

Prof. Rex Li's Writings

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Summary/ Abstract: Prof. Li interviewed Prof. Gardner on six issues through internet and Prof. Gardner gave substantial answers (published December 2021)

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Gardner Meets *Research MI* Readers

Howard Gardner met Rex Li, co-editor of *Research MI*, in the 1990s and they have been friends. Gardner has recently read *Research MI* (Vol. 1 and Vol. 2) with great enthusiasm. He endorsed the journal for its “spirit of MI” and hoped that “the publication thrives.”

Prof. Gardner has responded positively to Prof. Li’s invitation to address *Research MI* readers. Below are questions he answered in August 2021 and he has kindly given consent to its publication.

(1) Synthesizing Mind

Li: You proposed the idea of the synthesizing mind in your *Five Minds of the Future* (2008), and your intellectual memoir is entitled *A Synthesizing Mind* (2020). You have proposed 8 kinds of synthesis and “4 loosely ordered components” (2008, pp. 47-51). In recent years, have you developed your theory of synthesis further? Do you think the latest computers with AI, big-data and “deep learning” functions can work with humans in the direction of synthesis?

Gardner: I would never have anticipated this, but since I published my memoir, I have become obsessed with synthesizing. Like the proverbial cobbler who only sees shoes and feet, I am finding examples of synthesis every where—I’ve written a score of blogs on the topic and have dozens more drafted in my mind.

Why? Because I think synthesizing is a distinct human capacity but one that is very difficult to simulate in a laboratory, the way psychologists like to study cognitive phenomena. And so, while we admire great synthesizers like Charles Darwin or Leonardo da Vinci, we don’t really find it easy to characterize what they do and how they do it. I hope to make synthesizing more visible and more salient; to help teachers nurture synthesizing capacities in their students; and to help all of us become more competent synthesizers.

I don’t think that, on their own, AI programs can define synthesizing goals or approaches—that’s a human capacity, at least so far. But once one has an area that one wants to synthesize, and a goal, an end product in mind, computational tools can be valuable, indeed invaluable. I am sure that the great synthesizers of the past—in many media—would have



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made exemplary use of computational tools. But in the end, value judgments are involved—and I am not ready to transfer such judgments to an algorithm.

(2) Your Forthcoming Book

Li: You will be publishing another book, *The Real World of College*, with Wendy Fischman in 2022. It appears your interest has shifted from K-12 to collegiate education. Is there any reason for this shift? Would you give a brief account of your new book?

Gardner: Wendy and I have worked together on the study and nurturing of good work since 1995! We found, to our disappointment, that many (if not most) talented young people in the US admired good work—work that is excellent, engaging, and carried out in an ethical way—but too many of them said that “good work” was for LATER—ONLY AFTER they have achieved fame and fortune. And so, starting a dozen years ago, Wendy, I and colleagues began to work with students at various local colleges, trying to help them recognize ethical dilemmas at work, and giving them the tools to approach them sensitively and sensibly.

At the same time, we noted that American colleges and universities were undergoing intense scrutiny and receiving

much criticism, as well as numerous recommendations on how to improve their condition. But these accounts lacked convincing data. And so, for essentially a decade, we and our colleagues conducted in-depth studies of students—and seven other constituencies—at 10 disparate colleges and universities around the States. Our findings—many of which are quite surprising—are detailed in our new book. For a preview, please click the link (<https://www.therealworldofcollege.com/>).



(3) Project Zero (PZ)

Li: For PZ, you have spent and lived your whole academic life of 54 years through it. What are some of the latest projects in PZ in the last decade? How would it be sustained for another 50 years, or even longer?

Gardner: I am fortunate to have been a founding member of PZ, and was the co-director of PZ for over half that time—I am still the Senior Director, but that will end soon. I am very proud of Project Zero—a “soft money” (no endowment) research group at Harvard which develops ideas in education and then “gives them a push” in the right direction. We don’t ourselves run schools, businesses, or museums, but we have worked with dozens of them all over the world, trying to help them to improve their practices, and to document how they are doing.

As with *The Real World of College* (cited above), it’s best to visit the PZ website (pz.harvard.edu). We have shifted from an initial focus on the arts (and beauty), to dealing with the whole spectrum of disciplines, as well as interdisciplinary work; to working primarily in the US, to working around the world; to greater focus on the educational possibilities and perils of the Internet, and social media; and, more recently, to a concern with democracy, citizenship, professions and their organizations, and truth—issues which I know are being examined by sensitive and sensible persons everywhere.



