Example Comprehensive Exam Questions

Below are questions typical of those you are likely to encounter on the written comprehensive exam. Remember, the question for each of the three sections is written with your self-identified substantive area of interest in mind.

**Theory Questions**

Be prepared to provide a coherent definition of theory and discuss what is or should be the purpose of theory in sociology. Further, be prepared to articulate the various ways sociologists utilize theory in terms of both inductive and deductive approaches. You should be prepared to define *social structure* and *agency* and discuss at least two different theorists who tend to primarily focus on one or the other in their theorization. Finally, be prepared to articulate at least two different theories derived from your identified area of substantive interest within sociology.

Example of a theory question from a previous comprehensive written exam:

Define “theory.” Is theory important to sociological analysis of the social world? If so, why is it important? What is a “hypothesis” and how does a hypothesis relate to theory? How is theory utilized differently from a *deductive* versus an *inductive* perspective or approach? Finally, articulate one theory addressing (your area of self-identified specialization…).

Another example:

What is the purpose of sociological theory? Introductory textbooks generally contrast between *functionalist* and *conflict* theories. Delineate the central assumptions of each and articulate how each addresses order and change in society. Finally, briefly articulate a sociological theory concerning (your self-identified area of interest).

**Research Methods Questions**

Be prepared to construct a research question derived from your identified area of interest within sociology. Further, you should be prepared to describe how your research question could plausibly be investigated (how you would go about deriving evidence to answer it) from a *deductive* and then an *inductive* position. You should be prepared to identify your method of research inquiry (survey, secondary data analysis, interviews, etc.); identify your hypothesis or specific research question; delineate which are the independent and dependent variable(s) if appropriate; and describe your unit of analysis. You should also be able to give a definition of the ecological and individualistic fallacies and discuss why researchers should avoid each in conducting and interpreting empirical research.

Example of a research methods question from a previous comprehensive written exam:

Develop a research question derived from your interest of and readings in (your area of specialization…). Next, describe the method of inquiry whereby your research question could plausibly be investigated (i.e., survey research, secondary data analysis, interviews, participant observation, etc.). What is your hypothesis or research question? What is your unit of analysis?
Another example:
Develop a research question derived from your interest of and readings in gender. Next, describe the method of inquiry whereby your research question could plausibly be investigated (i.e., survey research, secondary data analysis, interviews, participant observation, etc.). What is your hypothesis or research question? What is your unit of analysis?

Statistics Questions

Be prepared to come up with a hypothesis and corresponding variables appropriate for conducting an Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) multiple regression analysis. You should understand the process of operationalization and the role of independent, dependent and control variables. Be prepared to discuss the assumptions underlying OLS regression, particularly normality and levels of measurement issues. You should understand the possible problems that may arise because of the “third variable problem” or spurious correlations. Further, you should be able to discuss the critical alpha-level that is usually used to determine significance level and explain what it means.

You will be provided with a table of multiple regression results from a sociology research journal article. You will then be asked to describe and interpret the results, which may include the F-ratio, $R^2$, Unstandardized Regression Coefficients, Standardized Regression Coefficients (Betas), the constant or y-intercept, Standard Errors, Level of Significance, Confidence Intervals.

Example of a statistics question from a previous comprehensive written exam:
Please find attached the Method section and Table 5 of the Rosenbaum, DeLuca, Miller and Roy article “Pathways into Work: Short- and Long-term Effects of Personal and Institutional Ties.” Although it is not necessary for the completion of the exam, we have also provided you with a pdf of the full article for your reference. Table 5 provides the results from an Ordinary Least Square (OLS) regression analysis. Let’s just examine the last column, the one that includes all of the variables. The (Ln) in the table indicates that Earnings have been logged in order to account for positive skew.

- Identify the independent, and dependent variable(s). In order to perform a linear OLS regression the dependent variable needs to be at what level of measurement?
- What is the critical alpha level in this analysis? What does this number mean?
- What variables have a significant effect on Earnings? Describe these relationships.
- According to the table, what job placement method is the most effective for getting a higher paying job??
- What is the specific meaning of the Adjusted $R^2$? In other words what is 11.7%? You do not need to interpret the meaning of “adjusted”