

# Who was Fritz Heider and why should I care?

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For a graduate student in social psychology, the answer to the first part of the question should be obvious. For a graduate student preparing for comprehensive examinations, the answer to the second part of the question is much less obvious.

Although the format of comprehensive exams varies from discipline to discipline, university to university, and department to department, the philosophy underlying the exam is a fundamental cornerstone of higher education. For readers interested in a quantitative synthesis of the practice of sitting comprehensive examinations in Canada, they will not find it here. Rather, the present commentary begins with a brief overview of one format of sitting comprehensive exams followed by some general strategies offered as survival tips for students having to sit such exams. Universities that require sittings of comprehensive examinations (commonly called "comps") typically follow a specific format. For in-class examinations, the average duration is four hours with the expectation that written responses to questions will evidence acquired knowledge throughout a student's career. These questions are of two kinds. First, there is the broad question for which students can draw upon accumulated knowledge on a variety of topics in order to state their position. Second, shorter questions address a wide range of phenomena that students are expected to have some more specific knowledge about.

Reading lists, usually provided at least six months in advance, comprise the material to be tested. Often readings concern the same topics covered in required courses throughout the degree program. This list may be lengthy and be comprised of both textbooks and journal articles with which the committee (those esteemed professors who will evaluate your responses) believes a student should be familiar. Students can expect some obvious readings (e.g., the Handbook) whereas other readings may (at first) appear less relevant.

At some point during students' residencies, they are required to successfully complete comps in their area of study. There is much debate over the merits of this practice. The best arguments in favor of writing comps concern the emphasis placed on the process of preparation. Indeed, one of my own committee members suggested that the actual writing of comps was so "anti-climatic" that he would have preferred to tell students, on arrival to the exam, that their work was done and there was no need to write the exam. For most students, the awareness of the evaluation (the actual exam) is a strong motivator to read and learn. The arguments against writing comps range from having "wasted time" to "the evaluative tools are inadequate". Regardless of the divergent views of comps, for students in the position of facing comps, there are some simple strategies to help you survive the process. These recommendations are aimed at students needing a relief from

the (often tedious) work ahead of them (professors need not read on!)

### Getting the reading list

It's November and you are already aware that comps will be written in June. Get the reading list NOW. Do not wait until Christmas or even after the holidays. Just get the list and have it in your hot little hands. You don't have to do anything with it, just get it. If the committee hasn't prepared it, bug them until they do. The best way to bug them is via email. If you've been a TA in the 1990s you already know how much professors dread the stack of emails that pile up in their inboxes. That's their problem, you need the list and you need it NOW. So you've spoken to the chair, you know who will be on the committee, you have sent numerous emails and still no list? Okay, here's the best strategy, write an email in ALL CAPITOL LETTERS (this is supposed to convey urgency and anger).

Okay so now you have the list. Pin it (tape it, paste it) on the wall directly at eyelevel on the cupboard door where you store your Kraft dinner. Believe you me, this will get you in the mindset. Before doing so, please remember to highlight (pink, yellow, or blue it doesn't matter what color) the words COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS.

Now you are ready to start

Take the reading list down and if not already done for you, organize a new list by stipulating headings and then place each reading under the appropriate heading. This step assumes you will know the topic to which each reading pertains. If such an assumption is too large a leap in faith, you can do one of three things. First, you can ask someone (preferably a peer, don't let the professors know you have no clue what

belongs where). Alternatively, you can do a quick search on either the PsycInfo database or on the Internet (it's amazing what you will find). A third way of dealing with this issue concerns using an introductory text (especially relevant if you are writing an area specific comps such as developmental, social, personality etc.) In creating your revised list, see if you can order readings in terms of their importance (much like Rokeach's value survey). One particularly helpful ordering may involve organizing topics from that which you know absolutely nothing right through to that which you know absolutely everything.

### Getting the readings

The next big step involves amassing the readings. There will be some readings you have ready access to (e.g., hidden under your bed), others will be relatively easy to obtain (e.g., a trip to the library), still others you will have to order (don't forget to comparison shop, one man's junk is another man's treasure), and finally there will be some readings that Sherlock himself wouldn't find (don't despair yet). For those readings that fall in the last category, I suggest a couple of routes. You might be thinking at this point that such an event would seldom occur (the operative word here is seldom, remember Murphy's law?). One of the "general texts" I was supposed to read wasn't even out in print until 4 weeks prior to the exam! Use the lab phone to call publishers, bookstores etc. Borrow books from whomever (send an email to students and profs alike requesting help). If you are borrowing a lot of books, make a list of who you have borrowed from and buy thank you notes the next time you're shopping (people will be more likely to lend again if you don't a) write in their books and b) you show some appreciation). Expect to have all the relevant materials by the end of January.

