

Towards An Understanding of Self-Regulation in Children: Parental Perspectives among the Khasi Community

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Abstract

The foundation of self-regulation lies in the early childhood phase and grows expansively over the first decade of the lifespan. Self-regulation is an important predictor of positive outcomes as seen in the previous literature. This study attempts to gain an understanding into the perceptions of self-regulation among parents. A qualitative approach was adopted to fulfil the aim of this paper. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted on parents who had children between the ages three and seven. The transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis. The global theme that emerged was motivation. Organizing themes that emerged were intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. There are various basic themes that emerged under each of the organizing themes. The study concludes that parents conceptualize self-regulation in children as motivated behaviour that is driven by having goal; that is subservient to authority; that is driven by factors such as temperament and the self-autonomous or independence that the child exerts.

Keywords: Self-regulation, Early childhood, Parenting, Parental perceptions.

Introduction

In the first decade of life, a child goes through many developmental milestones. Developmental psychology scholars agree that early childhood is the period from end of toddlerhood, which is, three years of age and extends to the age of five to six (Berk, 2017; Feldman, 2017). Many cognitive and social constructs are solidified in this period such as inhibition, planning, self-regulation (Berk, 2017).

Self-Regulatory Behaviour

Self-regulation is conceptualized as the ability to engage in goal directed behaviour and cognitions (Vohs and Baumeister, 2016), the ability to plan, monitor and guide one's own behaviour (Grolnick and Ryan, 2002), the delay of gratification (Mischel, 1974) and emotional regulation (Eisenberg and Fabes, 1992). These are considered as components of self-regulation. Poor self-regulation has further been studied in its correlation to higher risk of substance abuse, physical ailments such as obesity, psychopathology, violence, criminal behaviour (Bridgett *et al.*, 2015).

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The construct of self-regulation is emerges in the early childhood phase of development. In Kopp's (1982) conceptualization of the development of self-regulation, it is only at the age of three or four that true self-control emerges where the child is able to regulate and control their behaviour without adult supervision. It is at this stage that a child starts generally starts school; in such settings, that self-regulatory behaviour becomes crucial where the child has extended interactions with peers and teachers (McClelland and Cameron, 2011). Further, self-regulation has seen to predict long-term academic achievement and positive classroom behaviour.

Self-regulatory Behaviour in Early Childhood: Antecedents and Consequents

There are various factors that account for its development in early childhood including the child attributes. Montroy *et al.* (2016) showed that the trajectory of the child would take was dependent on child attributes such as gender and language and background characteristics such as mother's education. Furthermore, Suveg *et al.* (2017) showed that mutual cooperation, reciprocity, in the mother-child dyad has an association with child's self-regulatory behaviour regardless of the family risk status.

Studies have found that family income was associated with self-regulation. In particular, children who come from lower SES have shown to experience greater challenges when it comes to regulation than their peers from higher SES. Further studies have also showed that a higher family income to be positively associated with cognitive self-regulation, but not with emotional self-regulation (Piotrowski *et al.*, 2013; Li *et al.*, 2017).

Two key variable construct of self-regulation are age and gender. Self-regulatory skills of a child improve as they become older (Raffaelli *et al.*, 2005; Piotrowski *et al.*, 2013). In Hong *et al.* (2017) and in Raffalli *et al.* (2005), female children had better self-regulatory skills as opposed to male children in both the studies. High activity temperament in males was also seen as a mediating factor in the differences in gender.

In relation to culture, children from cultures that are inclined to an interdependent show greater self-regulatory behaviour rather than cultures that prefer an independent sense of self. Studies have found that children from a collectivist culture (Nso, Korean, Chinese, Cameroonian) were able to delay their gratification for longer as opposed to those from individualist culture (German, American) (LeCuyer and Zhang, 2015; Lamm *et al.*, 2017).

In outcomes measures of greater self-regulation studies (Eiden *et al.*, 2009; McKown *et al.*, 2009; Sawyer *et al.*, 2015; van Prooijen *et al.*, 2018) showed that self-regulation predicts social competence, with prosocial behaviour at age four/five in an Australian sample had lower levels of behavioural problems and lower externalizing problem behaviour.

Role of Parenting in Self-Regulatory Behaviour

The child's initial interaction with the social world is through the primary care-givers which in most cases are the parents. Barker (2018) notes that parental characteristics,

parenting styles, involvement, sensitivity, parent-child relationships have bearings on the how a child is able to regulate their behaviour. This shows that a nurturing environment provide a trajectory for a child to develop better self-regulation. The contrary is also true, where harsh, negative and insensitive parenting, does lead to deficiency in the way the child develops self-regulation. Among Mexican families it was found that children who lived in families that were conducive of learning and those whose parents exerted more control showed greater self-regulation. “Respect” and “being well educated” were shown as factors that guide parental expectations of children’s behaviour. (Diaz and McClelland, 2017). Raval *et al.* (2018) showed the increase of positive affect socialization among parents and adolescent girls leads to better emotional regulation among the latter.

From a Self-Determination perspective, Joussemet *et al.* (2008) suggest that in line with the Self-Determination Theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985), autonomy support in the familial context is associated with a host of positive child outcomes, one of which is that of a self-regulation. This indicates that a child will be able to have better self-regulation when there is a facilitative environment.

