

Empowerment Through Mystical Experiences in Islam: A Literature Study on Muhammad PBUH's First Revelation of Islam.

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Abstract

This paper discusses how empowerment can be triggered by mystical experiences, by focusing on mystical experience of the first revelation of Islam to Muhammad PBUH. Only few literature on empowerment in mainstream psychology, specifically discuss how empowerment can be achieved through personal mystical or spiritual experiences. Transpersonal studies give explanations of human mystical experiences and extra sensory perceptions. Chronological analysis of the first revelation showed how the mystical experience empowered Muhammad. First, mystical experience is empowerment. Second, mystical experiences can become an effective and an efficient trigger for empowerment in daily life if understood correctly; and affirmed with social support. Third, spiritual awakening can unfold into intrapersonal, interpersonal and behavioral empowerment if the person contemplates about the experience, and implement it to benefit others.

Key words: *empowerment, Muhammad PBUH, mystical experiences, transpersonal*

Makalah ini mendiskusikan bagaimana pemberdayaan dipicu oleh pengalaman mistikal, berfokus pada pengalaman mistikal turunnya wahyu pertama Islam kepada Muhammad SAW. Tidak banyak literatur mengenai pemberdayaan dalam psikologi arus utama yang spesifik mendiskusikan bagaimana pemberdayaan dicapai melalui pengalaman personal yang mistis atau spiritual. Kajian Transpersonal memberikan penjelasan mengenai pengalaman mistikal manusia dan persepsi indrawi ekstra. Analisis kronologis dari wahyu pertama menunjukkan bagaimana pengalaman mistikal memberdayakan Muhammad SAW. Pertama, pengalaman mistikal adalah suatu pemberdayaan. Kedua, pengalaman mistikal dapat menjadi pemicu yang efektif dan efisien untuk pemberdayaan dalam kehidupan sehari-hari bila dipahami dengan benar dan diperkuat dengan dukungan sosial. Ketiga, kebangkitan spiritual dapat menjadi pemberdayaan intrapersonal, interpersonal, dan perilaku bila orang tersebut melakukan kontemplasi mengenai pengalamannya dan mengimplementasikannya demi memberi manfaat untuk orang lain.

Kata kunci: *pemberdayaan, Nabi Muhammad SAW, pengalaman mistikal, transpersonal*

Introduction

This paper will discuss how empowerment can be triggered by mystical experiences, by focusing on mystical experience of the first revelation of Islam to Prophet Muhammad PBUH (peace be upon him). Empowerment is widely discussed in mainstream psychology, from a highly personal view point of theories of psychology to a widely implication on community psychology. However, not many of this literature specifically discuss how empowerment can be achieved through personal mystical or spiritual experiences.

On the other hand, literature in transpersonal psychology mostly discusses Islam mysticism as the Sufism (Frager, 2002). In Islam, the Sufi way is known as *tariqa* translated as the narrow path (Chittick W. C., 2008). Not all Muslims are following this narrow path.

However, all Muslims have the obligation to follow the revealed law that is called *Shari'a* which is translated as the wide road. All Muslims have the obligation to believe in all the prophets of Islam, from Adam to Muhammad. These prophets had some mystical experiences that Muslims believe.

Transpersonal studies give explanations of human mystical experiences and extra sensory perceptions. Three main themes defining transpersonal psychology: psychology beyond ego, Integrative/holistic psychology or psychology of the whole person in an interconnected world, and psychology of transformation (Hartelius, Caplan, & Rardin, 2007). The study on consciousness and non-duality in transpersonal studies might be able to reveal the explanation of the mystical experiences of prophets of Islam.

Therefore, this paper will use transpersonal view to explain how empowerment can happen out of the mystical experiences of the prophets of Islam, particularly Muhammad PBUH. Psychology and scientific explanations will help Muslims to understand the mystical experiences of the prophets that might lead to understanding of Islamic mysticism outside the box of the Sufis way. With these explanations, some Muslims and non-Muslims who were sceptical of the mystical experiences of prophets in the revelation of Islam might be able to understand the phenomena and learn how to empower people who have mystical experiences.

