

## **Islamic View on the Role of Social Environment in Shaping Human Behaviour**

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### **Abstract**

There is need for everyone to be aware of the best kind of behaviours they are expected to demonstrate as role models in order to bring a lasting solution in our teeming youth and produce morally as well as intellectually sound individuals. The objectives of this study are to find out the social environmental factors that shape human behaviour according Islamic view. This qualitative study used content analysis as the instrument for collecting data. This analysis involved prominent Western psychology books to represent Western views and involved al-Quran, Hadith and *tafsir* to represent Islamic views on the subject matter. While Western psychologists concentrated more on the outer and observable factors as the factors that shape human behaviour, Muslim scholar included and emphasised on the contribution of the inner composition of man, the soul, to his behaviour and personality development. The findings also highlighted that human beings, irrespective of their religious faith, need to be God-conscious in order to bring out the positive behaviour. By so doing, man could transform the social environment into a better place for the benefit of all humanity. Students, parents, educationists and society can easily mould the good behaviour that lead to the production of intellectual individuals who are morally upright, spiritually sound with the best of leadership capability.

**Keywords:** Social Environments, Environment Factors, Human Behaviour, Personality Development.

### **Introduction**

The natural environment often termed simply as the 'environment' refers to all living things and non-living things that occur naturally on earth (Marsh, Keating, Punch & Harden, 2009). It also refers to the earth surface and atmosphere, including all living organisms as well as the water, air, soil and other resources necessary to sustain life (Macionis, 2005). The environment is viewed by many in a very instrumental sense; to be utilized for human needs. Others recognize the intrinsic value of the natural world, stressing the interdependence and connection between all species and their environment (Marsh et. al., 2009). The environment

affects our moods, ability to form relationships, effectiveness in work or school and even our health (Bullard, 2010).

Similarly, Islam puts great emphasis on the environment as a factor that shapes human behaviour and also influences learning. There are many verses in the Qur'an explain about the human world, the natural world of earth, from trees to turtles, from fish to fowl, to the sun, stars, and the sky (Khalid, 2002). The environment or nature is referred to as *ayat* (signs) of Allah S.W.T. or proof of the divine. About the environment, the Qur'an says: "We have made the night and the day as two (of our signs): the sign of the night We have obscured, while the sign of the day we have made to enlighten you, that ye may seek bounty from your Lord and that ye may know the number of and count of the years: all things have we explained in details" (al-Isra', 12).

Ali (1946) further explains that if we actually go through the wide earth, we shall see the wonderful things and innumerable signs everywhere, there is no limit to these signs. All these are indications that these signs exist for many purposes one of which is to influence man in order to perfect his behaviour spiritually. This is achieved when man travels through the earth, reflects on the wonderful creations of Allah S.W.T. and understands that there is a Supreme Being who is responsible for creation and Whom human beings must please by displaying the best form of behaviour. This paper tries to find out the environmental factors that shape human behaviour according to the Islamic view.

**Human Behaviour Development From Islamic Views:** Human behaviour development from the Islamic view is different from what is seen in Western psychology. According to Islam, behaviour does not develop through mere interaction of the id, ego and the super ego as Freud postulates. Human behaviour development in Islam is a religious process undertaken by an individual to bring out the good in him. All Muslims strive to enhance their good nature (*fitrah*) due to the belief that one day he or she will return to Allah S.W.T. and will be held to account for all his or her deeds. According to Islamic psychology, an individual person is bound to face and experience stress, anxiety, conflict, frustration and dilemma in life. Man is put under such trials to find out whether he can maintain his pure humanity (*fitrah*). As such, in an effort to keep oneself intact on the path of guidance and virtue, behaviour develops (Abdul Razak, 2011).

