

Duke University

Department of Sociology

GRADUATE QUALIFYING EXAMINATION

MEDICAL SOCIOLOGY

August 28, 2008

This examination has three sections. You must answer questions I and II. In Part III, you may select any one question. Your answers should be as complete as possible. They should not exceed a total of fifteen (15) double-spaced pages, excluding the references. You should follow a journal format (e.g., *American Sociological Review*) for references and citations. You have 24 hours from the time you receive your exam to return it to Claudette Parker as an email attachment.

No discussion of any Qualifying Examination with any other person is permitted until after September 1, 2008, when all examinations have been completed.

Medical Sociology Qualifying Examination

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Answer both questions I and II. Answer one of the questions in Part III.

- I. Link and Phelan's theory that socioeconomic status (SES) is a fundamental cause of disease has had a huge impact on medical sociology. It is cited very frequently and most medical sociologists appear to find its assertions compelling and valid. This theory also has a few critics, however, and their criticisms focus on whether fundamental cause theory is falsifiable. Clearly there is a strong and persistent relationship between socioeconomic status and health. But this empirical fact is separate from whether fundamental cause theory meets the standards to which theories need to conform. First, what are the major propositions of fundamental cause theory? Second, could fundamental cause theory be falsified? If yes, how? If not, could it be modified such that it can be falsified? Third, review the empirical research based on fundamental cause theory, describing the extent to which the theory is or is not supported.

- II. There is general consensus in medical sociology and epidemiologic research that the effect of a social risk factor or protective factor on a health outcome of interest should depend in part on *length of exposure* to that risk or protective factor. Nonetheless, very few studies have empirically examined the issue of length of exposure. First, pick a risk or protective factor and a health outcome that interests you (e.g., stress and depression, religion and a health outcome, social support and mortality). Second, describe a research design that could be used to investigate the effects of length of exposure to that risk or protective factor on your health outcome. We understand that there are space limitations, but describe the general research design, the sampling design you would use to insure sufficient variability on both the independent and dependent variables, and how each variable would be measured. Third, given this design, what analytic strategy would you use to determine the effects of length of exposure on the health outcome?

III. Answer one of the following questions (A-C).

- A. Research on the relationships between stress and mental health has matured substantially over the past several decades. The evolution of the conceptualization, measurement, and temporal orientation of stress has been a major part of that maturation. First, describe the current state-of-the-science regarding the conceptualization and operationalization of social stress. Second, in what ways has our understanding of the effects of stress on mental health been advanced by changes in the conceptual and operational definitions of stress?
- B. Strong and persistent relationships between socioeconomic status (SES) and health have been observed for decades. For most of this time, the focus was on the association between *current* SES and current health. In line with the increased emphasis on life course patterns, a body of research has emerged that examines the effects of SES at earlier points in the life course on current health. First, review the literature that examines the relationship between SES and health in life course perspective. What are the major findings? How consistent are the findings? Second, is the state-of-the-science such that we can claim a basic understanding of the effects of SES on health across the life course? Third, what are high priority research questions for future research on SES and health across the life course?
- C. Estimating the effects of social factors on depression has a long history in the sociology of mental health. Over time, the research designs and analytic techniques in this field have become increasingly sophisticated. Recently, a number of investigators have used trajectory analysis to better understand the social antecedents of depression. First, describe at least two studies in which trajectories of social factors are used to predict depression. Second, compare results from the trajectory studies with the knowledge accumulated from more traditional longitudinal studies of social factors and depression. Has trajectory analysis yielded new conclusions or qualified/elaborated previous knowledge of or theory about social factors and depression? Justify your answer.