**Towards an Islamic Perspective of Developmental Psychology**

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*This article seeks to advance an Islamic understanding of the process of human development. It began with a critique of the Western secular worldwide, which relies exclusively on empiricism and reductionism. It also brings out the exclusion of the spiritual dimension and the privileging of materialism in secular developmental psychology. The paper relies on the Quran to determine the factors, heredity and environment, that shape development. It is also argues that while there are factors that have a casual effect, in the ultimate analysis everything depends on God’s will.*

**Conceptual Background**

Developmental psychology, otherwise called “child psychology”, is a branch of psychology that is essentially concerned with the study of the overall processes of human development from conception to old age. The term “process of development” has been used to refer to the stages, aspects, patterns, principles, factors, and agents involved in human development.

In psychology, the term “development” has a wide range of meaning. It means the overall qualitative and quantitative changes that accompany human growth and maturation. In this regard, these two terms (growth and maturation) have also been subsumed under the general meaning of development. The definition given by Lefrancois reveals this wide sense of meaning: “the total Process whereby an individual adapts to his environment.” The scope of developmental psychology is as wide as is implied by the meaning of “development”. It thus covers both prenatal and postnatal development – embryonic, infant, child, adolescent, and adult development. By the same token, it covers physical, cognitive, personality, social, emotional, and moral aspects of development.

Modern developmental psychology is an integral aspect of mainstream modern Western secular psychology. By necessary implication, its fundamental paradigms and methodologies and its essential views of man are invariably materialist and secular, just like that of its mother body. Modern psychology has played a significant role in shaping Western man and Western society. As part of the overall product of modernity, the Western worldview is predominantly secular – characterized by atheism, agnosticism, and humanism. In line with this worldview, the dominant trend in Western intellectualism is similarly materialistic and secular.

In modern psychology, man is treated and studied within the purview of the Western materialist worldview. Thus, he is seen and studied fundamentally as a material being. The spiritual entity or component in him is either less recognized or simply dismissed or dispelled completely. This dismissal of the spiritual component in man became necessary because its presence cannot be established with the standards of rigid empiricism, which came to hold sway over the behavioural and social sciences – the craze for scientific precision and accuracy. In a more apt sense this is called scientism – the mad worship of science.

The Islamic worldview is diametrically opposed to this Western worldview. In the Islamic worldview, man and everything in the universe are creation of Allah. He created the universe alone and solely sustains and governs it. Man’s life has a divine and transcendental purpose because he shall be resurrected in a divine world (Hereafter) and shall be made to account for his life in this world. In the Islamic view, man is a creature made up of two components – matter and spirit. He should strive for the betterment of both in equal and balanced ways and manners. The Islamic Law (the Shari’ah), which governs man’s life, has been divinely formulated so that both components in man are catered to in a balanced way. A Muslim’s life and by extension the life of the Muslim community is governed and patterned along this worldview, just as the Western community is governed by its worldview.

Therefore, there are sharp differences between the Islamic and Western patterns of life. Similarly, and also necessarily, the patterns and processes of development (especially the moral, emotional, and social aspects of it) must be fundamentally and essentially different. Thus, it is also correct to say that a theoretical model of studying child development that has been conceived, formulated, experimented on, and applied in the West cannot necessarily be applicable for the same purpose in the Muslim world. The fundamental differences in worldview between the two worlds, which subsequently necessitate differences in child-rearing practices between the two culture, vindicates this assertion.

There is an urgent need for developing an Islamic perspective of developmental psychology whose paradigms, principles, methodologies, and conceptual and theoretical frameworks must evolve out of the Islamic worldview. In the same vein, it must also take into account the peculiar essentials and dispositions of the Muslim ummah pertaining to its belief system, moral codes and etiquette, and all aspects of its life that combine together to make it a distinctive entity. This article is an effort in this direction, attempting to identify and expound some of its basic principles and paradigms.

Before delving into a discussion of the paradigm and principles of Islamic developmental psychology, it seems pertinent to present a more concrete critique of the fundamental epistemological paradigm and methodology of modern psychology. This will reveal its shortcomings and blind sports. For the purpose of a comprehensive critique, three basic methodological issues are examined: the source of knowledge in modern psychology, the means of examining the knowledge, and the objectivity of empirical data.

The Source of Knowledge

In modern psychology as in all other modern behavioural and social sciences, the source of knowledge is confined only to human intellect and sense. Revelation is completely dismissed and denied as a source of knowledge; it is simply considered as a myth or superstition. This rejection of revelation as a source of knowledge is a consequence of both historical and philosophical antecedents. It resulted from the conflict between the Catholic Church and the scientists and the subsequent triumph of the scientists which engendered the so-called scientific revolution with all its attendant and associated material advancements.

