

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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Title: Howard Gardner in Progress:
From MI to A *Synthesizing Mind*

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Summary/ Abstract: It tells the life story of this eminent scholar with reference to his mentors and colleagues (published December 2020).

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Philosophy of Education



Gardner in College
(Circ 1965)

Howard Gardner, the father of multiple intelligences, has just released his memoir, entitled *A Synthesizing Mind*. In the introduction, he acknowledged that "I have never wanted to continue working only on MI ideas" (Gardner, 2020, p. xi). Surprisingly, I reached more or less the same idea six years ago when I wrote about him: "The second half of his life was spent on MI for more than 50% of his time. ... the situation develops that way and he did not necessarily enjoy it" (Li, 2014, p. 16). Apparently I spoke his heart; I can feel how he feels!

Last year (2019) when I reviewed Gardner's more recent work, I suddenly realized that this MI guru had tried to move away from MI since 1990, with works on creativity (1993), leadership (1995), good work (2001) and philosophy of education (2010). He must have had an urge to go beyond MI. Surprisingly I found similar evidence of this move in this memoir of his, "In an unexpected turn in my own scholarly life, the reaction to MI theory eventually led me to large-scale, decade-long studies of professional ethics and of higher education (Gardner, 2020, p. xiv)." Here is a lesson: when one reads with empathy, one can see more depth and insight.

Gardner's MI Profile as a Boy

Born in 1943 to an immigrant family in the USA, Howard Gardner's parents were middle-class German Jews who fled Nazi Germany. The Gartners arrived in New York in 1938 and the family name was anglicized to Gardner (ibid: 2020, p. 7). Gardner grew up as a smart boy who excelled at school and was good at music. In his memoir, Gardner tried to humorously recreate his boyhood profile in terms of MI:

- Language ability: very strong
- Mathematical and logical abilities: strong enough
- Musical abilities: quite strong
- (Visual) spatial abilities: weak, probably on the basis of biological / genetic factors
- Bodily kinesthetic abilities: weak, because little opportunity in childhood to practice and improve (though drilling and piano playing are possible exceptions)
- Understanding of other persons: not strong
- Understanding of self: average
- Discriminations in the natural world (plants, animals, etc.) : adequate, at least for obtaining Boy Scout merit badges
- Interest in big questions: very curious about the world, especially the world of human beings, past and present (ibid, 2020, p. 16)

Howard Gardner in Progress: From MI to A Synthesizing Mind

Going
Beyond
MI

Professor Rex Li



Howard and his sister Marion, around 1954
Photo credits: *A Synthesizing Mind* (2020) MIT Press

Getting into Harvard

Back in the 1950s in America, gifted education was still in its infancy and few knew how to deal with gifted kids. So this precocious teenager was sent to take some psychological and aptitude tests, which merely confirmed that "Howard is a bright child. He can probably do most anything." (ibid, p. 20). A dutiful and introverted adolescent interested in music (p. 105), reading and writing, Gardner possessed a strong superego and was a good test-taker (pp. 21-24). His mind was on Harvard because his perception was that Harvard would not discriminate against the Jews (pp. 31-33). After taking the required tests and an interview, a linguistically-gifted Gardner was admitted.

As it turned out, Gardner stayed in Harvard for the rest of his life. First he had a busy student life with wide academic exposure. Then he received a fellowship and spent a year in London School of Economics, during which he "probably attended more theater, concerts, and arts exhibitions in one year than in the succeeding decade" (p. 57). Back again to Harvard in 1966, Gardner enrolled in a doctoral program in developmental psychology and earned his doctorate in 1970.

Self-Propelled Iconoclasm

A strong impression comes to my mind after scanning through his autobiography. Gardner is self-propelled to his development of iconoclasm throughout his life. He rode on an untrodden path of his choice. First he was a gifted teenager in music but did not wish to practice the piano 10 hours a day.

