



Psychology of Learning from An Islamic Perspective

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
History Revised format: Aug, 2019 Available Online: Sep, 2019 Keywords Islamic concept of learning, theories from an Islamic perspective, Islamic model of learning, Islamic learning model from the Biography of the Prophet	The objectives of this paper are: (1) to provide an Islamic overview on the concept of learning, (2) to evaluate contemporary learning theories from an Islamic perspective, (3) to integrate various learning theories to form an Islamic model of learning, and (4) to illustrate the application of the Islamic learning model from the Biography of the Prophet. The paper presupposes that the audiences have a working knowledge of the psychology of learning including familiarity with classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and observational learning; or will be using this paper in conjunction with psychology of learning textbooks. Therefore, this paper will focus more on evaluation of current theories as compared to description of theories of learning.

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Introduction

ISLAMIC OVERVIEW OF THE CONCEPT OF LEARNING

Contemporary psychology defines learning as the process by which experience or practice results in a relatively permanent change in behaviour or potential behaviour (Klein, 2002; Walker, 1996). Islam believes that the source of learning for human being can be *ilahi* or *insani* (Najati, 2001). *Ilahi* source of learning means learning that occur directly from Allah such as *wahy* (revelation), *ilham* (inspiration), and *ru'ya sadiqah* (true dream). Whereas *insani* source of learning means learning that occur from human experience through conditioning, observations, cognitions, and others. Regardless of the sources of learning, Muslims believe that Allah is the ultimate reason of our learning or behaviour changes. It is He who teaches us what we know not (QS 96: 5). And it is He who teaches us the Qur'an and ability to speak (QS 55: 2 & 4).

Obviously, learning directly from Allah requires the souls of human to be at a certain level of *iman*. Since contemporary Western psychology does not include soul as a subject matter of studies, the *ilahi* source receives no attention in psychology of learning textbooks. And since Islam believes that human being consists of both body and soul, Islamic perspective on how a person learn from *insani* experience also differs compared to contemporary Western psychological perspective. Many of the learning phenomena that cannot be explained by contemporary theories of learning (such as drastic change of behaviour of those who had performed *hajj* or

pilgrimage) can actually be explained if we believe on the existence of the soul. In short, Islam believes in the existence of soul and its influence in human learning. This is the single most important difference between Islamic concept of learning and contemporary Western concept of learning.

Observational Learning

Observational learning is based on Bandura's (1986) social learning theory. According to this theory, people will imitate other people's behaviour depending on the outcome of the behaviour. Unlike classical and operant conditioning, observational learning incorporates both cognitive and social factors in explaining behavioural changes. However, observational learning still cannot explain all behaviours. Current literature shows that elements of social learning theory are relative, rather than absolute in shaping learned behaviours (Curran, White, & Hansell, 2000). Roger (2003), for example, found out that observational learning merely accounted only 22-24% of the variance in alcohol use and delinquency and 6% in the prediction of drug use. The strongest predictor actually, is moral disengagement. Other research (cf. Benda & Corwyn, 2000) indicated that religious factors, over and above the elements of observational learning, seem to predict criminal behaviour. These researches supported the notion that soul as a variable should be taken into account when explaining learned behaviour.

Islam emphasises on learning by observing a model. Prophet Muhammad SAW has always directed his companion to learn *salat* (narrated by Bukhari) and hajj (narrated by Muslim, al-Nasa'i, Abu Dawud, and Ahmad) by observing him doing it. Al-Qur'an (QS: 5: 31) illustrates how Cane (*Qabil*) learned to bury the corpse of his brother Abel (*Habil*) by observing a raven who scratched the ground to bury another dead bird. Another example of observational learning took place when the companions initially refused the Prophet's order to perform *tahallul* to cancel their *'umrah* but later obliged after *observing* the Prophet performed it first. Some theorists believe that an observer needs to observe that the model being "rewarded/ punished" before reproducing the behaviour performed by the observer. Based on the examples above, it seems that the model does not need to be rewarded in order for the observers to reproduce the behaviour. In the example of Cane, his soul's needs for guidance (*hidayah*) may lead him to model the bird's behaviour. And in the case of the Companions, their souls' needs to follow the Prophet SAW as the spiritual guide may lead them to model the Prophet's behaviour despite being frustrated of not having the opportunity to perform *'umrah* on that particular year.