Contrary to Western psychology, in Islamic psychology, there exist role models whom all Muslims are expected to look up to especially during times of trial for guidance and for developing healthy behaviours. These role models are none other than prophets mentioned in the Noble Qur'an and Hadith whom possess quality behaviours and personalities worthy of emulation. These two things; man's humanity (*fitrah*) and the prophets' exemplarity serve as a focus in the Islamic understanding of human behaviour development. The Prophet Muhammad P.B.U.H is the best example for the whole of humanity. Studying his actions in this particular historical and geographical setting enables us to learn about the relationship between faith and human beings, brotherhood, love, adversity, community life, justice, tolerance, laws and wars. Similarly, all Allah's messengers have suffered in their lives, but their suffering does not mean they made mistakes nor does it reveal any tragic dimension of existence. Simply, it is a lesson for the entire *ummah* to emulate their perseverance and patience in dealing with all sorts of situations. By following their footsteps, an individual develops the best of behaviours (Ramadan, 2007).

## Methodology

Due to the nature of this study, the researcher employed the qualitative method in collecting relevant data related to the research topic. This study used content analysis to review relevant sources that represent Islamic views. Regarding the Islamic viewpoint, this study gathered information from the Noble Qur'an, Prophetic sayings and Muslim scholars.

## Result And Discussion

### Environmental Factors that Shape Human Behaviour According to Islamic View

Based on the texts analysed, all agents of socialization discussed in this study have an impact on human behaviour.

**The Family:** From the Western view, a research conducted by a developmental psychologist Baumrind (1966) proved that the development of children's behaviour depended largely on three parenting styles; authoritarian style which is too harsh and characterised by high demands from the parents with low response to children's demand. Permissive parenting on the other hand was identified as "too soft" and characterised by high demands from the parents with high response to children's needs. The last, authoritative parenting style was identified as "just right". Each parenting style, from Baumrind's research produced entirely different pattern of behaviour development. Children of authoritarian parents developed well, they were found to be cheerful, socially responsible, and cooperative with adults and peers. Children with permissive parents were found to be aggressive, impulsive, bossy, and self-centred. Lastly, children with authoritative parents were found to be moody, unhappy, unfriendly, and easily annoyed (Shaffer, 2009). It has been found that children from abusive family environment where there is frequent hostility and abuse, inconsistency in parenting and lacking in positive interaction, result in low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, negative view of life, emotional instability, difficulty in self-control, violence and criminal behaviour. Whether the children see themselves as strong or weak, smart or stupid, loved or simply tolerated depend on the surrounding provided by parents. Class position has also been found to determine how parents raise their kids. Survey showed that when asked to pick from a list of traits that are most desirable in a child, lower class people (in the United States) favoured obedience and conformity from their children, while well-to-do parents, in contrast, choose good judgement and creativity. This difference was because people of lower social status usually have limited education. They perform routine jobs under close supervision. Expecting that their children will hold similar positions, they encourage obedience and may even use physical punishment like spanking to get it. Well up parents, usually with more schooling, have jobs that demand creativity and imagination. These parents therefore try to inspire the same qualities in their children (Macionis, 2007).

From the Islamic point of view, this study found out a strong link between parents and children's behaviour. Several verses in the Qur'an proved the influence of parents on their children's behaviour development. After a thorough survey of the Qur'an, the researcher selected three verses as evidence to prove the above point. In surah al-Zukhruf, Allah The Exalted said:

"Just in the same way We sent a Warner before thee to any people, the wealthy one among them said: "We found our forefathers following a certain religion and we will certainly follow in their footsteps" (Surah al-Zukhruf:23).

The warner or Apostle, pointed out the merits and the truth of his teachings and how superior it was to what they called their ancestral customs. But they denied his mission in its

entirety or the validity of such mission. They did not believe in inspiration or revelation. They went their evil ways until they brought themselves into destruction. Furthermore, in surah al-Ahzab, Allah S.W.T. says:

“And they would say: ‘Our lord! We obeyed our chiefs and our great ones and they misled us as to the right path. Our Lord! Give them double penalty and curse them with a very great curse” (Surah al-Ahzab: 67-68).