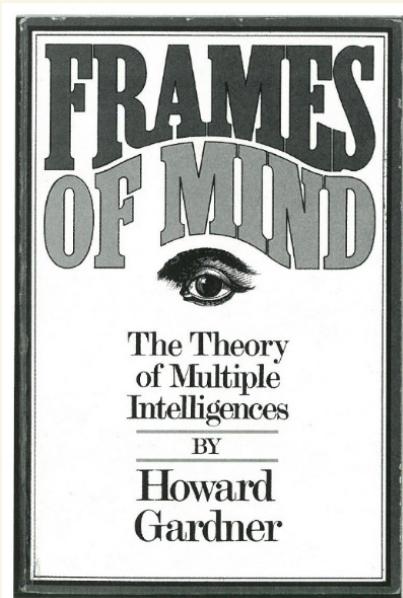
Mentors and Growth Path

In his college and graduate school years in Harvard, Gardner had met many renowned scholars and some had become his mentors. The following are eminent scholars that had shaped Gardner's growth path:

Eric Erikson (1902-1994) is a renowned psychologist famed for his psychology of life-span (eight stages of psychosocial development). He was in Harvard in the 1960s and tutored Gardner for 2 years. "Under the wings of Prof. Erikson," Gardner chose clinical psychology for his doctoral program but later changed to developmental psychology (pp. 56-58).

Then in the world of books, he preferred wide reading and synthesis to minute research details. To perpetuate his linguistic talents, Gardner "was inspired" to become a writer who could cover many topics (p. 42). He was concerned with big questions of human nature and the human

condition, so that in Harvard he took interdisciplinary courses of social relations, covering ideas of Karl Marx, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim. Adding to his interest in art and American literary history, Gardner was exposed to anthropology, sociology and then psychology. To summarize, the rich intellectual soil of Harvard favored his self-propelled intellectual growth.



Book cover of 1983 publication

Norman Geschwind (1926-1984) is a pioneering neurologist. He was Chief of Neurology at the Boston VA Hospital and established Boston University Aphasia Research Center. Gardner got acquainted with Geschwind in the late 1960s and upon receiving his doctorate, sought a postdoctoral fellowship with Geschwind. With that Gardner gained access to observation and experimental studies in Boston VA Hospital on brain damage, which became the cornerstone of his theory of MI.



Gardner's mentors

Jerome Bruner (1915-2016) is a pioneering cognitive and educational psychologist and had conducted many pioneering researches in psychology and education. In 1965, Bruner launched an education entitled program entitled "Man: A course of study" and hired Gardner as a research assistant. Bruner as a "charismatic and entrepreneurial scholar" (p. 61) has had lasting impact on Gardner.

Nelson Goodman (1906-1998) is an American philosopher in logic, analytic philosophy and aesthetics. He was in Harvard in the 1960s and started Project Zero, a research project in artistic education and cognition. During that time, Gardner was a doctoral student in psychology, interested in artistic development. Goodman hired Gardner as the first research assistant in Project Zero. Gardner worked on the project and later became its co-director. His doctoral dissertation was also on artistic development, inspired by Goodman and Bruner.

Road to Fame

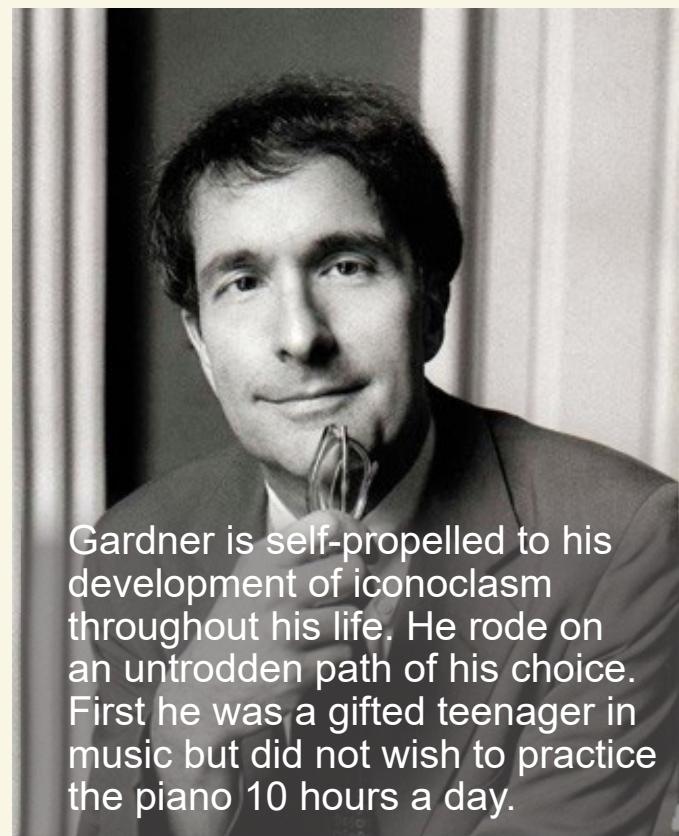
The publication of *Frames of Mind* in 1983 brought Gardner fame. By then Gardner was 40 years of age and had already been in Harvard for two decades. Even then, he did not have a tenure. In the 1960s, he worked as a research assistant to Bruner and then to Goodman. Then he gained three postdoc fellowships to continue his study and writing from 1970–1973. By then in the 1970s, Gardner became the co-director of Project Zero but there was no funding and he had to raise funds for the project and his salary!