Before continue with this paper, I would like to state my biases. First, God exist, and also that Qur'an, the Old, and New testaments were divinely inspired. Second, Muhammad PBUH is a human being. Third, Muhammad PBUH is a truly evolved human being. Fourth, Muhammad PBUH had real revelatory (theological sense of a manifestation of Divine Truth) experiences. Lastly, the mystical experiences of Muhammad are genuinely transpersonal. With this biases, I will discuss psychological and Islamic perspectives on the mystical experience of the first revelation of Islam to Muhammad PBUH.

Content

Empowerment

There are many definitions and perspectives on empowerment. On this paper, we will discuss two of the perspectives which are the transpersonal, and community psychology. Maslow (1968) as one of the pioneer of humanistic psychology, proposed that humanistic psychology was not enough to reveal and to understand human experience fully.

I consider Humanistic, 3rd force to be transitional, a preparation for still higher 4th psychology, transpersonal, transhuman, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interest, going beyond humanness, identity, Self-Actualization and the like (pp. iii-iv).

Maslow realized that there is the need for the 'fourth force' of psychology that embraces a more complex states of consciousness such as altered, mystical, ecstatic or spiritual states. Maslow used the word "transpersonal" to capture the experiences that are beyond individuality, and beyond the development of the individual into something which is more inclusive. The birth of transpersonal psychology was inspired by the work of William James. William James (1902/2002) noted that the core of religious life is to be found primarily within the inner recesses of the individual. Therefore, the essential link between normal waking awareness and mystical states of religious awakening lay through a direct encounter with subliminal unconscious life. However, the truth of such tremendously powerful inner experiences must be tested in the world at large by their practical results. He said that the true essence of religion lay

within a person. In this notion, he pointed out about how power in individual manifests in daily life and the resource of the power may come from religious experiences.

Transpersonal psychology uses a whole person approach to empowerment, including deep human experiences. After four decades of development, Hartelius, Caplan, and Rardin (2007) examined the definition and scope of research underneath the umbrella of transpersonal psychology. There are three main themes defining transpersonal psychology: psychology beyond ego, integrative/holistic psychology (psychology of the whole person in an interconnected world), and psychology of transformation. In the first theme, transpersonal psychology picks up where traditional psychology leaves off. The second theme asks how one can construct a single psychology of the whole person. The third theme deals with how to understand and cultivate growth into larger human potentials, both as individuals and communities. Transpersonal psychology thus validates the meaningful nature of human experience from the standpoint of an embodied participant rather than as a disinterested observer. The three meanings of *trans* corresponds to three themes: *beyond ego*, *pervading personhood*, and *changing humanity*. The summary definition from those themes is:

Transpersonal psychology: an approach to psychology that 1) studies phenomena beyond the ego as context for 2) an integrative/holistic psychology; this provide a framework for 3) understanding and cultivating human transformation. (Hartelius et al., 2007, p. 11)

Therefore, transpersonal psychology explains human transcendence, wholeness, and transformation. According to Maslow, religious questions, quests, yearnings, and needs are rooted deeply in human nature; and a “contemporary existential and humanistic psychologist would probably consider a person sick or abnormal in an existential way if he/she were not concerned with these ‘religious’ questions” (1994, p. 18). Religious experiences are part of spiritual and transpersonal experiences. Transpersonal experiences are defined as experiences in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (trans) the personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche, or cosmos (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993). Transpersonal experiences can lead to empowerment (Saft, 2007). According to Saft (2007), characteristics of transpersonal experiences that empower individuals are ones that transcend the personal ego; afford new insight regarding the Divine with an altered sense of self, and thereby engage in actions that he or she did not previously engage.

