

"Everything we see hides another thing, we always want to see what is hidden by what we see."

magritte

Dear Colleague,

I appreciate your interest in exploring the idea of Existential Intelligence (EI) with me. It has been nearly two decades since I began this investigation but, then again, what does time mean when you are wandering in the wilds of existential thoughts, eh?

This is a large topic. I suppose by its very definition that's obvious. On the other hand, are there small existential questions and insignificant concerns about one's life? Hmm... much to ponder. This might take a while to figure out, or no time at all. Hard to tell!

More than a decade ago, I left off my research with the conclusion that "Existential Thinking is a valued human activity but evidence does not support its inclusion as an intelligence in MI theory." I came to this conclusion for a number of reasons that are now open to reexamination (re/search = to look again) and discussion.

I expect to begin this project Feb. 1 and end with my final MI@40 Newsletter by Nov. 1.

In order to bring this topic down to earth, I propose three questions to guide this exploration regarding its validity and educational implications:

1. Is there evidence to support its inclusion in MI as a scientific theory of human intelligences?
2. Can Existential Thinking (ET) be measured with distinct, observable levels of skill and ability?
3. What are the implications for education? Both positive and/or negative.

I will post ET materials on my website for your review. Then I will initiate an email discussion addressing each question in turn. To conclude I will invite you to write a piece for my MI@40 Newsletter: **The Future of MI – Unfinished Business: Is There an Existential Intelligence?** (*Does an existential intelligence really exist or is it merely a figment of our overactive imaginations?*)

I think that our first order of business will be to distinguish among ET and related human characteristics (spiritual awareness, existential philosophy, religious beliefs, personality characteristic, etc.). Howard Gardner is pretty clear on this, but it is worth further clarification.

Getting the details right is an important part of a coherent scientific theory of human abilities. See Howard's excerpt on Spirituality posted on my website for details.

As I write this I continue to have three reservations about naming ET as an intelligence.

- 1- Its very vague definition makes it a stretch to operationally define skill levels – (from basic to advanced with several steps in between).
- 2- Do we (as humans) really want to quantify this capacity with a number or label (*Oh, you're a perfect 10 in your existential intelligence but your mate is an existential moron who couldn't tell his backside from a legitimate philosophical query...*)
- 3- Of course, Howard has also identified the third problem that we do not understand its neural systems.

I recently asked Howard about the status of Existential and he replied:

. . . as the anthropocene ends, we may be spending more time as a species contemplating who we are, why we are here, what lies ahead, is there life after the death of homo sapiens. Those are existential questions-- which other animals certainly don't ponder-- and if large language instruments pondered them, we would not know whether to take them seriously-- just as we would not know how to make sense of the monkeys who-- as the old expression goes—keep typing till they produce the collected works of Shakespeare.

Howard Gardner, personal communication. 1.1.24

Reading his chapter 4 - *Are there additional intelligences?* In *Intelligence Reframed* is a worthwhile way to begin. Key points are excerpted in my posted materials.

EI Materials posted on <https://miresearch.org/mi-teaching-and-learning/>

1. **Existential Information Page** - several key descriptors excerpted from *Reframed*.
2. **EI and Education White Paper** – more extensive information on EI
3. **Scale for Existential Thinking (SET)**. Self-scoring questionnaire.
4. **The Scale for Existential Thinking** – published validity data paper
5. **EI Validity in Education** – high school teachers respond to a survey re EI in school
6. **EI Ability Descriptors** – proposed descriptions of ability at 5 levels.
7. **Spiritual as Concern with Cosmic or Existential Issues** – H. Gardner

Cheers. Branton