Fortunately he kept writing and publishing to keep him afloat and to raise his family. He even wrote a textbook, *Developmental Psychology*, which earned him some good “soft money.” In those years, Gardner had no financial stability nor security, but he recalled, “I managed to survive and even to thrive, while supporting a growing family” (p. 106).

Then came *Frames of Mind* which changed Gardner’s life. The book was intended to offer a new theory of multiple intelligences to replace IQ—the single intelligence. Gardner was able to put forth his symbol systems idea in neurophysiological terms based on his research in Boston Hospital to support the argument of Multiple Intelligences: evidence of impairment in different parts of the brain results in the loss of different types of intelligence. While the idea of Multiple Intelligences and abilities is an old speculation, Gardner’s evidence is new and his rhetoric and synthesis makes a convincing case.

To Gardner as well as a lot of people’s surprise, *Frames of Mind* took off like a rocket. It caught the mood of the 1980s for a change in psychology and education. As Gardner summarized:

The publication of the book about the theory of multiple intelligences had changed my life forever. Before, I had been a research psychologist plying my trade; now, I was the author of a much-discussed treatise and the creator of a controversial theory. I had written several works of synthesis that were principally about other people’s ideas; not my own ideas had become the subject of praise, criticism, and debate. And while I preferred (and still prefer!) not to be recognized on the street or at the airport, I gradually got used to the idea of assenting when asked if I were, indeed, “Howard Gardner,” or “Dr. Gardner,” or “Professor Gardner,” or even “the Howard Gardner.” (Gardner, 2020, p. x)



Gardner is self-propelled to his development of iconoclasm throughout his life. He rode on an untrodden path of his choice. First he was a gifted teenager in music but did not wish to practice the piano 10 hours a day.

Howard Gardner

Photo credits: Worldwide Meeting on Human Values website

Moving Onto Creativity, Leadership, Good Work, Education

Gardner’s academic journey did not end or stop with MI. It is common for many great thinkers to hit on an idea, develop it into a theme or theory and then elaborate it for the rest of their lives. For example, Karl Marx took the idea of proletarian revolution and developed his economic laws, theory of surplus value, socialism, historical materialism and so on. Herbert Spencer picked the idea of evolution and produced his synthetic philosophy, a 10-volume work including biology, sociology, and political theory. Even John Dewey had some unifying ideas in his wide ranging scholarship—organicity and wholeness, summing up as pragmatism.

The publication of *Frames of Mind* in 1983 brought Gardner fame. By then Gardner was 40 years of age and had already been in Harvard for two decades. Even then, he did not have a tenure.

But Gardner did not take this route. Theory of intelligence was only one of his interests. He was also interested in other intriguing aspects of human intellect and endeavor, such as creativity, leadership, and ethics. While his theory of MI was hailed as a new view to education and was taken up in practice by some educators, Gardner himself did not start any school of MI. He did endorse the Key school of Indianapolis and some practitioners such as Tom Hoerr, but he never made a launch of MI schools. He was concerned with malpractices and misinterpretation that he had to defend his own ideas. Gardner did try to work on some assessment of MI in Project Spectrum through his colleagues and students (p. 153).

More importantly, Gardner went to his academic journey in the next thirty years, producing impressive works in creativity, leadership, ethics and education.