Maslow’s (1987) conception of an actualized person consists of a more whole person approach of empowered individual. Self actualizing people are ones who has: perception of reality, acceptance, spontaneity, problem centering, solitude, autonomy, fresh appreciation, peak experiences, human kinship, humility, creativity, resistance to enculturation, imperfections, values, and resolution of dichotomies. On his study of three thousand college students and some older subjects who are friends, public and historical figures, he summarized the observations of characteristics of self-actualizing people. This literature review will elaborate some that relates closely to this research topic. Perception of reality is an ability to judge people correctly and efficiently. They have more correct predictions of the future because better perception of something that was certainly there. People with quality of acceptance able to accept their own human nature in the stoic style, with all its shortcomings without feeling real concern. These people tend to focus on problems outside themselves rather than ego centered. They can also be solitary without harm and discomfort to themselves. These people are relatively independent of the physical and social environment, and more dependent on their own personal growth on their own potentialities. They are able to appreciate freshly recurrence moments and experience with of the same strong feelings, reaction to beauty, and excitement. One of the distinct qualities of

self-actualizing people is the peak experiences. Most subjects in Maslow's (1968) research reported the subjective expressions that termed as mystical experiences by William James (1902/2002). The characteristic of the feeling of being more powerful and yet at the same time more helpless than one ever was before, followed by the conviction that something valuable had happened, so that the person relatively transformed and strengthened in their daily life. Non-peaking self-actualizing people tend to be practical, effective people that doing well in daily living. They are merely healthy people who are the social world improvers, the politician, the reformer. Peakers live in the realm of Being, tend to involve in aesthetics art, transcendence, religious or spiritual mystical personal experiences. These people are more apt to write poetry, music, philosophy and religions.

So far, transpersonal psychology has been able to provide evidence on how spiritual aspects can influence a person to be empowered. However, most empirical studies were only covered individual experiences of the phenomena without any attempt to provide empirical evidence on how the spiritual power owned by an individual can be beneficial for society. Somehow this lack of research on how self actualization affects many people to just expressing what a person wants for him/herself, without any consideration whether the behavior will be beneficial for others or not. Therefore, the self empowerment do not result on interpersonal or community empowerment. Empowerment just seen as content and not a process.

In community psychology, Rappaport (1987) defined empowerment as both a construct and a process. As a construct, empowerment links individual strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, and proactive behaviors to social policy and social change. As a process, empowerment enables people, organizations, and communities to gain mastery over issues of concern to them. The empowerment process and outcomes vary for different people in diverse contexts (Rappaport, 1984). Perkins and Zimmerman (1995) suggested that empowerment is more than the traditional psychological constructs with which it is sometimes compared or confused, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, competency, and locus of control. In this definition, empowerment seen as a wider process which involves participation in community. It is an intentional ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation. In this process, people lacking equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources, or over their lives, democratic participation in the life of their community, and a critical understanding of their environment. On the other hand, Rowland (1997) identified a personal dimension of empowerment, which includes self-confidence, self-esteem, scope for autonomy, and dignity. Internal criteria of empowerment might reflect more fundamental, structural transformation in the constitution of gender relations—within the individual, in personal relationships, and through collective actions.

Zimmerman (1995) introduced the concepts of empowerment in three levels: community, organizational, and individual. The community level focuses on how individuals work together in an organized fashion to improve their collective lives, and strengthen relations among community organizations and agencies. The organizational level deals with processes and structures that enhance members' skills and provide them with the mutual support necessary to effect community level change (i.e., an empowering organization). On the individual level, empowerment integrates perceptions of personal control, a proactive approach to life, and a critical understanding of the sociopolitical environment. This individual level is referred to as psychological empowerment (PE). PE includes active engagement in the community and an understanding of the sociopolitical environment. PE also includes the belief that goals can be achieved, and awareness of resources and factors that hinder or enhance efforts to fulfill goals. PE has three basic clusters of components, intrapersonal, interactional, and behavioral. The

intrapersonal component refers to how people think about themselves, including domain-specific perceived control and self-efficacy, motivation to control, perceived competence, and mastery. The interactional component refers to the understanding people have about their community and related sociopolitical issues, including critical awareness, understanding causal agents, skill development, skill transfer across domains, and resources mobilization. The behavioral component refers to actions taken to influence outcomes, including community involvement, organizational participation, and coping behaviors. According to this definition of PE, a psychologically empowered person is one who believes that he or she is capable of influencing a given context, understands how the system works in that context, and engages in behaviors to exert control in the context. To capture a full perspective on PE, all three components must be measured specifically for the population and context under study.

