

Key Points in MI Theory

Beyond the descriptions of the eight intelligences and their theoretical underpinnings, certain points of the MI model are important to remember:

Each person possesses all eight intelligences. MI theory is not a “type theory” for determining the *one* intelligence that fits. It is a theory of cognitive functioning, and it proposes that each person has capacities in all eight intelligences. Of course, the eight intelligences function together in ways unique to each person. Some people appear to possess extremely high levels of functioning in all or most of the eight intelligences—for example, German poet-statesman-scientist-naturalist-philosopher Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Other people, such as certain severely impaired individuals in institutions for the developmentally disabled, appear to lack all but the most rudimentary aspects of the intelligences. Most of us fall somewhere in between these two poles—being highly developed in some intelligences, modestly developed in others, and relatively underdeveloped in the rest.

Most people can develop each intelligence to an adequate level of competency. Although individuals may bewail their deficiencies in a given area and consider their problems innate and intractable, Gardner suggests that virtually everyone has the capacity to develop all eight intelligences to a reasonably high level of performance if given the appropriate encouragement, enrichment, and instruction. He points to the Suzuki Talent Education Program as an example of how individuals of relatively modest biological musical endowment can achieve a sophisticated level of proficiency in playing the violin or piano through a combination of the right environmental influences (e.g., an involved parent, exposure from infancy to classical music, and early instruction). Such educational models can be found in other intelligences as well (see, for example, Edwards, 1989, for a method that improves one’s spatial abilities through drawing).

Intelligences usually work together in complex ways. Gardner points out that each intelligence as described above is actually a “fiction”; that is, no intelligence exists by itself in life (except perhaps in very rare instances in savants and brain-injured individuals). Intelligences are always interacting with each other. To cook a meal, one must read the recipe (linguistic), perhaps double the recipe (logical-mathematical), develop a menu that satisfies all members of the family (interpersonal), and placate one’s own appetite as well (intrapersonal). Similarly, when a child plays a game of kickball, she needs bodily-kinesthetic intelligence (to run, kick, and catch), spatial intelligence (to orient herself to the playing field and to anticipate the trajectories of flying balls), and linguistic and interpersonal intelligences (to successfully argue a point during a dispute in the game). The intelligences have been taken out of context in MI theory only for the purpose of examining their essential features and learning how to use them effectively. We must always remember to put them back into their specific culturally valued contexts when we are finished with their formal study.

There are many ways to be intelligent within each category. There is no standard set of attributes that one must have to be considered intelligent in a specific area. Consequently, a person may not be able to read, yet be highly linguistic because he can tell a terrific story or has a large oral vocabulary. Similarly, a person may be quite awkward on the playing field, yet possess superior bodily-kinesthetic intelligence when she weaves a carpet or creates an inlaid chess table. MI theory emphasizes the rich diversity of ways in which people show their gifts *within* intelligences as well as *between* intelligences.