Response Paper  
Intelligence  
Bachelor of Independent Studies  
11-February-2010  
Gregg Miller

Prepared for Professor Ellen Oh

A parent might think, “I’ve spent a lot of money and time to give my child every opportunity. Is my kid actually smarter than your kid?” A human being is a conglomeration of many things, not all of which are easily observed or tested. The idea of “intelligence” has social connotations that may be far heavier than its actual social value.

According to Merriam-Webster, intelligence is:

**1 a**(1) **:** the ability to learn or understand or to deal with new or trying situations **:** also **:** the skilled use of reason

What is the point of intelligence, personality, etc testing? Putting aside the most negative likely rationales, there are probably two genuine, nearly altruistic purposes.

* To understand ourselves and each other and forgive our awkward differences.
* To recognize and make use of those among us who possess great ability.

Other than sexual insults, insults to one’s intelligence arguably carry the most weight. Intelligence is normally associated with bookish, scientific knowledge or the ability to store and process a great deal of technical information.

In Who Owns Intelligence, Howard Gardner spoke of Alfred Binet’s invention, the Intelligence Quotient and its derived tests of intelligence, as having had at least some effect on the lives of millions of people. While its original purpose was to sort out slow learners and the mentally challenged, it quickly became a tool for finely and somewhat inaccurately slicing between persons of average intellect.

It is very difficult to structure a test or instrument such that its result is not affected by cultural differences. A native and an immigrant will often test very differently on SATs, possibly due to language differences or differences in use of colloquial or common words and terms. A kid from inner city Baltimore and a kid from corn country Wisconsin will have had very different life experiences, very different education from each other.

Despite these obvious concerns, a difference of just a few points on such a test can determine access to opportunities that can affect the rest of a person’s life. In Malcolm Gladwell’s most recent book, Outliers, he points out that there is a degree of ability above which a person performs no better at their work than others above that same level, regardless of how well they test. Above a certain point, a person simply needs to be “good enough.”

Gardner makes the valid point that a test of intelligence necessarily only tests a particular kind of intelligence; in the commonest type, academic or book intelligence. He introduces the burgeoning concept of multiple intelligences which include emotional, creative, leadership and even moral intelligence.

Limiting the understanding/measuring of intelligence to just one (or even just a few) kinds of cognition does not take into account the natural abilities and preferences of different persons. In MBTI terminology, a Thinker who interprets the world through reason and a Feeler who interprets the world through emotion will score very differently on the same test because of only one character difference.

Thus, intelligence cannot be measured without taking personality into account. Faced with an array of very different kinds of problems to solve on a test, one individual will score differently than others. Some question types will be more familiar and easier to solve than others. The result of this test is not a score so much as an aptitude. It is a value that, when teased apart (like the MBTI itself) will show what strengths and weaknesses a test taker has, what personality that person likely is and how that person performs with respect to other persons of the same type.

Different people have the *ability* to absorb one kind of knowledge better than another. **Meriam-Webster Online defines “ability”:**

1. **:** natural aptitude or acquired proficiency

An MBTI-appropriate interpretation of the definition of “ability” might be:

“How well someone performs at tasks organic to his/her personality preference”

An individual with a certain personality preference may have a potential ability in a chosen field but a realized ability that does not match. Due to many circumstances, potential and realized ability can differ substantially.

Education tends to improve the ratio of potential vs realized ability. In Changing Mind, Changing World, Torff and Sternberg discuss the two equal forms of learning; academic and tacit. Academic learning generally takes place in a classroom. It is a theoretical replication of how the real world should work. Tacit learning generally happens by going out and doing the thing in the real world. Some curricula can only be taught using one method or the other, but much can be taught using an integration of the two. In a science class, for example, there may be a class in theory one day and a lab demonstrating that principle on another day.

For both of these cases, it is opportunity that largely determines the amount and quality of learning that is available and, therefore, the realized potential of the individual. Opportunity tends to determine who gets access to how much of each kind of education.

In Outliers, Malcolm Gladwell addresses this point when comparing Canadian child hockey teams. A child born six months earlier than another child does a little better at tryouts because six months in the life of an eight year old is a much bigger percentage of life already lived than it is to an adult. The slightly older child is selected for the team, gets more opportunity to practice and better coaching which leads to an actually more skilled child. The difference began merely as an arbitrary one; a difference that, barring actual differences in ability, would have vanished in a few years. Instead, the arbitrary difference is amplified by the unequal distribution of opportunity.

The MBTI instrument is a helpful tool in figuring out what personality preference a person may be, but it would be irresponsible to assume that it is correct in every case. Just like in intelligence testing, people will respond to questions very differently due to seemingly arbitrary cultural differences.

For example, in western culture, masculinity tends to be associated with being a Thinker and using reason. Femininity tends to be associated with being a Feeler and being nurturing. Some Feeler men in such a society which ostracizes their nurturing tendencies may have developed such strong compensations for being Feelers that they test as Thinkers, despite their preferences. Conversely, some Thinker women in such a society which ostracizes rational, reasoning women may have developed such strong compensations for being Thinkers that they test as Feelers.

Evidence for this may exist in that 50% of the population is found to be Thinker and the other half Feeler[[1]](#endnote-1), but 2/3 of men tested are Thinkers and 2/3 of women tested are Feelers. It could be argued, in fact, that traditional IQ testing applies principally to Thinkers and not Feelers for this very reason.

Merely being aware that such a test exists can also strongly skew its results. After understanding that there are 1/3 as many iNtuitives as Sensibles (Myers-Briggs Foundation), a Sensible might choose answers that seem like “good” answers, but aren’t necessarily in line with that individual’s preferences.