PE is used widely in many areas of studies, including the workplace (Jha, 2010), health prevention, community (Itzhaky & York, 2000), prisons (Ferszt, Salgado, & DeFedele, 2009), and social work (Itzhaky, 2003). In more recent studies (Peterson, Lowe, Aquilino, & Schneider, 2005; Peterson, Lowe, Hughey, Reid, Zimmerman, & Speer, 2006), components of PE were reexamined and validated. Speer (2000) found that persons with greater levels of intrapersonal empowerment reported participating in community activities more often than those with lower levels. The higher level of interactional empowerment also correlated with higher participation in organizational activities and a stronger sense of community. Speer's research provides evidence that participation in the community correlates highly with psychological empowerment.

Mystical Experiences and Spiritual Awakening

Wals and Vaughan (1980) defined mystical experience as an expansion of consciousness beyond customary ego boundaries, and beyond the ordinary limitation of time and space. Mystical experience is that amorphous, well-ordered, historically conditioned, trans-sensory metamorphosis of the waking consciousness that usually serves only after the individual has achieved re-collectedness (Hollenback, 1996). Linn and Schwarz (1958) gave a comprehensive understanding of the nature of mysticism. Mysticism is a state of consciousness marked by certain distinguishing qualities. Those qualities are: the ineffability that make it hard to express or describe; noetic quality (the feeling that the mystery of the universe has been plumbed), immense illumination and revelation has occurred; transiency of the moment even if it is unforgettable; passivity that resulted as a sense of unity with superior power; fifth, a capacity to reconcile the opposites; and there is clouding over the mind before the experience which lead the person to be in isolation and do meditation.

William James (1902/2002) argued that mystical experiences is the core of religions. According to James (1902/2002), possible admirable result from mystical experiences has some qualities. First is the sense of peace, harmony, and fulfillment. Second, a new, keener awareness of one's world and one's self. Third, an insight into one's particular potentialities combined with an eager incentive to actualize them as a primary interest. Fourth, a rediscovery of spontaneity and a sense of individual freedom. Fifth, a deeper sense of individual continuity and personal integration. Sixth, a more affirmative attitude toward life and a sense of zest and joy. Seventh, a more open communication with one's environment. Lastly, a deeper feeling of tenderness and a higher regard for other human being.

Another related perspective on mystical experiences that included in mainstream psychology is the spiritual awakening; which is different that other mystical experiences or

symptom of psychotic experiences, like hallucinations and delusions. In DSM IV, the mystical experience that triggered spiritual awakening (Lukoff, Lu, & Yang, 2010) is covered by a more general definition for spiritual problems which is: "questioning of other spiritual values which may not necessarily be related to an organized church or religious institution." In the clinical setting, a *mystical experience* can be defined as a transient, extraordinary experience marked by feelings of unity, sense of harmonious relationship to the divine, euphoria, sense of noesis (access to the hidden spiritual dimension), loss of ego functioning, alterations in time and space perception, and sense of lacking control over the event.

In Islamic studies (Hollenback, 1996), Ibn 'Arabi discussed the mystical experience as a form of empowerment. According to him, mystical experience is an empowered imagination which termed as *himmah*. *Himmah* is transfiguration of the mystic's imagination that allows a person to convert the imaginative faculty into "organ" that perceive subtle realities or spiritual dimensions that otherwise hidden to physical sense organs, and to endow the creations of his own imagination with objective, extramental existence through a process involving both concentration and mental projection. Ibn 'Arabi said that mystical experience is the very power with which God creates and sustains the cosmos.

