interested students to develop and demonstrate a broad grounding and expert familiarity with key research and guiding questions in cultural sociology. In the process of exam preparation, students should also practice and ultimately demonstrate mastery of the ability to develop and focus independent questions which may advance the subfield. Having passed this qualifying exam, students should also be competent to interact with professional peers on the basis of shared knowledge and understanding, and to organize syllabi and to teach cultural sociology.

REQUIRED/RECOMMENDED COURSES

Students should have completed advanced graduate classes related to cultural sociology before beginning exam preparation (exceptions may be negotiated with the committee for students with strong prior background).

EXAM PREPARATION AND READING LISTS

The committee sets a standard list of topical areas within culture; with 10-12 exemplary readings for each topical area. Lists should comprise readings from the most recent Cultural Sociology class offered in the department.

Students will be expected to read in six topical areas. Students will read in total 60-72 article length readings, approximating around 2,500 pages of reading in total. Students will select their six topical areas in consultation with the exam chair. Students may choose six of the pre-set subfields and for most students this is the advisable path.

Alternatively, with the guidance of the exam chair, students can craft customized reading lists (of 10-12 article length readings) for *up to two sections* outside these pre-set areas (i.e. 4 pre-set and 2 customized, or 5 pre-set and 1 customized). These customized sections should include widely-read and recognizable works from cultural sociology that the majority of cultural sociologists would be familiar with. Examples of customized sections have included topics like Family Cultures, Creativity, or Pragmatism. All lists must be approved by the exam chair by the end of the April preceding the exam.

One of the six sections must be a cultural theory section. This is defined broadly, but might include topics like classical, contemporary, culture in action, or structure and agency.

Students may select from the following pre-set lists:

- Classical theories of culture
- Contemporary cultural theory
- Culture in action
- Structure and agency
- Methods
- Production of culture
- Reception and consumption
- Interaction
- Fields
- Identity
- Cultural Capital, taste, omnivorousness
- Valuation and commensuration
- Boundaries, categories and classification
- Semiotics, codes, narrative
- Schema and cognition
- Ritual
- Practice
- Materiality and material culture
- Embodiment
- Group Cultures, styles, subcultures
- Collective memory
- Culture and inequality
- Culture and power

Preparation for the exam involves reading the work and developing a detailed understanding of the questions, arguments, intellectual resources, evidence, and conclusions of the works on the list. We encourage students to meet with the committee faculty members to discuss ideas from the student's selected topics and to help the student develop connections across the readings that might yield provocative questions and arguments the student could engage on the exam.

EXAM QUESTIONS AND FORMAT

In advance of the exam, in consultation with the Culture exam chair, **students will develop a set of six questions based on their list.** The goal of these questions is *synthesis*--asking questions that *bridge* the topical areas of their reading list. Rather than a restatement of major arguments in subfields of culture, the exam tests both *their mastery of this material, and their ability to make connections across the field of culture.* Exam questions will typically involve several iterations of revision in discussion with the chair. Questions should be finalized no later than two weeks before the exam.

At the time of the exam, the committee chair will randomly pick three questions from the list decided by a dice roll. The administrative assistant for graduate studies will communicate the selected questions to the student at the start of the exam period. Per the graduate guide, students will have six hours to answer three questions. At the conclusion of the exam period, the student will send their essays to the administrative assistant for graduate studies.

Students are permitted to bring into the exam their reading list and two single-sided pages of notes. These notes may be single spaced but no smaller than 11 point font. Attempting to pre-draft an exam answer in these notes violates the spirit of the exam. Therefore, notes will not include full paragraphs or essay outlines. Notes could include diagrams, categorizations of concepts or readings, short sentence-long notes on readings, notes on observed links between readings. Any notes must be approved by the culture exam chair one week in advance of the exam. Approved lists and notes will be given to the Graduate Studies Coordinator, who will print out these materials for the student to have on the day of the exam.

A note on citations: while exam essays should display close familiarity with substantive particularities of the readings discussed, complete and detailed formal citation is not required in the exam setting. The student should use in-text parenthetical citation when referencing work, but the student's reading list serves as a "works cited."

EXAM RESULTS

Overall, exams will be assessed as pass or fail. If students fail the exam, they should retake the area exam in its entirety at the next exam date. Students who fail should meet with the committee members to discuss ways to improve, and double their efforts to better understand the culture subfield.

Students will be notified of exam results by the committee chair, who will coordinate the reports of committee members. Every attempt will be made to provide results two weeks after the exam, however this deadline may be extended if the exam date creates deadline conflicts for committee members. The committee chair will keep the student informed of when the report is expected. To emphasize the expectation that the importance of the exam lies in the substantive training it provides, more than the technical performance expected, students will be provided with written substantive comments, ideally from each committee member. Students should also meet with the committee chair to discuss this feedback, and should meet with the other committee members if possible.