Evidence for this may exist in the ratios between known types. ISTPs are fighter pilots, special forces soldiers and stock car drivers. INTPs design their machines. Society clearly needs many more of one than the other but the ratio is 3.3N:5.4S (Myers-Briggs Foundation). ISFJs keep society going. INFJs figure out where society is going. Society clearly needs more of one than the other, but the ratio is 1.5N:13.8S (Myers-Briggs Foundation). In both cases, the ratio should be at or very near 1:3 or 0.33. Instead, the ratio for the first example is 0.61, not nearly a large enough difference, and the second is off the scale in the opposite direction, far too large a difference.

The point here is that there are many cultural effects and simple human effects that might influence each or any of the characters, altering the outcome of the individual’s instrument and, thus, the data. An individual’s perception about his or her preference, another individual’s view of that individual’s preference and the instrument’s conclusion may all differ substantially.

For this reason, while personality must be considered in intelligence/ability testing, it cannot be used in teaching/training. Simply because certain personalities have a natural talent/advantage/gift in a particular field is not reason to force a particular personality down one path and away from another.

In Claiming an Education, Adrienne Rich encouraged students to own their education, to take responsibility for the direction they were going. Even if the child chooses a path completely contrary to what may be indicated by their actual personality preference (and not merely how they tested), there is great potential value to society in a person exploring an unfamiliar field.

This is why a child needs to follow his or her inspiration without being funneled down a path determined by a test. Every child needs to have access to the same resources, the same opportunities and the same freedom to follow the course best suited to the individual.

I am an INTP. I learned this fact in my senior year of high school. When presented with the first edition of Please Understand Me, I read the entire book several times through. I have an intuitive understanding of human and natural order and so understood this system very easily. I could have written it.

I have always concealed my personality. It’s a difficult thing to stop doing. For my type, I am fairly socially adept. If one were to compare me to most any other type, however, I would seem utterly socially inept. Mine is a type that conflicts with many other types. I can appear arrogant in one statement and self-deprecating in the next and I may have no idea until sometime later. It makes it difficult to share ideas in a manner that will increase their receptivity. It can be a frustrating, lonely type to be. It is also a type that sees the world with an analytical clarity that can be confused with something supernatural. I am intelligent where I am intelligent and dumb where I am dumb.

I am unlikely to score as well on tests of intelligence as my peers, but then I haven’t been groomed for these tests. Other individuals of my type, of my ability potential have spent their lives mastering computer programming, understanding the intricate details of aircraft or solving the big questions in physics. They are brilliant. They can do this because they have been working toward that goal since they were quite young. I have not. I had none of those opportunities and am unlikely to have recognized them if I did. I did what people generally do when presented with few options. I found a way to make my world work while still feeding my preference. I worked. I volunteered. I enlisted. In all of these places I learned valuable lessons about the world and about people. When I had ideas that I was certain were of great benefit, I learned that the best way to see them applied was to pretend that I had gotten the idea from somewhere else. This wasn’t necessarily a lie since often an idea had roots or at least some ties to the example I gave. I learned that I could fake a single MBTI character change temporarily in order to see things through.

When I commanded, I was an ENTP. When I worked, I was an INTJ. When I fought, I was an ISTP. And when I create art, I am an INFP. I have little experience being just an INTP, except when jotting ideas down on napkins or trying to explain a principle to someone.

I do, in fact, have one area of mastery; one thing I have done almost constantly for as long as I can remember. I have taken this analytical mind which would have been focused on a technical pursuit atop the shoulders of a person with better opportunities and instead studied the human animal at the level of sweat, blood and dirt. I have toiled through this. I have struggled and made physical and internal sacrifices in this pursuit that cannot be quantified. The knowledge, experience and perspective I’ve gained from this is invaluable. The technical and organizational concepts that I have derived from this knowledge over the years are my gold. I do not yet know how they will feed me, but they are why I’m here. If permitted to make something of them, they will do good in the world.

In class, we did an experiment where we tried writing with our non-preference hand. I’m right-handed so it was difficult to write with my left hand. This activity was related to the experience of behaving against our personality preferences. It’s difficult, awkward and difficult for you or anyone else to read. But it’s also obviously a good thing to balance out those skills. I think my personal goal (in college in general and in BIS specifically) is to get comfortable using my right hand.

Bibliography

Torff, B., & Sternberg, R.J. (1998). “Changing mind, changing world: Practical intelligence and tacit knowledge in adult learning.” In M.C. Smith & T. Pourchot (Eds.), *Adult learning and development: Perspectives from educational psychology* (pp. 109-126). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Rich, Adrienne. (1984). Claiming an education. In *Developing writers: A dialogic approach* (pp. 213-216). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Gardner, Howard. (1999). Who owns intelligence? *Atlantic Monthly,* February 1999, pp. 67-76.

Gladwell, Malcolm (2008). Outliers: The Story of Success.

Kiersey, David & Bates, Marilyn (1984). Please Understand Me: Character and Temperament Types.

Meriam-Webster Online (2010). www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/

Myers-Briggs Foundation, The (1997). “How Frequent is My Type?”   
www.myersbriggs.org

Spraggins, Renee E. (March 2002). “Women and Men in the United States: Population Characteristics.” US Census Bureau

Gratias, Melissa B. (1997). “Gender and Ethnicity-Based Differential Item Functioning on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator”

1. The Myers-Briggs Foundation has a figure of 60-40 Feeler-Thinker. Taking into account the Census Bureau’ s values that women outnumber men in the US after roughly age 25 but outlive men by some 20 years, this is still consistent. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)