Muhammad and the First Revelation of Islam

To understand how mystical experiences in Islam, it is more appropriate to take an example from the Last Messenger of Islam, Prophet Muhammad PBUH. Prophet Muhammad PBUH lived in 570 to 632 century and become God's messenger when he was 40. As the central human figure of Islam, Muhammad regarded by Muslims as a prophet of God and the last messenger. He was active as a social reformer, diplomat, merchant, philosopher, orator, legislator, military leader, humanitarian, philanthropist. His active participation in society is a behavioral example that he is an empowered person. In Maslow's frame, he fulfilled an example of a self actualizing peakers. In a book titled *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History* (1978 /1992) by Michael H. Hart that ranks 100 people whom most influenced human history, Prophet Muhammad is the first one. After analyzing many biography of famous people, he asserted that Muhammad was "supremely successful" in both the religious and secular realms. He gave significant influence in his era that shown how he was empowered and empowering others. To understand how spiritual experiences empowered Muhammad PBUH, it will be more useful to examine how is his life before the revelation, after the revelation and the most noteworthy are how was the mystical experience that empowered him.

Prophet Muhammad PBUH has lineage with prophet Abraham through his son, Ishmael (Ramadan, 2007). In the book of Genesis, God answer Abraham invocations with: "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him... and I will make him a great nation" (Genesis, 17:20). Just like Ishmael, from his earliest childhood, Muhammad was accompanied by signs and trials that educated and prepared him to become a prophet. He was an orphan. His father died when he was still in the womb; his mother died when he was 6. After that, in this Arab tribal culture, he was raised and protected by his breastfeeding mother, his grandfather from father side and an uncle. Some priests in his era recognized his signs as a future prophet and told his family to take care of him.

As he grown into adulthood, he was already respected by his society as Al-Amin, the honest and trustworthy (Ramadan, 2007). He had a healthy personality. As it was a common thing in his oral teaching culture in that time, he was a person who is unable to read or write. He got married when he was 25 years old to Khadijah. He stayed monogamy, which is rare at his

time, and had six children. All his sons died when they were young, so it was only his girls that will give him descendants..

Prior to the first revelation, Muhammad was on his 40 and had even more awareness about his society. He can see how corrupt the society was. As a descendant of the tribe who guard Mecca, there is a tradition he knew from his grandfather, to do meditation in a cave. So he did his spiritual meditation to have a deep introspection at the cave Hira. He meditated on the meaning of his life, his presence on earth, the signs that had accompanied him throughout his life. In Maslow's term, this is called the spiritual quest for the truth.

In the Hira cave, he had his first mystical experience of the revelation. According to Prophet's biography or *sirah*, here is the conversation between Muhammad PBUH and angel Gabriel (Ramadan, 2007):

Gabriel suddenly came to him in a form of man,
"Read," said Gabriel
Muhammad: "I am not of those who read"
Gabriel: "Read"
Muhammad: "I am not of those who read"
Gabriel hold him tight, almost choked him
Gabriel: "Read"
Muhammad: "I am not of those who read"
Gabriel: "Read in the name of your Lord"

The last sentence of that conversation above is the first verse of Qur'an that revealed to Muhammad. It was the first part of sura *Al-Alaq*, which means the blood clot or the first sign of embryo. Here is the full version of that first verse from one to five.

In the name of Allah the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful. Read! In the Name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exist). He has created man from a clinging clot. Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous, Who has taught (the writing) by the pen. He has taught man that which he knew not. (Qur'an)

This verse began a new culture that Islam brought for humankind which is the culture of reading and writing that marked human civilization. It was a monumental change for Arabic culture that was not used to reading and stayed in a tribal culture.

After he had that experience, he was shocked, shaking, trembling, greatly disturbed, and fearing that he has lost his mind (Lazarus, 1985). He went home and asked for comfort from his wife, Khadijah. Khadijah calmed him down and went to get a second opinion about what happened to her husband, she asked one of her cousin. Her cousin Waraqah was an old and blind Christian priest. Listened to what happen to Muhammad, Waraqah said: "Holy!...the angel bringing the sacred revelation who has come to Muhammad; the same who had come to Moses. Indeed Muhammad is the prophet of this people". This part of history showed how Muhammad PBUH had a mystical experience that have lineage with mystical experiences of Moses, and also Christianity.

