THE CULTURE OF INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM IN BALANCING ACCOUNTABILITY AND INNOVATION IN EDUCATION: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: The concept of individualism and collectivism has been widely studied with reference to the cultural elements, which have nothing in common pertaining to integrity. That is, individualism and collectivism always stand in sharp contrast to each other. In other words, these concepts occupy opposing edges of the platform that seeks to shape lifestyle and attitude of societies. In that light, this paper discusses individualism and collectivism from Islamic perspective, highlighting the interplay between these two inseparable concepts. Islam views individualism (accountability) and collectivism (innovation) as foundational and innovative concepts. The former, as fundamental building bricks that constitutes principles of accountability in human activities, and the latter as an innovative element that flourishes from principles of accountability and stipulates human activities. Furthermore, the paper gives insightful implications of individualism and collectivism with particular reference to education.

Keywords: individualism, collectivism, accountability, Islamic perspective, innovation, education.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of modernisation and its dynamic components has reformed the way most humans conceptualise things existing in the living world. It sways not only the way people perceived things per se but also the meanings they give to the cultural entities surrounding them, which in one way or another could constitute, over the time, an alien understanding and interpretation. Individualism and collectivism are not exempted from this perception.

Meanwhile, to many Muslims the terms do not make any conceptual meaning that differs in its implications from that of Western perspectives. However, the approach and the implications are completely different. Put succinctly, individualism and collectivism from Western perspectives are situated on the edges of two opposing platforms compared to its connotation from the Islamic teachings.

Individualism and collectivism from Islamic viewpoint are not two opposite concepts but are two intertwined precepts complimenting and enhancing each other. In other words, sustainability of collectivism is vain in isolation of grounded individualism and vice versa. Individualism relatively deals with early formation of effective, committed, accountable and responsible individuals. Thus, it embeds and inculcates sense of accountability into individuals. The role of collectivism is, therefore, continuity in shaping effective, innovative and contributive personalities in the society. The purpose of this paper is to examine individualism and collectivism briefly from Western viewpoint, and then present an extensive discussion of the subject matter from Islamic perspective.

The discussion about individualism and collectivism might appear, at a first glance, irrelevant to Islamic paradigm. Partly because of wide domination of western cultural influence which associates individualism with capitalism and collectivism with communism. However, critically pondering over the underlying principles of Islamic teachings and the totality of its comprehensiveness in bringing up efficient human beings, "….. We have neglected nothing in the Book, then unto their Lord they (all) should be gathered" (Qur'an, *al-An'm*:38), would

clearly reveal the Islamic comprehensiveness at all levels of human live, which cannot be over looked as far as functions of the two terms in Islam are concerned. Thus, dismissing addressing these two dimensions from Islamic perspective critically might paralyse educational role in mobilising effective generations that are dynamic, responsible, accountable, innovative, etc who will live Islamic as a way of life.

METHODOLOGY

According to Abu Saud (1993), the objective of acquiring knowledge is to discover eternal truths, and to serve the interests of humanity within the parameters of Islam. In conducting a research, the research methodology procedures adopted should enable the researcher to understand the specific facets of the subject being studied.

In order to investigate any subject matter, including a social science the researcher should have a clear idea of his research objectives, his preparations, his methodology, and expected results. Among all these, research objectives are imperative because if they are not clearly laid out they only reinforce a self-fulfilling prophesy.

The purpose of research, a normative question (Abu Saud: 1993) is to derive perception of reality from the revealed sources of evidence (Faridi, 1991). Faridi further points out that Islamic research methodology assigns a purpose to research, i.e. acquisition of knowledge to understand the reality, recognize Allah (God) and promote the good of humanity. In other words, research is carried out to understand further the universe, and to link it to the ultimate reality because this universe is created with an underlying moral intent. Perception is the process by which individuals attend to, organise, interpret and retain information from their environments. A Muslim researcher can never be value free in undertaking a research because he is required to uphold Islam at all times. His understanding of Islam influences his choice of methodology and interpretation of results. He exercises objectivity within the framework of Islam.

It is worth noting that Faridi (1991) labels to the divine purpose as the first-order questions or macro-paradigm, whereas the methodology as the second-order questions or the micro-paradigm. The first-order questions are very important because they shape the general directions of one's life; they deal with the reason for being. The researcher should integrate; they do contribute towards the dimensions of individualism and collectivism by making comparisons between Islamic and the Western perspectives. The current paper seeks to espouse the earlier analyses undertaken on individualism and collectivism, while emphasising areas that have received little attention.

INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM FROM WESTERN PERSPECTIVES

Most researchers in the Western world do study individualism and collectivism in association with cross-cultural effects on group characteristics, such as functional heterogeneity, preference for teamwork, group potency and outcome expectations (Sosik and Jung, 2002).

Hofstede (1980) technically defines individualism as a focus on rights above one's duties, a concern for oneself and immediate family, an emphasis on personal autonomy and self-fulfilment and basing of one's ability on one's personal accomplishments. Whereas, collectivism is defined as assumption in which groups bind and mutually obligate individuals (Daphna, Coon and Kemmelmeier, 2002).

Cross-cultural researchers' observations slightly differ somewhat concerning the dimensions of individualism and collectivism in terms of its effects on communities. While, some researchers assert that the distinction between individualistic and collectivistic cultural values influence work-teams' compositions, processes and outcomes, others observe that the collectivist values emphasise social community, collective goals, harmony and self-concept rooted in the collective parallel attributes of high-performing teams (Sosik et al., 2002).

Most systems and philosophical debates appeared unbalanced on the scale of jointly adoption of underlying factors of individualism and collectivism. Some widely welcomed individualism and widened its scope at the expense of collectivism to the point that selfishness, tarnishing community's bonding and dispersing its collectivised approach. Conversely, others superiorly embraced collectivism to the point that it nearly neglects individual structure for it deemed individual as just a weak device, which structure only represents single entity of group (Nouh, 1993). The biased approach towards the two views leads to the birth of two ideologies namely Capitalism and Communism as elaborated in the following quotations:

Capitalism in the Western world stands on the principle of human individuality. It widens individual's scope of thinking towards embracing individualism and leaves up to him/her freedom of act in various aspects of life, to the extent of harming oneself or others without any boundaries for his/her activities. No scale of values will be taken into considerable account for individual's exaggerated activities. Until he or she is victimised by his/her desires. As a result, individual would regard no virtues or customs…. therefore, ruling system and

society policy will be corrupted as well as the way people perceived life… with all this, individual is only practicing his/her individual rights and no one has legitimate power of depriving him/her this exercise of individual rights… Muhammad Qutub, (1989: 162).

Qutub goes on saying:

Communism as a system in the East is based on principle of human collectivity. It widens group's boundary (the nation), and interdicts all kinds of individual activities. It also forbids sharing of political affairs and shared society governing. Furthermore, communism imposes its systems and orders onto people claiming that it knows their welfare and pride more than they do. Henceforth, it is only the legitimate source of allocating jobs and people's living places. It is even forms their thoughts, feelings and the way they feel. In addition, individual choices under communist system are completely eliminated … it adopts policy of iron and fire in ruling people and spying on them. In the nutshell, any individual reformative approach towards the government is deemed as a high treason and punishable, because it is an evil desire counterattacking the sacred structure of the community. Thus, individual has no value of untouchable entity in itself in isolation of the group… (Muhammad Qutub, 1989: 162-163).

The abovementioned two quotations highlighted how individualism and collectivism are treated in non-Islamic cultures, which as consequence leads to the formation of ideologies that affect humans in one way or another and desperately deprived them or spoilt them with ill sense of individual rights (unlimited freedom of act). However, the two terms have distinctive and peculiar dimensions in Islam.

INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM FROM ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

Unlike what exists in non-Islamic culture, individualism and collectivism are interrelated entities, both of which are needed and inseparable or neglecting one body at the expense of other. To be more precise, individualism has no effective role without collectivism and vice versa (al-Wa'yi, 1990). Thus, both individualism and collectivism as human configuration dimensions are considered within the notion that human race fundamentally consists of dual desires in every aspect of his/her miraculous creation. These dual desires are parallel and opposite of each other, fear and wish, physical energy and incorporeal energy, strictness and leniency (Muhammad Qutub, 1989) are some examples. By having quality of being parallel and opposite to each other, they function as a driving force in connecting human being to dynamic life (Nouh, 1993).

Individualism and collectivism as aforementioned are conditioned to be effective by developing peculiar balance between them -dichotomous desires- whereby no component could be over dominated at the expense of other, in which the end results of equally careful attention is given to the two element of human development simultaneously. Consequently, this balance leads to development of accountable and innovative personalities in the Muslim societies. If this is the case, what makes individualism and collectivism distinctive from Islamic point of view?

INDIVIDUALISM FROM ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

According to al-Nahwi (2008), individualism is considered as one of the necessary fundamental instruments for developing dynamic and effective collectivism. However, its components start to dissipate from the current educational system, which more or less receives indirectly government support to favour the so-called modern educational system over that of traditional educational system.

