

QUESTION BANK FOR SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY COMPREHENSIVE EXAM

*** Last revised June 6, 2015.*

1. Which theoretical perspective, among the range of perspectives covered on the reading list, would you say has stood the test of time and shows the most promise in terms of guiding our explorations of the relationship between individuals and society? Justify your choice, being sure to discuss such issues as the development of the perspective, the empirical research it has generated, the contributions it has made, the criticisms leveled against it and the ways in which it has or has not responded adequately to these criticisms.
2. Symbolic interactionism has been criticized from one direction for overemphasizing meaning as a basis for action and for not paying sufficient attention to structural constraints; and from the opposite direction, for overemphasizing the degree to which meanings are shared and therefore, act to constrain human behaviour. Discuss the roots of both criticisms and explain your own position on this question.
3. Since the late 1970s, there have been various attempts by those in the symbolic interactionist tradition(s) to pay more attention to social organization or structure and the constraints they are likely to impose upon individuals and social actors. Discuss and evaluate these attempts.
4. Many symbolic interactionists appear to assume that there is very little in the way of predetermined motivation "in" individuals. Rather, most motivation can be reduced to cognitive processes (e.g., meanings, etc.) whose content derives from particular interaction contexts and personal histories. Assess the strengths and limitations of this approach with the theories of motivation offered by **two** of the following: critical theory, dramaturgy, Freudian theory, exchange theory, and dual-process theory. Which approach do you find most compelling, and why?
5. (a) Proponents of various "critical" theories have criticized mainstream approaches for either outright apologizing for dominating and exploiting social organizations or at least lacking macro and/or micro theories which would allow one to adequately understand and criticize contemporary western societies. Discuss and evaluate the major social psychological claims of at least one such "critical" theorist.

(b) On the other side, mainstream theorists have sometimes argued that "critical" theories are mainly if not only prescriptive or normative; that they concentrate upon abstract philosophical concepts without much substantive and empirical content (e.g., human "potential", "projects", "totalizations", etc.); and as such do not in fact have the means for persuading social scientists of the worth of their claims. Evaluate the worth of such counter claims, using at least one "critical" theorist or school as an example.
6. Rather than following various schools of "critical theory" in modifying Marxist or other traditional approaches to sociological social psychology by employing concepts from Freudian, existentialist, or post-modernist approaches, various sociological social psychologists claim to have followed the inclinations of Marx, Weber or Durkheim (among others) to incorporate rather than simply dismiss concepts which we now associate with such traditional approaches to micro social phenomena as those of social exchange and symbolic interaction theory. The latter include such writers as Collins and Giddens. Discuss

the relative merits and disadvantages of these two sets of approaches, using at least one theorist from each of them.

7. Consider the range of theoretical perspectives that sociologists have employed in their attempt to understand the relationship between individuals and society (e.g., symbolic interactionism, exchange theory, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, Marxism, postmodernism, social structure and personality). Select the **two** perspectives that you feel represent the sharpest contrast. Explain the reasons for your choice. Discuss each theory critically, addressing their assumptions, units of analysis, most important concepts and the methods they employ. What are the main points of convergence and dissimilarity?
8. Several perspectives in social psychology emphasize the actor's subjective understanding of social reality. However, they differ in the extent to which they allow for the possibility of an objective external world confronting and constraining individuals. Select the **two** social psychological perspectives you consider to be the most insightful in terms of how they deal with the link between individuals and society. Justify your choices, and compare and contrast the two, focusing on their assumptions, units of analysis, most important concepts, and the methods they employ. Consider whether there are any grounds for convergence.
9. Focussing on their assumptions, units of analysis, and typical methods for empirical research, examine what it is about Symbolic Interactionism that differentiates it from at least **two** of the following: Exchange Theory, Social Structure and Personality, Cultural Sociology, Freudian Theory, Ethnomethodology, Critical Theory, and Post-Modernist Theory. Are there also grounds for combining SI with the two other theories you have chosen to discuss? If so, what are those grounds?"
10. Like most schools of sociological thought, symbolic interactionism has become fragmented into several, often competing "sects". Some well-known analysts have argued for four or five main types: the Chicago school, the Iowa school, dramaturgy, and ethnomethodology. However, others such as John Hewitt in effect argue that these various alternatives are compatible rather than competing, and can be integrated within a single, general paradigm. Indeed, some go further and claim SI is not very different from other schools altogether, such as exchange theory, or even macro "conflict" or functionalist theories. Discuss the merits of, and problems with, these various points of view, and defend your own positions.
11. Social psychologists employ both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Are there some areas of substantive inquiry that are more suited to one method versus the other? Explain and provide empirical examples. Finally, select a substantive social psychological research topic and discuss what aspects of this area of research might be better studied quantitatively and what aspects might be better studied qualitatively. Remember to discuss specific factors that guide a social psychologist's choice of method as well as the strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research.
12. Social Inequality is one of the major themes in sociological social psychology. This question asks you to explain how social psychologists address social inequality using various theoretical approaches. Choose **two** approaches from the following list: social structure and personality, symbolic interactionism, identity theory, role theory, social exchange theory, expectation states theory, cultural sociology, and structuration theory. In each selected approach, is social inequality a macro or micro phenomenon, neither or both? According to each selected approach, how is inequality produced or reproduced? What kinds of methods does each approach use and what is the evidence for their claims about social inequality?

13. Select **one** substantive topic from the following list: mental health, aging/life-course, class, race/ethnicity, or work and family. Explain how each of the “three faces” of social psychology (summarized by House, 1977) has approached (or would approach) the topic in terms of the following aspects of research:

- (a) what substantive questions are asked;
- (b) how social structure, human agency, and the link between the two are conceptualized for the topic; and
- (c) what methods are used.

In your answer, explain whether the three faces illuminate different aspects of the topic by complementing each other or provide contradictory views on the topic.

14. Does social psychology need “three [or more] faces”? Why or why not? Discuss with reference to **one** of the following substantive topics: Mental Health, Work and Family, Race and Ethnicity, Social Inequality, or Deviance.

15. What is the Stress Process Model? Provide a broad and comprehensive overview of the key features and components of the model. In your response, trace the successes and developments (or elaborations) of the concept of stress in that model over time. Provide a critical case for the importance of at least two missing elements—or limitations—of that model and how focusing on these aspects would improve the sociological study of stress and mental health.

16. Identify key psychosocial resources that help protect individuals’ mental health. Describe the ways that they might be seen as mediating and moderating factors in the sociology of mental health literature. Use examples to illustrate your argument. In your discussion, comment on how the study of psychosocial resources helps us to understand or better specify the impact of social and demographic statuses on mental health.

17. What are the major explanations for how social inequality structures mental health within and across societies? Please describe the proposed mechanisms that underlie this relationship. Review the empirical evidence that has linked social inequality to mental health.

18. If “race” is not a meaningful biological category, how does it get “under the skin” and why is it associated with differences in identity, attitudes, socioeconomic status, health, and other social characteristics? Discuss the proposed mechanisms that underlie these connections, and evaluate the empirical evidence for them.

19. What is the contact hypothesis? To what extent has it stood the test of time? What are the most important criticisms or limitations? How, if at all, would you modify the contact hypothesis in light of recent empirical evidence on the relationship between contact and prejudice in various social contexts?

20. How do stigmatized groups and individuals cope with and respond to stigmatization? What accounts for the range of responses? Propose a research design whereby you could study the conditions associated with, and/or the relative effectiveness of, the different responses.