Life is good. You have 6 months, WHOA only SIX MONTHS? Okay you better get to it. Oh, and by the way, don't let anything else slip. Your research should be running smoothly, you should be on top of your course work, keep your appointments with your supervisor (avoiding him or her doesn't fool them one bit!), have a night out, play with your kids (or dog, or cat) and for goodness sake don't forget practicum if you're in clinical (clinical supervisors, of all people, will see through you calling in sick for the 3rd time this week).

### Reading the material

Begin with a specific topic in mind. For example, no matter what area of psychology you are in, you should know some history. Then skim/read an introductory text chapter on the history of psychology. From there, you should have at least one name that is relevant to your area. Do a quick search on the Internet for a brief bio of this person and major contributions (e.g., Heider's contribution to attribution). Now you have direction. Begin an outline. At the top, put the name down and in three words or less, the area of contribution. Now define the area in one sentence. Write an outline that you think might be the issues in that area. Now go to your readings. Guaranteed, there will be a chapter, a book, or an article that is subsumable under each heading. When I first started reading, I began with Book A and Chapter 1. Unlike novels, unfortunately there is rarely a climax in Chapter 13 and a resolution in Chapter 26. My personal preference is to read about an area within my stream. This means that chapter 4 out of Book A, Chapter 10 from Book B, Articles 2,5, 6, 19, are all relevant and the rest you can reserve for subsequent topics. The strategy I like best is to read a broad overview of the area and then funnel my reading to more specific issues, studies (e.g.,

current articles) and then finally read a broad overview again (reread the first again if only one such animal exists).

A colleague of mine told me that the Socratic method discourages you from taking notes as you read. I agree to a point. I like to take notes; so I do. You may not, so don't. The point here is that it is entirely up to you. If you think it will help you then do so otherwise, don't. If you do decide to take notes, the best approach (in my opinion) is to follow a SORTED approach. State the topic; outline main points, relate themes, trace the progress of research, use examples to explain and illustrate, and deduce the meaning within a broader context. For me, tree diagrams work well. Once every hour (especially as time marches on), I suggest a walk. Whether you decide to walk to the store for more bottled water (diet coke or whatever your poison) or you just decide to walk around your apartment, it matters little. During this five or ten minute walk, imagine you are telling someone about what you have read (by the way, if you have an audience that is willing to listen, you have an advantage). The idea is to tell a story in your own words out loud. I have thought of more interesting issues as I spoke to Sam (my dog) than at any other time.

Although study groups are ideal, they are not always practical; so create your own and recruit mates, parents, or pets. Now once you have finished with a topic, sit down (prepare to spend at least 2-3 hours here) and write out everything pertaining to that topic (the organization of it at this point matters little). Just type, go for it. Put it aside and get some sleep. The next day read it, fill in obvious blanks and organize it into a coherent story in a written format. Print it off and delete it from your hard drive. Take the pages (probably around 10 to 20) and staple them together and then put them in a

safe place (not under your bed). Wait until tomorrow and begin with the next topic. By the time April rolls around you will have completed most of the major areas and feel that you haven't read any of the books on the list (remember this is a piecemeal approach). Here's where the Kleenex comes in. Yes, I am serious. If you haven't been frustrated to the point of tears yet, you will be by now (regardless of the gender stereotypes). This is also the point where you need to a) have a glass of wine (preferably good versus cheap), b) rent the video classic the best of SNL, c) get a hug from (mom, dad, sis, bro, mate, or pet), and/or d) check out the alternatives.

Alternatives to comps? Yes there are alternatives. Think about it. You could apply to Tim Horton's, after all you know their product better than most. Who needs a Ph.D. anyways? Aren't academics pretentious ivory towered visionaries? If you move to the States, you can teach high school without a degree (or so I was told). Spring is here, lawns will need to be cut, heck you could start your own chip stand. The point here is that there are alternatives. But, if you are anything like everyone else who has walked this path, for you, right now, there

are no other alternatives with the same appeal. The only things we regret are the things that we didn't dare to do.

Are you ready? No. No one, no matter what they say is truly ready, what they are is tired and fed up and wanting this to be over. Miraculously, the day arrives and with it brings fear and worry. There are relaxation techniques and books on test anxiety for which you might consult. My philosophy? Well if I am here now so be it, in 20 years I won't remember this four hours out of my life and even if I do, it will be so pale in comparison to the highs and lows in my life. Come on, you know what I am talking about. The highs include getting married (or divorced depending on your circumstances), the birth of a child, the feeling of sunshine on the inside, and snowflakes melting on your tongue. The lows include getting divorced (or married depending on your circumstances), death, and loneliness. Let's face it; in the big scheme of things, comps are just a hangover. However, the unexpected consequence of comps that you will most likely carry with you is knowledge. It is by far the most rewarding and often the least expected outcome when one first starts the process.