(4) Good Work Projects

Li: You started from psychology (how do children learn) and slowly moved to ethics and sociology (what is good work). Would you briefly describe your work with Katie Davis on *The App Generation* (2013)? What are some of the more recent good work projects?

Gardner: In 2005, the Chicago-based MacArthur Foundation announced that it was investing young people and the “new media.” I asked the president whether the Foundation was considering how ethical and moral senses were affected by the Internet. Realizing that this was an important and under-investigated topic, Katie David, Carrie James, Emily

Weinstein received support from the Foundation and we began a deep investigation of youth and participatory politics (see their work at pz.harvard.edu).



As part of that project, Katie and I studied many young people as well as adults who worked with young people. We learned that the youth’s senses of identity, intimacy, and creativity were affected by these media, sometimes positively, sometimes destructively. Because so many young people are guided by the apps on their mobile devices, we dubbed them “the app generation.” And we made an important distinction between being “app enabled”—where apps open up your mind to new possibilities—and being “app-dependent” where your thinking and your action are limited or even dictated by what happens to be visible at the time on your mobile device.

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Needless to say, as educators (and parents, and grandparents), we seek to encourage app-enablement, and to discourage app-dependence. The pandemic has really tested young people’s abilities to go beyond dependence (<https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/the-app-generation-meets-the-pandemic/>).



(5) Multiple Intelligences and Gifted Education

Li: How would you advise parents and teachers on their nurturance of children’s MI and giftedness?

Gardner: If your child seems healthy, engaged, and doing well in school, please don't do anything--just cheer him or her on!

If your child is having difficulties, of course it’s useful to find out what is going well, what can need some support or a boost. Sometimes a child’s gifts/intelligences are not well matched with current schooling options, and this places extra burdens on children and their teachers and parents. Finding a match between a child’s gifts and the opportunities available for healthy growth and development is important, and “MI” theory can guide you down promising paths. There are many forms of giftedness and they are not necessarily the ones prized in school. . . or in the school yard.

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In Chinese societies, some people have mis-interpreted "MI theory" as an injunction to get good at all 8 intelligences. Most of us will not be Leonardo da Vinci—it's best to find one's areas of strength and build upon them. If you can help others with your areas of strength, they can help you in areas where you are not as 'intelligent'.

Also, breadth of interests is most important for young persons in the first decade of life—as one gets older, it is a better use of one's energy and resources to bolster your areas of strength. Of course, one can choose to focus on areas of weakness—I myself have done that—but you need to acknowledge that it may be more an uphill battle—which some of us enjoy—at least some of the time!

(6) Future World

Li: Since year 2000, you have talked much about globalisation and technological change. You have proposed a respectful and ethical mind for the future world of mutual understanding and cooperation. (We are all supporters of the vision of United Nations). Could you outline your vision of the future world?

Would you like to comment on Yuval N Harari's *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (2017) and *21 lessons for the 21st Century* (2019)? He is much more pessimistic than you are. Here is a short quote from him: "The merger of infotech and biotech threatensthe core modern values of liberty and equality. Any solution to the technological challenge has to involve global cooperation. But nationalism, religion and culture divide humankind into hostile camps and make it very difficult to cooperate on a global level (2019, p. 99)."

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Gardner: I am combining these two questions. For whatever reason, I incline toward pessimism and I could easily endorse Harari's sentiments. But it does not pay to live as a pessimist, one needs to try to be optimistic, to work toward a better world, and perhaps you will be able to nudge the world in the right direction. Almost all of my work in the past 25 years has been toward the definition and promotion of good work—and good citizenship ([thegoodproject.org](https://www.thegoodproject.org)). I am particularly interested in professions that have a sense of integrity at their best, and in institutions that over the long run have served the broader society.



I realize that quest is an uphill battle, at best, but it's one that I choose to engage in, even though the odds are not particularly favorable. This is not the occasion for a political discussion, but it's clear that contemporary China and contemporary Western society (say, Western Europe) have very different visions of what the world should be like and how to get there. But if we cannot combine forces on huge challenges—like climate change or pandemic—we will not have a world in which anyone will survive or want to live. And that's why I search for something akin to a world religion--though it need not include a deity.

Here are my recent thoughts on this crucial matter: <https://www.thegoodproject.org/good-blog/2020/11/30/a-religion-for-our-timenbsp-nbsp>



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