Comprehensive Exam Prep Example

Note: Comps vary a lot by area in our department. This guide was put together by people who took comps in Race and Ethnicity, Political Sociology, Gender, and Education.

Semester/six months before exam
- Check comprehensive exam archive on department website
- Meet with area coordinator for exam(s) of interest *direct advice from graduate advisor
  - Ask for a current reading list
- Begin compiling reading lists

Five months before exam
- Talk with students who took comps in your area for insight on informal processes
- Set committee members *this process varies by area
- Discuss exam approach and format with committee chair
- Get input on reading lists/exam approach from committee members

Four months before exam
- Finalize reading list
  - Determine which books are available through UT Library and which ones to borrow or buy
- Set reading schedule
  - Decide what items to read in full, partial, and book review

Three months before exam
- Start reading
  - Establish a note taking system that includes summaries, key arguments and key concepts *recommendation: a citation software that allows notes like Zotero
- Devise accountability plan with peers
- Ask students in cohorts above yours for any materials they can share i.e notes, PDFs of readings, sample outlines

Two months before exam
- Meet with grad coordinator for program review *required by department

One month before exam
- Start reviewing
- Create outlines and/or sample answers for questions you may be asked
  - Share these with committee members for feedback and direction
- Confirm exam format with committee chair
Two weeks before exam
  □ Finish reading
  □ Review comprehensive exam archive
  □ Keep reviewing

One day before exam
  □ Do something lowkey and fun

After exam
  □ Celebrate!
Notes Example
By Kathryn Wiley

Hagerman, Margaret. 2018. White Kids: Growing Up With Privilege In a Racially Divided America

TLDR: “Good white parents” take a range of approaches to raise “good white kids” which results in those kids thinking racism isn’t real anymore; it’s a prejudice issue only; or they have to be white saviors. None of these do much to solve racial inequality

RQ: What role do white children and their parents play in the reproduction, reworking, and challenging of existing forms of racism? How do affluent white children interpret the racial context of childhood designed for them by their parents?

- SubRQ: How do white kids who grow up in families that do not openly talk about race learn about race/racism? What do white kids whose parents consider themselves to be anti-racist learn about race/racism?

Concepts/terms:
Comprehensive racial learning: process through which children receive and interpret mixed messages about race, ultimately forming their own understanding; preferred over “racial socialization” which focuses on how parents teach children and assumes children are passive consumers

Justified avoidance: strategies white parents use to insist they aren’t racist while simultaneously acting in ways to secure advantages for their own child. Ex. desiring diverse classrooms then changing their child's school because they didn’t want their kid to witness racism

Conundrum of privilege: White parents who acknowledge they have privilege struggle to teach their children about privilege, be “good parents” while trying not to (in the ways they are aware) reaffirm the racial order. Some give up and say it’s too hard, others try various methods. Even the ones who try can’t escape the wages of whiteness.

Key arguments:
- Children are active participants in the formation of their racial ideology, not merely blank slates for parents to fill up. White children disagree and challenge their parents racial ideology as much as their parents teach them
- White children/families are racialized actors with authentic racial identities. Their private worlds should be studied critically as racialized places where ideas about race get reproduced and reworked. Though all white people benefit from whiteness, whiteness isn’t monolithic; white people think, act, and raise their children differently
- When parents choose a home they make a “bundled decision” about schools, activities, political environment and friends that become the racial context their children grow up in. That choice is informed by their own racial commonsense/knowledge
- Many white parents want their kids to experience other cultures. Will facilitate this by accepting friendships with “desirable others”, volunteering at homeless shelters, and traveling nationally and internationally. These last two typically manifest as poverty tours that center the white child
and create opportunities for the white child to learn something about themselves. It also teaches white children they are entitled to be/go anywhere without asking for permission

● Through schooling (private schools, honors programs) white children learn to promote abstract ideas about fairness while viewing themselves as special, unique, and deserving. Many of these children can speak critically about racial inequality while simultaneous believing they are better than others

● White kids talk about race with their friends and siblings; sometimes ostracizing nonwhite children, affirming color-blind ideology, turning “that’s so racist” into a joke or insult. Sometimes interracial friendships help white kids see when BIPOC are being mistreated and understand it as racism.

● Affluent families use media (news, podcasts, network tv) to facilitate conversation about race and sexuality. They also engage in race talk while coaching or spectating their kids activities and commenting on peer interactions

● Many white kids think talking about race at all is racist, only see racism on an individual level and/or as a thing of the past. Some of the Wheaten and Evergreen kids do think critically/institutionally about race.

Key Contributions:

● Adds to knowledge on how racial ideology is transmitted from one generation to the next: it is simultaneous recreated and contested

● What parents think is “best” or important for their children is partly shaped by racial ideology which then sends messages to kids about race, privilege, and power. Affluent parents have an abundance of choice and autonomy to carry out their decisions and desires.

● Racial ideology, parenting ideology, American ideology intersect to create conflict around good parents who want to be good citizens who raise good children

● White people have to break up with whiteness and stop thinking their child deserves more than anyone else’s child. Invest in the common good

In conversation with: Dow, Bonilla-Silva, whiteness studies