

Theory exam guidelines
(updated September 2022)

Sociological theory (as a subfield and exam subject area) is concerned with ideas that have the widest explanatory, predictive, or interpretive applicability--the discipline's "big ideas" regarding such things as social order, rationality, power, structure, and agency. It also includes sociology's founding ideas, and contemporary critiques of the same. Deep knowledge of theory allows a student to transcend the boundaries of his or her chosen subfield, and, while doing specialized work, to gravitate toward problems that matter to the wider discipline.

Recommended courses

Students should take graduate Classical and Contemporary Theory (2 courses) before the exam.

Reading list

The reading list is compiled by the committee members. (Email the chair for a copy of this.) There is no customization. It combines short selections touching on must-know ideas, and longer readings that model sustained theorizing and the development of complete systems of thought, both classical and contemporary.

Exam format

Students get three questions to answer over six hours. Committee members write them and students don't see them in advance. Students answer all three questions.

Themes

Students should be prepared to answer questions about the following themes:

- different conceptualizations of structure
- the place of agency/creativity
- the advantages and disadvantages of different sorts of theoretical analogies and levels of abstraction
- the purpose of theory
- the place of chance and contingency
- the relationship between micro and macro
- the relationship between subjectivity and overt behavior
- contemporary critiques of the theory canon
- drivers of social change
- the nature of power

Notes

Students may bring two pages of notes (single-spaced is fine; 11 point font or larger). These will not include quotations. The notes must be submitted in advance to the committee for review. (Send them to the committee chair.)

See the Sociology Graduate Guide for more information about area exam policies.