Prophet Muhammad has been a role model for all Muslims who have hope for Allah and the hereafter (Al-Qur'an 33: 21). However, based on observational learning, it can be quite impossible to explain how can Muslims nowadays imitate or model the behaviour of the Prophet who had died 14th century ago? Perhaps the acceptance of the Muslims' souls that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah provides a state of readiness to learn from an unobservable model. In addition to that, numerous *hadiths* and detailed descriptions in *sirah al-nabawiyah* (biography of the Prophet) about Prophet's words, actions, and agreements, facilitate a higher-level or "virtual" observational learning. Clearly, without *iman* in the soul, this kind of learning could not have taken place. Another limitation about observational learning is the soul's influence on learning can be more powerful than the model itself. Al-Qur'an (66: 10) shows that, even with the presence of an ideal model (a husband who is a prophet), the wife of Noah (Nuh) AS and the wife of Lot (Lut) AS followed the unbelievers instead of their husband. In contrast, Al-Qur'an (66: 11) gave examples of the wife of the Pharoah (Fir'aun) who has a bad model (a husband who claimed to be a god), but refrain from following him, and instead followed the right path with Prophet Moses (Musa) AS. In other words, soul can play an important factor as moderator to observational learning.

Insight Learning

Insight learning involves a sudden restructuring or reorganization of a problem (Walker, 1996). Criticisms of the theory include research results not replicated and perhaps the learning can be better explained by operant conditioning theory (Eysenck & Flanagan, 2001). As mentioned in the introductory paragraph, sometimes we learn directly from Allah in the forms of revelation, inspiration, and true dream. All these types of learning are considered a higher-level of insight learning and can never be explained without believing the existence of the soul, and can never be obtained without the soul having a higher level of *iman*. Since only the Prophets are given the privilege of receiving revelation (wahy) in the form of *kitab* and *suhf*, the paper will only talk about inspiration and true dream.

There are many examples in the Qur'an that can illustrate the concept of learning through inspiration and true dreams which is sometimes labelled as *'ilm al-ladunniyy*. Najati (2001), based on Al-Qur'an and Hadith, has given several examples illustrating learning by inspiration. Some of them are mentioned below:

- (1) how Allah gave inspiration to Prophet Soloman (Sulayman) to differ from his father Prophet David (Dawud) on a legal matter (Al-Qur'an 21: 78-79)
- (2) how Allah gave inspiration to Prophet David to make an armour suit (Al-Qur'an 21: 80).
- (3) how Allah gave inspiration to Prophet Joseph (Yusuf) in interpreting dreams (Al-Qur'an (Al-Qur'an 12: 6, 21-22 & 93; 2: 37)
- (4) how Allah gave inspiration to Prophet Jacob (Ya'qub) on matters pertaining his son Joseph (Al-Qur'an 12: 86 & 96).
- (5) how Allah gave inspiration to a faithful servant of Allah (Al-Qur'an 18: 65-66)
- (6) how Allah gave inspiration to non-prophets such as the mother of Prophet Moses (Musa) (Al-Qur'an 20: 38-39; 28: 7) and the disciples of Prophet Jesus (Isa) (5: 111)
- (7) A hadith relating that 'Umar RA is a *muhaddath* (a person who is given inspiration) (narrated by Al-Bukhari), and that the Truth is with 'Umar's tongue (narrated by Ahmad),

When discussing about inspiration and dream as sources of learning, and especially sources of *shari'ah* to guide our behaviour, we have to understand that they are not part of the valid *dalil* (evidences) in Islamic *shari'ah* unless they do not go against the Islamic rulings based on al-Qur'an and *al-Sunnah*. This concern has been detailed out by al-Qaradawi (1997) when he described the third principle of *al-Fahm* (understanding) propagated by Hasan Al-Banna and the readers are advised to refer to his writing to understand the issue better. Since Islam concerns about scientific values such as the accuracy of the source of insight as source of *Shari'ah* rulings, it can be said not all insight will lead to correct or desirable learning. Insight learning is a valid phenomenon, but only the soul with high level of *iman* can get true learning from it.