In the above mentioned verses, the unbelievers themselves proved and testified that although the truth came to them, they could not follow the straight and right path because of their chiefs and great ones who misled them. The Prophet Muhammad P.B.U.H. also described that the parent play a major role in behaviour development as he said:

“Every child is born with a true faith (i.e. to worship none but Allah Alone) but his parents convert him to Judaism or to Christianity or to Magainism, as an animal delivers a perfect baby animal” (Sahih al-Bukhari, no 1358)

**The School:** From the Western views, teachers have been found to enhance positive outcomes in children’s social behaviour because they reduce the tendency of students to compare themselves with others, using cooperative interaction strategies in the classroom, being warm and encouraging. When students feel safe and welcome, they experience greater freedom and have more energy to devote to making social and academic progress. Likewise, physical punishment has also been found to lead to uncontrolled results and aggressive behaviour (Zastrow & Krist-Ashman, 2013). Contreras & Kerns (2000) state that the responsibilities of a teacher go far beyond the matter of knowing how to technically structure a syllabus and assess the learning outcomes. It extends to making sure that children entrusted under their care learn the best of behaviours in order to utilize the learned experiences effectively. This is in line with Idu & Olugbade (2011) who suggest that the only way for students to maintain discipline in schools is when principals and teachers demonstrate such desirable behaviours. This, in other words means that the quality of students’ behaviour depends to a large extent on the school system.

From the Islamic point of view, the school was also found to be an important institution for human behaviour development. Teachers have been found to shape their students’ behaviours and character. For this reason Islam view teachers as role models whom all Muslims are expected to look up to for guidance and for developing healthy behaviours. Teachers must possess quality behaviours and personalities worthy of emulation Allah S.W.T. says:

“Enjoin you *al-birr* (piety, righteousness and each and every act of obedience to Allah) on the people and you forget (to practice it) yourselves while you recite the scripture! Have you then no sense?” (Surah al- Baqarah: 44).

In surah al-Ahzab, Allah S.W.T. says:

“Ye have indeed in the apostle of God a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for anyone whose hope is in God and in the final Day, and who engages much in the praise of God” (Surah al-Ahzab:21).

The first verse quoted from surah al-Baqarah pointed out the need for instructors to practice whatever they instruct their followers as they (the instructors) are considered role models by the society while the second verse quoted from surah al-Ahzab clearly indicated the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) is the best example for the whole of humanity. The prophets in Islam are considered the best teachers that from whom the *ummah* learn

perseverance and patience in dealing with all sorts of situations. By following their footsteps, an individual develops the best of behaviours.

**Peer Relations:** Western psychologists provided strong evidences that linked peer relation with human behaviour development from both Western and Islamic views. Regarding the Western views, from the texts analysed, we have found out that at every point in life cycle, peer relation provide an important context for development. As stated by Asher & Coie (1990), children's social contacts extend beyond the family to include the world of peers. Peers are of vital significance to young children as well as adolescents and they assume a great importance as children grow older to become adults. Friends are important sources of companionship and advice. Other findings have indicated that having a deviant friend increase a youth's own level of deviance. Careful analysis of a small group treatment session revealed that the boys had engaged in what the researchers called "deviance training." The boys who were already inclined to be disruptive reinforced others through laughter and non-verbal feedback where someone in the group broke the rules or used inappropriate language (Underwood & Rosen 2011). Similar findings have again established the fact that the group in which individuals, especially adolescents belong, influence their behaviour development for these groups promote the ideology of adhering to one standard of social uniformity. This, in other words is referred to as conformity. This group pressure can be unpleasant and at times even dangerous (Shaffer, 2009).

From the Islamic viewpoint, in surah al-Zukhruf, Allah S.W.T. says: "Friends on that day (Day of Judgement) will be foes to one another except *al-muttaqun*" (Surah al-Zukhruf: 67). This verse was referring to the Day of Judgement when every soul would be held to account for its deeds. And that day, friends who influenced each other negatively in this world would be foes except *al-muttaqun*. *Al-Muttaqun* as explained by Tafsir books, means the pious and righteous who fear Allah much and abstain from all kinds of sins or evil deeds which He has forbidden and love Allah much (perform all kinds of good deeds which Allah has ordained). In surah al-Furqan, Allah S.W.T. says:

"The day that the wrongdoer will bite his hands, he will say: 'Oh! Would that I had taken a (straight path) with the Apostle. Ah! Woe to me! Would that I had never taken such a one for a friend! He did led me astray from the Message (of God) after it had come to me! Ah! The evil one is but a traitor to man" (Surah al-Furqan:27). A man who actually receives the truth and is on the right path is all the more culpable if he is diverted from that path by the machination of a worldly friend. The particular person whom commentators mention in this connection was one Uqbah who received the light of Islam but was misled afterwards by a worldly friend into apostacy and blasphemy. He came to an evil end afterward. Similarly, in another surah, the companion of the disbeliever will say on the Day of Judgement:

"His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress, but he was himself far astray'. He (Allah) will say: 'Dispute not with each other in My Presence. I had already in advance sent you warning" (Surah al-Qaf: 27).

Commentators explained 'companion' mentioned in the above verse to mean an evil associate in the world, an evil one who misled. It was suggested that sinners whose book is black, when driven into a corner, accuse others of misleading them. 'Others' may mean one of several things; the Recorders (Raqib and Atid), their faculties or opportunities or surroundings or their associates in the world. Supporting the verses, The Prophet P.B.U.H says:

"The example of a good companion (who sits with you) in comparison with a bad one, is like that of the musk seller and the blacksmith's bellows (or furnace); from the first you would either buy musk or enjoy its good smell while the bellows would either burn your clothes or your house, or you get a bad nasty smell thereof" (Sahih al-Bukhari, no 2101).

In a metaphorical sense, the above hadith indicated how peer relation influences a person's character to goodness or otherwise. Friends therefore really shape a person's overall behaviour. When individuals associate with people of good or bad character for a sufficient amount of time, they will consciously or unconsciously learn from them.

**The Media:** As for the media, we have clear evidences from prominent Western scholars to confirm the stronghold it has in shaping human behaviour and personality development. From the various texts analysed scholars unanimously agreed that the media influence human behaviour. Television, as a common aspect of a child's environment, was found to play a significant role in behaviour development (Zastrow & Krist-Ashman). Television is a fertile ground that influence and increase children's violent behaviour. Children are routinely exposed to murder scenes, beating and sexual assault. Statistics proved that children who watch 2 to 4 hours a day of television will see 8,000 murders and another 100,000 acts of violence by the time they finished elementary school. Similarly, most video games were found to provide means not only to view, but to actually practice violence. Many such games closely resemble reality. They provide means to engage actively in violent pursuits, usually shooting down people or other figures. Even worse, they reinforce these violent behaviours by awarding points when targets are effectively annihilated (Zastrow & Krist-Ashman, 2013). Modern technology like the internet has also been found to influence children's learning and lifestyles. Online communication has been proved to promote closer friendship. It makes adolescents feel free to share intimate information about them. This sort of intimate self-disclosure is a primary determinant of deep and committed friendship. Likewise, online communication has been found to present fewer risks than similar face-to-face exploration with members of the other sex (Shaffer, 2009).

From the Islamic perspective, we have also found out that the media, especially the social media contributes so much in human behaviour development. The media is considered as a friend and a teacher to an individual, as such, the researcher used the same verses and hadiths used to prove the influence of teachers and friends to ascertain the role of media in shaping human behaviour according to Islamic point of view. The media, being a platform where youth communicate with peers and establish new contact with strangers influence an individual's behaviour in the same way friends influence human behaviour. Allah S.W.T. says: "The day that the wrongdoer will bite his hands, he will say: 'Oh! Would that I had taken a (straight path) with the Apostle. Ah! Woe to me! Would that I had never taken such a one for a friend! He did led me astray from the Message (of God) after it had come to me! Ah! The evil one is but a traitor to man" (Surah al-Furqan:27).

"Friends on that day (Day of Judgement) will be foes to one another except *al-muttaqun*" (Surah al-Zukhruf:67).

"His companion will say: 'Our Lord! I did not make him transgress, but he was himself far astray'. He (Allah) will say: 'Dispute not with each other in My Presence. I had already in advance sent you warning" (Surah al-Qaf:27).