Individualism from Islamic perspective consists of salient traits of which self-building is one and accountability before Allah (God) is the other.

Self-building elements

In bringing up accountable individuals who play their roles as effective components of Islamic state, Islamic education has infused and emphasised some elements that build Muslim personality at the early stages of his/her life. The followings are some of these elements:

(1) Creating link with Allah (God) regularly. This is extremely essential to building Muslim personality in the early stages of his/her life in order to be freed from anxiety and mental disorders. This could be done by strengthening the implementation of *Rusulullah's* advice to Abdullah bin Abass: "Young man, I shall teach you some words [of advice]: Be mindful of Allah, and Allah will protect you. Be mindful of Allah, and you will find Him before you. If you ask, ask of Allah; if you seek help, seek help of Allah. Know that if the nation were to gather to benefit you with anything, it would benefit you only with something that Allah had already prescribed for you, and that if they gather to harm you with anything, they would harm you only with something Allah had already prescribed for you. The pens have been lifted and the pages have dried." (Ahmad ibn Hanbal, 5:2805).

(2) Emotional stability and balance. Developing this trait in early stages, leads to grounded awareness in the heart of Muslim, God consciousness, tranquillity, stability and balance at one hand. On the other hand,

it prevents oneself from chronological factors of fear, anxiety and confusion. "Allah [God] will keep firm those who believe, with the word that stands firm in this world (i.e. they will keep on worshipping Allah alone none else…..)" (Qur'an, *Ibrahim*: 27).

(3) Patience at hardships. Education inculcates spirit of patience and straggle with life challenges by always reminding human race "… and those who are *Sabbirin* (the patient ones, etc.) in extreme poverty and ailment and at the time of fighting. Such are the people of the truth and they are *al-Mutaqen*" (Qur'an, *al-Babqrah*: 177).

(4) Flexibility in facing Reality. This trait is considered as one of the most vital element that prevents humans from anxiety and mental disorders "… and it may be that you dislike a thing which is good for and that you like a thing which is bad for you. Allah knows but you do not know" (Qur'an, *al-Baqarah*: 126).

(5) Optimism. Education system should infuse in the heart of learners a sense of being always optimistic and avoid feeling of despair "… and never give up hope of Allah's mercy. Certainly, no one despairs of Allah's mercy, except the people who disbelieve" (Qur'an, *Yusuf*: 87). Meanwhile, Allah has promised believers in Him that His assistance and help will always be with them, and that He is very close to them at any moment "and when My slaves ask you (O Muhammad) concerning Me, then (answer them), I am indeed near (to them by My knowledge). I respond to the invocations of the supplicant when he calls Me, so that they may be led aright" (Qur'an, *al-baqarah*: 186).

(6) Uniqueness of Muslim personality. Whereby Islam has assigned orientation responsibilities to the future leaders, as early as before the age of puberty in order to build accountability in them before the legal period of executing their social responsibilities, which is a proper balance of sound psychological foundations, that would enable him/her controlling instincts and gives a high degree of self-satisfaction due to the faith and early education, which awakens the conscience and strengthen the relationship to Allah.

(7) Socialisation: In line with developing socialised individuals who are always ready to sacrifice for their fellow citizens, Islamic education imbues Islamic values that reflect the status of Muslim communities and their social values, which build on principles of mutual cooperation in righteousness and piety. This socialisation makes of them as one body that exercises tolerance and forgiveness, which in turn strengthens stability and psychological balance "the good and the evil deed cannot be equal. Repel (the evil) with one which is better (i.e. Allah ordered the

faithful believers to be patient at the time of anger, and to excuse those who treat them badly), then verily! He, between whom and you there was enmity (will become) as though he was a close friend. However, none is granted it (the above quality) except those who are patient, and none is granted it except the owner of the great portion (of the happiness in the hereafter i.e. Paradise and in this world of a high moral character" (Qur'an, *Fussilat*: 34-35).

Accountability

Taking into account individual as a first brick of the society, continuity of the society could be on the shaking foundation without having accountable individual personality developed in the first instant (Khalid Ahmad, 2008). Accountability as a sub-element that individualism infuses, highlighting its basic principles is imperative:

(1) Linking educational objectives with lived reality. Islamic educational system through developing accountability should infuse and emphasise the importance of knowledge across the syllabus and that it is a mean to an end. In other words, knowledge leads to recognition of the Creator. To realise this educational objectives, two types of knowledge should be inculcated namely; knowledge to manage self, which builds unique and dynamic individuals, and knowledge to manage the system, which in line with innovation in light of collectivism (Professor Sidek Baba, personal communication, February 3, 2010). By so doing, the mission of being vicegerent of Allah on the earth would be fulfilled.