To understand how this first revelation began empowerment, it is necessary to see at least some verses of Qur'an that revealed after that. Most scholar of Islam concluded that the next verse that Muhammad received was *Al Qalam* (the pen). Here is the verse:

Nun. By the pen and by that which they write. You Muhammad are not, by the grace of your Lord, possessed. Verily, yours is an unfailing reward. And surely

you have sublime morals. You will soon see, and they will see, which of you is afflicted with madness.

The connector of the first and this verse is the word 'pen' which is a mean of writing. In this verse, there is a clear message that confirm and affirm Muhammad about his situation and psychological condition which is: "not possessed and not insane". This verse gave reassurance from God that normalized Muhammad psychological condition.

The next verse is *Al-Muzzammil*, which means the enshrouded one, bundled up, and enfolded (Ramadan, 2007). In this verse, Muhammad PBUH was told to do contemplation with God by praying in the middle of the night. With this ritual practice, Muhammad PBUH developed his intrapersonal empowerment. The next verse is *Al Muddaththir*, which means the cloak. The first part of this verse is a teaching about self-preparedness. "You, wrapped in your cloak". Muhammad usually uses cloak to do prayer. By calling Muhammad PBUH one who wrapped in cloak, means that God wants him to be ready to pray. Then the second verse serves to alert the Prophet to a changing environment from which he is charged with saving mankind. The full sentence of the verse is *Arise, and give warning* (Qur'an, 74:2). By this verse, God was telling Muhammad to do actions to give warnings to people, which means he has to do something for his community. Verses 3-7, is a command for the Prophet or whoever follows the righteous path of God to maintain cleanliness, monotheism, humility, and patience in his own life. These are all preparations for the revelation of the rest of the Qur'an and his duty as Prophet and messenger of God.

Muhammad PBUH reported that there are some other different type and symptoms that he had when he received revelations. In some other times, he said, "It was as the words were written on my heart" (hadith). Other revelation arrived directly to his heart, like ringing of a bell, an Angel in the form of human being, dream, and out of body experience (Sells & Ernst, 1996). These sometimes caused him to have symptoms of heat in cold days, perspiration, face change colors (pale or red), and feeling wonder and awe. He and his followers received many tortures from their tribes and their allies. However they had a firm believe on God, and their abilities to make a better world with justice and prosperity.

Discussion and Conclusion

The chronological analysis of the first revelation showed how the mystical experience empowered Muhammad. After he had received the revelation, eventhough he was shocked at first and felt as he was going insane, he got the explanation in the following verses and the explanation from Waraqah. The support and protection from closest family and friends, especially his wife Khadijah, helped him went through the spiritual awakening period. The revelations taught him to become what he said " God has sent me to perfect good qualities of character and to complete good deeds" (Hadith).

From the perspective of spiritual awakening in clinical psychology, he had a spiritual awakening through the mystical experience. The treatment that he had helped him grounded and use the mystical experience to empower himself and others. The normalization that he received from the verse of Pen help him to accept his ability to access God directly and face challenges from his tribe. This kind of support may not be available in every culture or family.

From the perspective of psychological empowerment (PE) in community psychology, the mystical experience triggered his intrapersonal empowerment. From there, he developed his intrapersonal empowerment through contemplation and discussions with his family members, who gave him perfect container of culture that accept mystical experiences. Only from there he

was able to foster his own potentialities and developed it to empower others. He brought good news and warnings from God to human with more confidence and power. He continued to have interpersonal and behavioral empowerment through spreading the religion.

From this literature review and discussion, there are some conclusions. First, mystical experience itself is empowerment. Second, mystical experiences can become an effective and an efficient trigger for empowerment in daily life if understood correctly; and affirmed with social support. Third, spiritual awakening can unfold into intrapersonal, interpersonal and behavioral empowerment if the person do contemplation about the experience, and take action to implement it to benefit others.

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