

Researchers map 'self-regulation' to develop comprehensive definition

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The term "self-regulation" has started appearing in children's report cards of late, but what it means is often unclear to parents. Thanks to three York University researchers, who have created a clear-cut definition for learning this important psychological concept, parents and teachers can now have a better understanding of what "self-regulation" means and how they can help their children develop that capacity.

"My hope is that every parent whose child has had a meltdown in a mall, and every teacher who has to work hard every day to prevent something similar from happening in their classroom, will recognize the value of improving the understanding of why such a thing happens," explains Jeremy Burman, lead author of a new study on self-regulation and a PhD candidate in the Department of Psychology.

"Currently there is no widely accepted definition for self-regulation, but there exist dozens of competing perspectives with slightly different emphases," says Burman. "Any one scientific study can address only a handful of these. And that means our understanding is badly fragmented."

The commonly used word in psychology and education is often misunderstood, according to Burman and his co-authors Professor Christopher Green and Professor Stuart Shanker, because it is used to convey several different interrelated ideas.

"It's a hot new topic. And we knew that the inconsistency in academic

literature was a problem. But we didn't know how big an issue it was until Professor Shanker started hearing complaints from confused parents and teachers. To address this, we synthesized a simple description using new [digital humanities](#) methods developed in collaboration with Professor Green's lab," says Burman, who had previously spent five years serving as an advisor to PsycINFO, the American Psychological Association (APA)'s search engine.

Briefly put, "learning 'self-regulation' involves learning how to monitor and manage your internal states, understanding what it feels like to be [calm and alert](#), and so also learning to recognize when certain activities help you to return yourself to those states most easily, as well as what pulls you out of them," according to the Faculty of Health researchers who delved into the concept in-depth.

"Our aim was to show the range of technical meanings that influence the understanding of 'self-regulation' by various audiences," notes Professor Shanker, a noted researcher on the topic and author of *Calm, Alert, and Learning: Classroom Strategies for Self-Regulation*.

Shanker adds, "However, we were also able to go further to provide an overview of what can be said about self-regulation in psychology and, at the same time, urge caution on how different partial interpretations can alter the sense of the fundamental phenomenon."

For the study, the researchers examined the 447 possible interpretations of "self-regulation" and their interconnected meanings, focusing on how the APA defines the associated terms.

The study revealed that self-regulation can be fully described using an easy-to-navigate map that charts the locations of all of the terms, and highlights the 88 most relevant among them. Modularity analysis also showed that everything could be reduced to just six broad conceptual

areas. The authors then identified that these six areas could in turn be located along two broad and intuitive axes.

The study, "[On the meanings of self-regulation: Digital humanities in service of conceptual clarity](#)," is published online ahead of print in *Child Development*, the leading peer-reviewed journal. The resulting analyses showed how similar ideas—self-control, self-management, self-observation, learning, social behavior, and the personality constructs related to self-monitoring—are all interrelated.

The next step, according to Burman, is to advance the method itself: "we intend to use a similar approach to break down the ways in which those meanings are used in the scientific literature, and connect them to the best-supported interventions that address the required needs in just the right way. When there are thousands of partially-conflicting studies, with new ones being published every day, you can't just 'read more.' You need to approach the subject in a different way."

Provided by York University

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