(2) Awareness. It is very important at this stage to create awareness to the mission of individuals as existing beings on this earth, and that they have huge responsibility to fulfil in this life "Do you then think that We made you in vain and you are not to return to Us" (Qur'an, *al-Muminun*: 115). Thus, individuals are created for utmost mission and are accountable and responsible towards themselves, their society, environment etc. in fulfilling *Amanah* (trust) bestowed on them. An outspoken Muslim scholar, Yasir Fazaga said and I quote "we should watch [mindful] about our thoughts, for our thoughts become our words. We should watch our worlds, for our words become our actions. We should watch our actions, for our actions become our habits. We should watch our habits, for our habits become our character. We should watch our character, for our character becomes our destiny".

These traits according to Nouh (1993), lead to positive effects that sway a person's role individually and collectively. First, exercising insight and thought; knowing that the bounty of thought is a religious duty of Muslim before Allah, for this

reason, Muslim always feels that inadvertence of thinking about him/herself and the surroundings would prevent him/her from being effective on this earth; consequently, he/she would be subjected to the punishment of Almighty. It is narrated by the holy prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to have commented on the verse "Verily! In the creation of heavens and earth, and in the alternation of day and night, there are indeed signs for men of understanding" (Qur'an, *'Alemran*: 190) "Woe for who reads it and does not think about it". This sense of responsibility both individually and collectively will definitely contribute to the effectiveness of young generations in their professional expertise and career suitability in the *Ummah*.

Secondly, escalating the effort and activity; this is a direct outcome of true embracing (exercising insight and thought) because Muslim strongly believes that nothing comes from vacuum "as those who strive in Us 'Our cause', We will surely guide them to Our paths 'i. e. Allah's religion –Islam Monotheism'. And verily, Allah with good doers" (Qur'an, *'Alemran*: 69). Nouh (1993) states that a Muslim who has realised his/her individuality is always looking forward to enlarging his/her daily activities to be able to manage life affairs.

It is undeniable fact that having educational curriculum designers who vigorously exhibit this approach at ministries of education would contribute a great deal to the improvement of educational institutions' products and their competitiveness in academic field most particularly in Muslim world.

Thirdly, participation with effective ideas; humans are not infallible beings, thus their life is not absolute, which outlines the way for a Muslim to uphold effective individual component by participating and exchanging ideas. This participation is religious-motivated in the first place and self-actualisation in the second place.

Fourthly, giving and accepting advice; this individual trait, according to Nouh (1993), would create awareness of individual human characteristics that human nature is fallible as such; individual needs to adopts sense of giving advice and accepting it from others in order to remedy human errors for the sake of creating healthy community and lifestyle.

Lastly, self-accountability; this individualistic trait makes Muslim individual to be always held himself accountable and responsible for errors committed and correct them. Because he/she is not an absolute being, thus, making mistake is normal in human activities, in fact, it reflects the nature of being human, but the problem is to persist and deny the possibility of correction, which in turn will lead to mistake-oriented, stubborn and arrogant individuals.

These, are some traits of individualism, which build accountable individuals that constitute fundamental bricks for effective, intellectual and civilised generations.

COLLECTIVISM FROM ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

Collectivism as a human desire has numerous traits that affect human activities if it is appropriately regarded with desired limits within the scope of individual inner well being (Ali Mohammed, 2006). These desired traits of which, according to Nouh (1993), are:

(1) Self-discovering, whereby the status of collectivism helps individual discover qualities or otherwise hidden in his/her inner personality structure. It has been argued, however, that no matter how clever someone could be, self-discovering is not possibly comprehended completely in isolating oneself from collectivism. Therefore, interaction with others will draw attention to the acceptable criterion of social and ethical mainstreams. The saying of the holy prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) supports this view "believer is like a mirror to his fellow brother…" (al-Nas'ai, 1972). As such, developing qualities and getting rid of the downfalls should be exercised.

(2) Correcting deviation, the functionality of this trait automatically comes after discovering oneself. Thus, embracing collectivism socialisation provides right platform to learn from one another by observing, advising, etc to place individual qualities to the best of human activities.

(3) Utilising various energies, this connotes the desires embedded in human instinct. Thus, effective balancing of these desires, Muhammad Qutub (1989) states that Islam is an instinct religion, the religious state of instinct is peculiar in collectivism, authentic in individualism. Thus, humans constantly twisted between two opposite desires which need comprehensive balance that equally function by the two opposite desires simultaneously.