All three verses confirmed that indeed friends, whether real friends or friends met on the social networking sites, to a certain degree, play a significant role in making or marring an individual's behaviour. Likewise, a prophetic tradition (hadith) in which the influence of a

good friend was compared to musk perfume while the influence of a bad companion was compared to a blacksmith. This hadith has also been used by the researcher as evidence to refer to both real and internet friends.

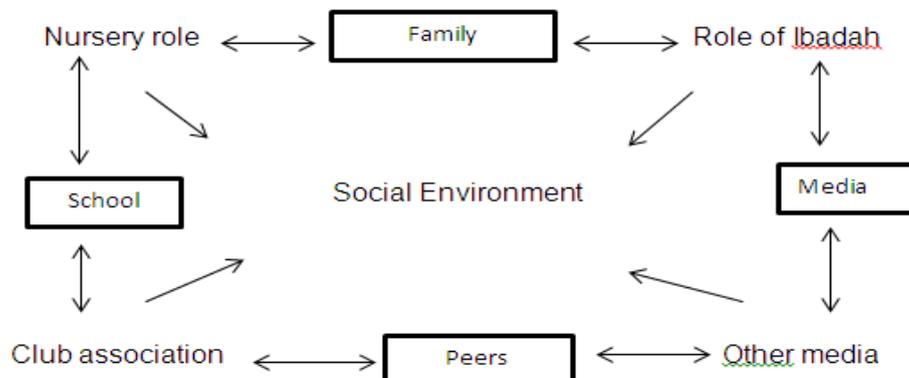


Figure 1: The Social Environment Factors

### Conclusion

Although similarities exist among the Western and Islamic views, a lot of differences have also been seen particularly on the kind of behaviour each laid much emphasis on. While Western psychology placed much emphasis on the social and intellectual changes that occur as a result of an individual's interaction with his surrounding, the Islamic view, although consider the social changes, placed much emphasis on the spiritual implications these changes caused within the physical and spiritual body of an individual as he or she interacts with the family, school, peers and the media. Where the Western scholars were found to focus on social behaviours like being supportive, cooperative and making academic progress as well as issues like bullying among peers, self-reliance, self-esteem, academic achievement, cooperation and healthy competition as behaviours learned in schools under the guidance of teachers or the media, the Islamic views focused on how the teachers succeed in making individuals to learn more about Allah S.W.T. which in turn enable them to serve Him better, strengthen the spiritual bond between Allah S.W.T. and His servants which leads to development of all the above mentioned behaviours. Because it is believed in Islam that proper Islamic education will prevent students from becoming bullies, promotes academic achievement, self-reliance, cooperation and healthy competition as well as all sorts of positive behaviours. All these in turn will help in strengthening the bond between Allah S.W.T. and His servants and also enable man to carry out his duties as Allah's vicegerent on earth and fulfil amanah (trust) entrusted him by Allah S.W.T.

Man is a dynamic creature that is too complex to be understood by one single theory. This is evident from the many philosophical and psychological theories that could not thoroughly explain human nature the researcher of this study, like many Muslim psychologists, feels that religion is the only avenue through which a clear picture of man's nature could be depicted. Much of the confusion in the understanding of man and what influences his behaviour and personality development can be corrected by incorporating Islam into the study of man. this is because Islam has presented a comprehensive explanation

of man physically, spiritually, intellectually, psychologically and socially. Islamic psychology has provided a comprehensive explanation of human behaviour right from the cradle to the grave as well as the result of each behaviour and its consequences.

Again, the researcher feels that since findings from both views have indicated that the social environment influences and directs the shape which an individual's behaviour takes, religion is the only avenue which the social environment can be sanitized and protected against modern challenges which pose a serious threat to children's healthy and acceptable behaviours development. Besides this, Muslim scholars should also embrace Western psychologists' ideas as long as these ideas do not contradict with Islamic teachings. Ideas found in Islamic psychology pertaining to children training, human behaviour modification therapy, counselling and sensitizing the social environment for the proper development of personality should be accepted by Western psychologists.

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