In creativity he published a few case studies of eminent people, showing some common character traits and developmental paths of them. In leadership, Gardner also used case studies to create a matrix of "leader archetype" revealing how they succeed or fail. In ethics, Gardner collaborated with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and did empirical research on good work (excellent, ethical, engaging), mostly related to 1200 researchers in science and executives in business. To be ethical in an important issue at that time because of the Enron fraudulent debacle (1998–2001). In education, he wrote *Open Minds* (1989), *The Unschooled Minds* (1991), *The Disciplined Mind* (1999), *Five Minds for the Future* (2007) and *Truth, Beauty and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the 21st Century* (2010).

Gardner has a purpose in life: to synthesize and to write for his own interests. He enjoys music, art, history and literature as much as extensive reading. These are all his pastimes. Then he thinks, synthesizes, and writes. He would not allow himself to be limited by one and existing ideas.

Gardner went to his academic journey in the next thirty years, producing impressive works in

creativity

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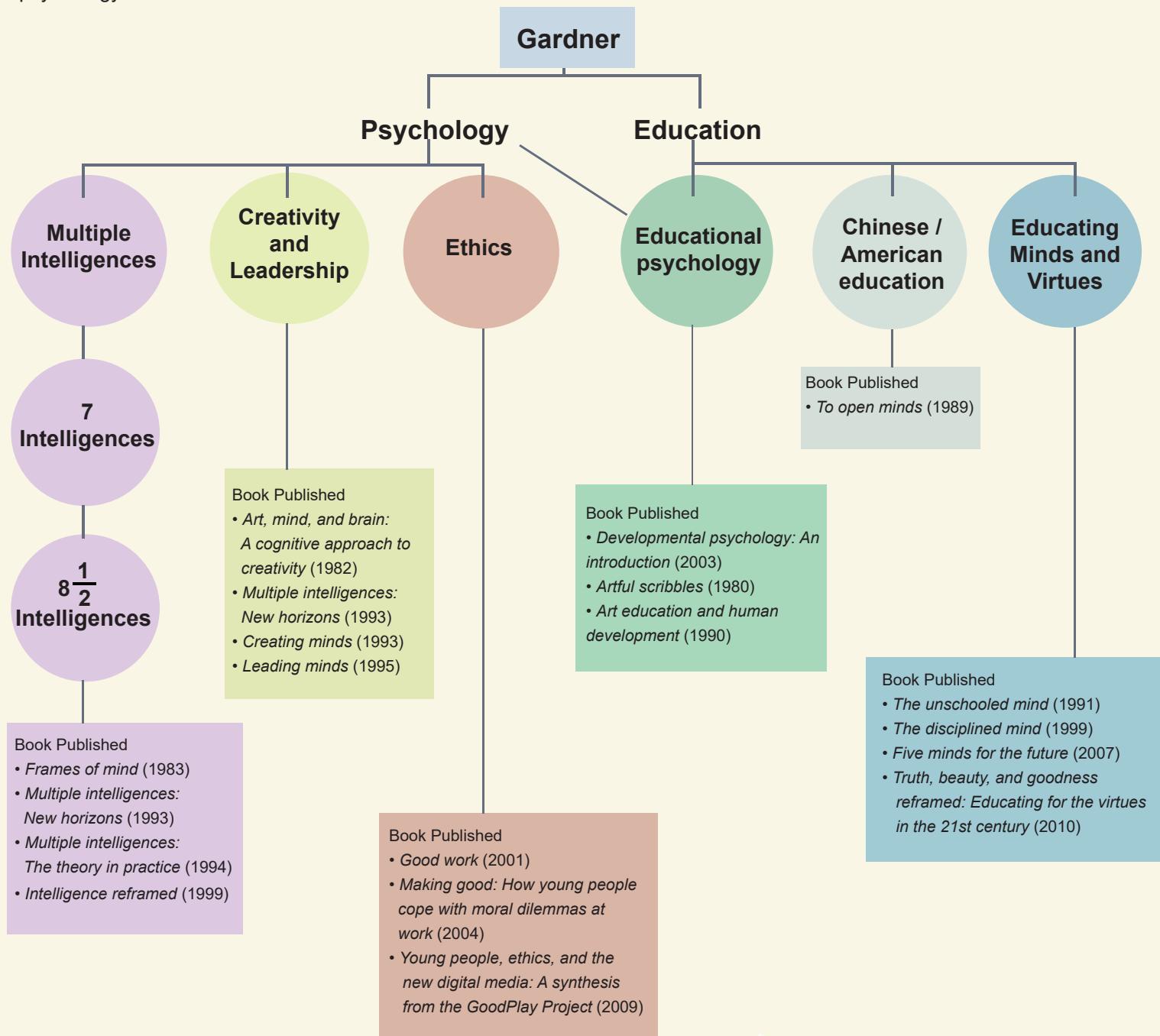
leadership