ISLAMICALLY-ORIENTED APPLICATIONS OF LEARNING PRINCIPLES

The application part of learning will try to illustrate the change of behaviour of the Companions of Prophet Muhammad SAW who were able to change their behaviour of heavy drinking (alcoholism). This is to inspire modern Muslim psychologists to use the same principles in changing the bad behaviour of contemporary Muslims such as alcoholism, drug abuse, smoking, etc. The application is inspired and adapted from the writing of Badri (1976) on "Islam and Alcoholism." The word alcohol used in this paper is referring to liquor, not the various types of alcohol that is sometimes used as cleaners or perfumes.

Physiological perspective:

It is understandable that most Arab at that time were alcoholic because their forefathers had been alcoholics, and this had possibly provided genetic, neuronal, or hormonal potentials for the Companions to become alcoholics as well. But since the inception of Islam, some of the Islamic practices may have change the physiological potential to a more positive side. Practices such as *wudu`* (ablution), *salat* (prayer), *dhikr* (utterance and remembrance of Allah), *tilawah* (reading the Qur'an), and *sawm* (fasting) may have provided positive potential to prepare for abstinence from alcohol. Besides that, some worldly practices such as proper diet (semi-vegetarian), eating supplement (honey and *habbat al-sawda`* or black seeds), and exercises (preparing for Jihad) may also have provided positive potentials to change behaviour. Supported with *tarbiyyah nafsyyah* (souls' education) in terms of *`aqidah*, *`ibadah*, and *akhlaq* during Makkan period and part of Medinan period, the potential to continue to become alcoholics had changed to potential to abstain from alcohols.

Psychodynamic and Humanistic perspectives:

According to Badri (1976), one of the reasons that alcohols become rampant in ancient Arab society was the deep-rooted unconscious feelings of pride, insecurity, and romantic passion; which would be of interest to modern psychodynamic theories. But the coming of Islam has instilled the sense of pride for the true *`aqidah*, sense of security by Allah's power, and love and passion for Allah. These psychodynamic variables, influenced by Islam, had provided the potential for the Companions to change any bad behaviour in future, which in our case, heavy drinking.

From humanistic perspectives, individual differences also influence whether the Companions would be involved in alcoholism or not, before or after converting to Islam. For example, Badri (1976) mentioned that Uthman ibn al-'Affan RA never touch the alcohol even during pre-Islamic period despite having the physiological and psychodynamic potential to do so. Even after converting to Islam, not all people have the sensitivity or get the hint that alcohols are bad. Badri (1976) mentioned that 'Umar ibn al-Khattab RA was already suspicious when the first verse that talk about alcohol is revealed (QS 16: 67) that subtly differentiate between strong drink and good nourishment. Although the process of *tahrim khamr* (prohibition of alcohols) took a lengthy period and involve a few stages, individual differences showed that some of the Companions had already been abstaining 100% from alcohols from the very first stage, while other Companions postponed until the final stage of prohibition. But it is the *iman* in the souls of Companions that ultimately enable them to show mass abstinence of alcohol during the final stage.

Social Learning Perspective

It is understandable if observational learning contributed to alcoholism among the Arabs. The children and teenagers may have been following their fathers' habit. The adults, on the other hands, may have been following the habits of some significant or influential others. In fact, heavy drinking had become an Arab culture, models are everywhere for any new potential non-alcoholic to become one. But when the Prophet SAW migrated (*hijrah*) to Medina, he had first and foremost created brotherhood (*ukhuwwah*) tied with the divine *`aqidah* so they become united and cohesive. This unity and cohesiveness had facilitated the compliance of the Companions to follow other fellow Companions who had been abstaining from alcohols. And of course, the Prophet SAW and a few Companions who had never touch alcohols and the Companions who had abstained from alcohol in the early stage of prohibition had provided a model that increase the number of followers or at least provide potential for future abstinence. And this social learning is based on *iman*, the belief that the Prophet SAW is the true guidance and the pleasure of following their brothers whom they love for the sake of Allah.