With the scientific revolution, scientific epistemology, which is purely mundane and even atheistic, gained ground and came to be accepted as an infallible and impeccable paradigm of inquiry. This paradigm of knowledge, according to Abul-Fadl, soon came to assume a position of preeminence among all others, rendering them obsolete and vestiges of the pre-scientific age. As a result, each discipline was left with the option of either adopting this epistemological model or perishing. Humanity’s inquiry into the nature of its social world was forced to adopt this empirical model as its epistemological basis.

Belief in revelation as an infallible source of knowledge is an essential article of faith in Islam. All Muslims believe in this. This is why Muslims accept one Qur’an and the Sunnah as their primary sources of knowledge. This belief influences the consciousness of a Muslim while he seeks all sorts of knowledge. A Muslim psychologist will, necessarily face a fundamental contradiction between his faith and the Western empirical epistemological model. For this reason, Muslim psychologists must create an epistemological framework that conforms to their belief. Failure to do this will keep them in perpetual dilemma, as succinctly put by Badri.

Even more serious, however, is the fact that there is an obvious incongruence in using theories that have been formulated and tested within the purview of this epistemological model to study the development of an individual or a group of individuals whose belief system is in total opposition to it. Undoubtedly, the desired accurate results cannot be obtained. This point becomes all the more clear if a critical look is cast on the next methodological issue.

Means of Examining Knowledge

Modern social and behavioural sciences, in line with their view about the source of knowledge, recognize experimentation above all other tools as the principle means of verifying knowledge. As a prototype of natural science, social science must avail itself of rigid experimentation to arrive at empirical truth. Logical positivism therefore came to be the dominant methodology in all the behavioural and social sciences, including psychology. Experience alone is claimed to be the origin of all our knowledge, and all nonempirical elements must be purged.

The natural and logical consequence of this methodology and its epistemological basis is reductionism. Reductionism can be seen in two dimensions; first, as the source of knowledge explained earlier and second, as the objecxt of study. In the social and behavioural sciences, man and the human communities are the object of study. With the adoption of logical positivism (hypothetical-deductive methodology) as the means of studying man and his social world, the two have been reduced to the level of pure material bodies that can be studied within the confines of control and observation mechanisms. This resulted in a mechanistic view of man and his social world, and ultimately reduces and dehumanizes him and his society. Again, this is the factor that explains why modern developmental psychology limits the study of human development strictly within the confined context of natural forces and influences.

The points made above are made clear by Abul-Fadl:

Reductionism does not affect the area of understanding in general or specific areas of inquiry, but its consequences are diffuse and affect attitudes in a more practical context. The distortions attendant on reductionism have not only reflected on the understanding of human nature and the social world, but have also reflected negatively on the attitudes and ethics of social science in a manner detrimental to humanity and society.

The greatest problem created by this reductionist paradigm nature by constricting our vision and confining and reducing life to a narrowed biological conception and its associated sensory world. As Carrel rightly submits, “Man is still unknown … and our knowledge about ourselves is still primitive and partial”.

This situation suggests an urgent need for a more comprehensive and more balanced approach to the study of man. This is what Abul-Fadl aptly describes as the median culture approach. The Islamic perspective of social and behavioural sciences qualifies this description and by specification, Islamic perspective of developmental psychology. Without rejecting the usefulness and relative validity of experimentation, the methodology and epistemological model of Islamic social science primarily upholds revelation both as a source and a method of knowledge. Consequently, it also recognizes and takes into consideration the spiritual and material components of human nature and their interactive relationships.

This approach is not only comprehensive and balanced, but it restructures the grounds of inquiry in fields of social studies, investing them with meaning and purpose and also clearing the ground of the plethora of fragmented, dispersed, redundant research whose sole validation lies in their data pooling virtues that become the temptation and justification for a dubious market morality.

Many a Western writer has echoed similar criticism against this exaggerated materialism and crazy empiricism. Such writers go to the extent of suggesting the need for recognizing other of nonexperimental means of studying man. One good case in point in this regard is Hearnshaw. Particularly with respect to psychology, he made the following points:

Experimental psychology has vastly extended its boundaries. There are of course, still limits. Experimentation has, so far, not been able, and perhaps never will be able, to embrace either the creative heights or emotional depths of human nature. There are still and perhaps always will be areas of psychology that transcend the domain of exact sciences. Experimentation, however, is not the sole source of psychological data.