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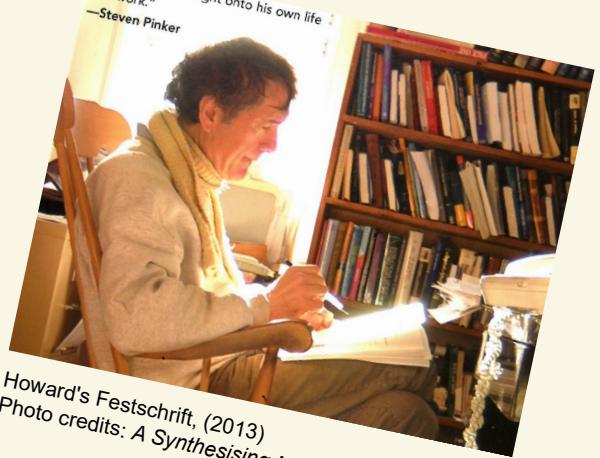


Gardner's Network of Enterprises

It would be helpful to present Gardner's academic production in the past 50 years in a network of enterprises. He has produced hundreds of books and papers, slowly ascending to the position of a public intellectual. All his life his focus is on psychology and education.



Gardner in an international conference in 1997
From left: Prof. Meiling Zhang, Prof. Howard Gardner, Prof. Rex Li



Howard's Festschrift, (2013)
Photo credits: A Synthesizing Mind (2020) MIT Press

What I Have Discovered about Gardner

First I discovered that Gardner is a Jew. That he was brought up in the USA was within a historical context of post-war rapid growth of America. But it was even more striking that Gardner's mentors were all Jews, already well-established scholars in the academic community. How Gardner was attracted to them or how far they supported Gardner because of similar ethnic or religious background remained a mystery. On a broader cultural context, it is an interesting topic of how Jews support the Jews in American society and the academic world.

Second, I discovered that Gardner had a strong superego. This he admits, which led to his self-propelled growth. He found his route step by step, working them out as he experienced life and solved problems. The iconoclastic path is entirely his choice. When the more conventional doctoral students were busy doing lab experiments and publishing in esteemed journals, he was alone toying with others' ideas, synthesizing them and writing books. Concedes Gardner:

Nearly all of my peers in graduate programs in psychology around the country were in labs, carrying out experiments and writing short, empirical (and all too often unreadable) scholarly articles, poised for submission initially to the journals with the greatest prestige. Here I was, alone at my desk, reading articles and books, and putting them together in a reader-friendly, book-length format. (Gardner, 2020, p. 82)

Third, Harvard has made Gardner as what he could be. Three of his mentors were graduates of Harvard, with the exception of Erikson. These three mentors, Bruner, Goodman, and Geschwind, knew one another and they all invariably offered growth and learning opportunities to the young Gardner. Without their guidance, Gardner might have developed in very different ways. It was clear that Gardner chose Harvard in the first place, but then his life events developed in such a way that Harvard became his home and family. His wife was a doctoral student and classmate in Harvard. It looks like a warm family story but let's not be deceived with the fierce competition in the academic world.

Finally, Gardner has a purpose in life: to synthesize and to write for his own interests. He enjoys music, art, history, and literature as much as extensive reading. These are all his pastimes. Then he thinks, synthesizes, and writes. He would not allow himself to be limited by one and existing ideas.



Howard with Good Work colleagues William Damon (center) and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
Photo credits: *A Synthesizing Mind* (2020) MIT Press

He could not tolerate being a faithful interpreter of an idea or a school of thought. That is why he stopped to becoming a ludicrous textbook writer summarizing others' ideas and kept writing beyond the province of multiple intelligences. In a sense, Gardner knows many things and prefers moving from one issue to another. He is quite unlike his mentor Nelson Goodman, who made a modest claim, "I know one little thing" (*ibid*, p. 74).

In this sense, Gardner has made himself in education and psychology on his own terms, much like a pop song in his youth, "I did it my way."

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