Behaviourism

The stages of prohibition of alcoholic had some striking similarities with modern behaviour therapy called systematic desensitisation (Badri, 1976) but in a larger scale. The stages involved four stages (Badri, 1976): (1) subtly making no association between strong drink and good nourishment (QS 16: 67), (2) directly but cautiously associating alcohols with greater sin compared to their usefulness without prohibiting it (QS 2: 219), (3) restricting alcoholic drinking by not associating it with the most important divine practice i.e. *salat* (prayer) forcing them to abstain from alcohol at five different times in a day (QS 4: 43), and (4) direct prohibition and associating alcohols with filthy things and devils (QS 5: 90-91). These associations are what modern psychology refers to as classical conditioning. The very concepts of rewards and sins that were well-known even during Makkan period may also have influenced the behavioural change in a gradual manner which has striking similarity with shaping technique introduced by operant conditioning theory. At each of this prohibition stage, and while Prophet Muhammad SAW education on *`aqidah*, *`ibadah*, and *akhlaq* continues, some of the Companions may have totally abstain from alcohols, some of them may have reduced themselves to social drinking only, some of them may have felt guilt, and some of them just getting ready for the next stage to stop drinking. In other words, an effective combination of classical and operant conditioning principles may have contributed to mass abstinence of alcohols. In addition to cognitive factors that Ibn Sina and al-Ghazali had mentioned earlier, the soul factors also play an important role in all the behavioural changes.

Cognitive-spiritual Perspective

`Umar al-Khattab RA is one of those Companions who were gifted with inspirations as mentioned before. It is this `Umar who had been very suspicious about the evil nature of alcohol even during the first subtle stage of alcohols prohibitions. And it is this very `Umar who, after the third stage, met Prophet Muhammad SAW to ask Allah to give a clear statement about the status of alcohols in Islam. And as mentioned by Badri (1976), some of the Companions already knew that alcohol is bad and somewhat just waiting for the time of clear prohibition before they stopped drinking. This can be explained by another type of modern cognitive theory of learning called latent learning (Klein, 2002; Walker, 1996).

Religious Perspective

This perspective postulates, in general sense, a Muslim should enjoin the *wajib* (obligatory), *mandub* (desirable) and *halal* (permissible) behaviours and avoid the *haram* (forbidden) and *makruh* (undesirable) behaviours. When the Qur'an stated clearly that alcohol is *haram* (QS 5: 90-91), a mass behavioural changes took place. Badri (1976) described the situation by reporting that Muslims in Medina "threw away the remaining drinks in their cups and broke the large baked clay pots in which other drinks were being fermented." (Badri, 1976, p. 3). Some of them, after hearing the call 'Surely alcohol has been forbidden' broke and emptied the "large clay pots and skins full of fermented date-palm, honey, and grape till the streets of Medina ran with little rivers of *al-khamr* (alcohol) as a testimony to the greatest anti-alcoholism movement that humanity has ever witnessed." (Badri, 1976, p. 4). Naturally, as Muslims the *shari`ah* rulings such as *haram* should be powerful enough as a variable to change their behaviours. Actually, as we can see from contemporary Muslims' behaviour, this variable is moderated by the souls and their level of iman.

According to Badri (1976), the real reason for the success this behavioural change started many years before the prohibition of alcohols, specifically since the inception of Islam. During the early stage of Islam during Makkan period, instead of attacking alcoholism, Islam first attacked the false *`aqidah* (belief), ignorance, and values that

are based on that belief (Badri, 1979). It is this ignorance that had become the roots of all evil behaviour. That is why the first thirteen year after prophethood was spent focusing on establishing the new belief emphasising faith to the oneness of Allah, the unseen angels, the hereafter (including paradise and hellfire), the revealed books, and various prophets. Changing the souls of the Companions had changed them as persons in terms of mental processes (*`aqidah*) and behaviour (*`ibadah and akhlaq*). The classical conditioning, operant conditioning, or observational learning that came years later were only symptomatic treatment that witnessed this unbelievably mass-scale of behavioural changes made easier by the change of the souls' years before. Treating symptoms of observable behaviour only without looking at the deep-rooted cause would not have caused a massive behavioural change.

The above application shows the importance of educating current young Muslims, new Muslims, or Muslims who have just realised the importance of going back to his/her root in Islam in terms of correct interpretation of *`aqidah*, *`ibadah*, and *akhlaq* first, so that all behavioural intervention programmes either in the form behaviour therapy, behaviour modification, or even modelling will be more effective and successful.

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