Harris has further demonstrated the limitations of empiricism in more elaborate forms. He argues that the imperfections and drawbacks of the empirical model of sourcing and examining knowledge are embedded in the following:

1. Derived conclusion could not be logically valid for generalization because there could be exceptions.
2. Methodology of data collections is theory laden, that is, the investigator has preconceptions and motives, which influences his choice of methodology of investigating and this subsequently affects the outcome.
3. In trying to gain data about the world, filtration mechanisms operate between our sensation of the world and our perception of knowledge of it. Such mechanism includes:
   1. Psychological delusions: for instance, insanity affects our perception and there is difficulty in knowing who is a sane person.
   2. If they are adequate, our conceptual schemes may lead us to describe the world as what it is not.
   3. Social pressure may lead us to accept things simply because they are stated by famous authorities or the majority of people.
   4. Prejudice can lead us to perceive more than we see or to be selective in noticing things.
   5. Our present knowledge, experience, and preconception can allow us to perceive what other people lacking these cannot perceive. A child who is born and reared in a noisy environment may not notice the effects of noise on having a sound sleep as a child from a different environment may.
   6. Mental sets affects our perception; for instance, in reading a sentence that reads, “The boy is is lazy”, we may fail to notice the double “is” simply because our minds have been set to have the correct sentence.

Objectivity and Universality of Empirical Knowledge

The essence of logical-positivism or empiricism is observation, measurement, and quantification of sense data available to the observer. In undertaking his observations and quantification, the observer only subjects his object to study to the dictates of natural laws. By doing this, it is assumed and equally believed that he comes up with objective data that are neutral, value-free, and therefore, universal. This is all because, as it is also claimed, the observer has shielded his object of study and his methodology from the influences of all extraneous and confounding variables including his own personal attitudes, values, and biases, by means of rigorous control and conditioning mechanisms.

This assumption of objectivity may be true with regard to the natural and physical sciences, but it is certainly not true with regard to the social and behavioral sciences. In the natural and physical sciences, the data obtained from the observation of nonhuman materials are “dead”, unlike those of human behavior which are alive. The elimination of the influence of prior notions, prejudices, and biases in the latter case is far from being possible. This point has been intelligently argued by Al-Faruqi, in the first place, he argues that data of human behaviors are not impervious to the attitudes and references of the observer. They do not simply and ordinarily reveal themselves as they really are to each and every investigator. He maintains that “attitudes, feelings, desires, judgments and hopes of men and women tend to shut themselves off to the observer devoid of sympathy for them”.

In the perception of “dead” objects, the senses of the observer are passive; they are totally determined by the data. In the perception of values, per contra, the observer actively empathizers or “emotes” with the value-determination…. A value is said to be cognized if and only if it has moved, affected and stirred up an emotion or feeling in the observer such as its own nature requires. The perception of value is impossible unless the human behavior is able to move the observer. Similarly, the observer cannot be moved unless he is trained to be affected, and unless he has empathy with the object of his experience. The subject’s attitude toward the data studied determines the outcome of the study.

In light of the above arguments, Al-Faruqi drew the following conclusion:

The humanistic studies of Western man and the social analyses of Western society by a Western scientist are necessarily “Western” and cannot serve as models for the study of Muslims or their society.

From the point of view of strict methodological and epistemological criticisms, one would not only agree with Al-Faruqi in this regard, but would also be convinced of the fact that, even in the so-called natural and physical sciences, objectively may be largely farce or myth. According to Langgulung, research has challenged this traditional realist (empiricist) notion/belief of objectivity, which claims that the physical sciences have always progressed through the accumulation of context-free facts.

Langgulung further explains that, contrary to what is commonly believed, researchers in the physical sciences have always undertaken their research within the context of an adopted paradigm. Such a paradigm is what Kahn calls a “scientific paradigm” in that it defines the theoretical framework, the way of perceiving and understanding the world of a group of scientists with a particular worldview. According to Kuhn, a scientific paradigm is a socially shared cognitive schema, and just as one’s cognitive schema provides each of us with a way of collectively making sense of their scientific world.

It can then be argued that research, even in the physical sciences, has progressed through what Langgulung calls “paradigmatic epistemology,” and since paradigms are cognitive schemes that evolves or rather emanate out of particular social contexts, the physical sciences are themselves never commonly accepted notion that scientific findings are axiomatic truths of universal validity and applicability.