(4) Transmitting spirit of optimism, habituating sense of collectiveness develops a strong belief of individual entity, which empowers his/her confidence of belongingness. Consequently, individual constantly feels that the group will never leave him/her aside helplessly. This feeling develops proactive individuals who contribute individually and collectively and;

(5) Gaining credible experience, penetrating tendency of collectivism allows individual to acquire various types of experience, because group environment provides rich platform of experience, partly because,

group members have different mindsets, which experience different life events (Nouh, 1993).

After outlining some dimensions of individualism and collectivism from Islamic perspectives, the key question, which needs to be addressed, is how education could create effective balance between the two dimensions.

Undoubtedly, these traits are intertwined and theoretically enlightening. However, it might appear to be challenging when they are carried to the practical field of academic mainstream. Contrarily, the researcher is of the opinion that these traits would not pose any hindrance. Partly because, they can be transmitted within the umbrella of educational curriculum manifested by the ministry of education, which he believes to be the utmost effective body to infuse within the young generation effective and dynamic sense of balance with these traits. Muhammad Qutub (1989) emphasises that having a balanced person in his individuality with balanced tendency to collectivism is a must.

Given this standpoint, there are certain measures that are imperative if this mission to be realised. The following techniques are vital with reference to the creation of effective balance between accountability and innovation.

INTEGRATING INDIVIDUALISM AND COLLECTIVISM

It is worth mentioning after addressing individualism and collectivism that these two traits/dimensions are authentic in human nature, as such, balancing the two traits is a must. According to Kling (as cited in Salah, 2008), the principle in this regard is that, the law of sincerity, determination of presence and eternity, affirm that collectivism empowers individualism and vice versa, success is granted to whoever abide by this rule, and death is attributed to whoever abstained from it.

To achieve positive balance between individualism and collectivism, it is imperative for educational planners to instrumentally guide individual in such a way that he/she always feels affiliated to the society, at the same time feels he/she is a part of this positive entity, and as part of its strength, recognises that his strength is vain if isolated from the society. As such, his strength must be united with other forces to generate the greatest power in the existence. Given this stand, the following techniques should be considered:

(1) Awareness, that is individual must understand and fully comprehend the necessity of group and its importance to him in the life. Similarly, he must understand principles of working collectively, and his duties towards entire group at one hand (Salah,

2008). On the other hand, group also must recognise the status and position of individuals within it. The group must also understand that individual within the group is positive force that should be effectively utilised, and the impact of individualism on the collective success of the civilisations. Meaning to say, the two dimensions are inseparable, and it is the role of education to inculcate inseparability of the two dimensions within educational syllabi from basic education through higher learning institutions, in order to build such a tremendous character in the young generations.

(2) Effective participation, in such a way individual is a positive element of the group, executing his social responsibilities, using his intellect and valuable opinions for the interest and betterment and prosperity of the group.

(3) Collective responsibility toward individual, whereby the group play effective role in nurturing individual and exercising whatever necessary for individual well being. Moreover, the group should also prevent any obstacle that might jeopardise individual progress intellectually, physically, socially etc. and provide him right platform to develop and express his/her thoughts and ideas, which should be considered and appreciated.

(4) Promoting sense of responsibility that is education must focus on bringing up individual that upholds individualistic and collective responsibility, in such a way that he feels that he has special responsibilities to fulfil. Nonetheless, he should feel personal responsibility toward the group that he has to carry out. The failure of the group is attributed to the fact that individuals fail to play their role as effective components of the group, partly because he is responsible for realising the success with the group, and he is not responsible for his part per se but the entire group.

Put succinctly, having only accountable competent of individuals at the workplace or educational setting is not enough for realising successful and progressive communities. Rather there should be a conducive environment, which is a synergy-oriented among the entire members of the community, and supports collective approach of working together as well as developing desires of collectivism and individualism simultaneously in group members to work cooperatively for the betterment of their society in particular and for humanity at large (Holpp, 1999).

CONCLUSION

Individualism and collectivism from Islamic perspective are inseparable characteristics imbued in human innate that need to be carefully balanced across educational syllabus. This draws attention of educational planners to create effective balance

between individualism and collectivism and revitalise those two dimensions from Islamic perspective if the *Ummah* is to regain its intellectual expertise and leadership in the scholarship arena. Individualism and collectivism from Islamic perspective represent intertwined dimensions, which are inseparable. Islam considers these two desires as inborn in humans, which need to be nurtured side by side to develop effective, accountable and innovative personalities. If educational authorities overlook this effective equilibrium, the functionality of one dimension would lead to chaotic situation among graduates produced by educational sector, as it is obvious in the capitalist and communist cultures.

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