Need and Significance

It is essential, as pointed out in Jaramillo *et al.* (2017), to contextualize self-regulation to different cultural frameworks and socialization strategies. Further these contribute to the growing evidence that parental socialization with respect to ideals and practice are factors that shape the developmental pathways of a child. There are a few gaps in the literature as well. The focus on how parents perceive and understand their child’s self-regulatory behaviour was very little in the literature.

Research Question

How do parents perceive self-regulatory behaviour in their young children?

Method

Approach

This study adopted a qualitative approach. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) have opined that there is a consensus among researchers that qualitative research is a naturalistic, interpretative approach. It concerns itself with the understanding and the meanings which people attach to phenomena (be it actions, decisions, beliefs, values etc.) within their social world.

Participants

The participants for this study were sampled from Shillong, Meghalaya, India. Purposive sampling technique was employed. Parents with two or three children in the age range of three to seven and who are from a middle socio-economic background (as assessed using Kuppaswamy’s Socioeconomic Scale; Saleem, 2018) and a homogenous cultural background were taken the purpose of this study. Furthermore, parents with history of

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alcohol or drug abuse, with a psychiatric/medical condition, (as assessed using General Health Questionnaire-28; Goldberg and Hillier, 1979), and with adopted children were not considered for the study.

Data collection

The participants were interviewed individually so as to avoid social desirability. Semi-structured interviews were conducted that lasted between 35-50 minutes. This was done only after obtaining informed consent from the participants. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw. Following the interview a debriefing was carried out. The interviews were recorded on a mobile application and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, a qualitative analytic method, was used to analyse the transcripts of the interviews collected. Thematic analysis is ‘a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) have also suggested a six step method of thematic analysis which was followed for the present study. These steps include familiarizing ourselves with our data through multiple reading. After multiple readings preliminary codes are assigned to our data in order to describe the content. Within the codes, a search for patterns or themes in our codes across the different interviews is done. When this is completed a review of the themes is done, wherein some of the common themes are merged, discarded or renamed. Following this the themes are defined and given names and finally a report is produced wherein an analysis of themes is done. Further, to retain confidentiality, all participant names were replaced with initials.

Validity of the study

The interview guide (Appendix A) was validated three methodology and subject experts before going forward with the data collection. Further, in analysing data, memos were containing the initial thoughts, comments and additional questions of the researcher. The additional questions which needed further clarification were sent to the participants for their responses.

When the analysis was completed member check was used to validate findings (Creswell, 2007) where the participants were contacted to comment on the accuracy of analysis and interpretation of their responses. The transcripts of the interviews were sent to the participants via email and they were asked about the accuracy of interpretations made by the researcher. All of them confirmed that the findings channelized the essence of their responses. Some of them did not respond in detail and only approval was inferred; one participant contacted the researcher to discuss one of the aspects of the findings and how it can be improved upon in their child’s life.

Results and Discussion

The study sample consisted of parents belonging to the Khasi community of Meghalaya from a middle socio-economic status and with no history of alcohol or drug abuse and without psychiatric and/or medical conditions. Mean age was 43 years and age range was 38-49 years.

Thematic analysis of interview data identified one global theme: motivation. (Table 1). The organizing theme and basic have been subsequently laid out.

Table 1. Themes that emerged from the transcripts

Global theme	Organizing theme	Basic theme
1. Motivation	1.1 Intrinsic motivation	1.1.1 Control of emotions
		1.1.2 Temperament of the child
		1.2.1 Autonomy given to the child
		1.2.2 Independent choice making
	1.2 Autonomy	1.3.1 Learning by watching
		1.3.2 Intergenerational transmission
		1.3.3 Goal-Oriented behaviour from parents
		1.3.4 Goal Orientedness from schools
	1.3 Extrinsic motivation	

1. Motivation

As a concept, motivation has been studied from various perspectives. From a self-determination approach, motivation has been thought of as the beliefs, goals, expectations that one possess. It is also distinguishes motivation as being intrinsically and extrinsically oriented (Ryan and Deci, 2002; Feldman, 2017). These orientations of motivation are distinct from levels of motivation in that they are concerned with the why aspect of behaviour. Motivation is a key force in human behaviour and interactions. For example it drives us to engage in prosocial behaviour such as volunteering (Finkelstien, 2009). In terms of the data gathered, being motivated emerged as a theme that was recurring through the transcripts, though in different manifestations. In this way, the participants

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have conceptualized the way in which their children control or regulate their behaviour is through having certain motivating factors within themselves or those which are external. Subsequently, the three organizing themes are intrinsic motivation, autonomy and extrinsic motivation.

1.1. Intrinsic motivation. According to Ryan and Deci (2002), intrinsic motivation is where an individual does an activity for ‘its inherent satisfaction’ as opposed to being influenced by its consequences. In the data analysis it was seen that there were some factors that the participants attributed to the internal workings of the child’s mind or those that are part of the child’s personality. These are seen as working independent of the rewards. There are two basic themes under this organizing theme – control of emotions and temperament of the child. These two are seen as not being influenced by external rewards.

1.1.1. Control of emotions. Emotional regulation has been seen as an important factor in the socialization of an individual. Fisher and Manstead (2016) have commented on the social functions of emotions as having evolutionary origins in terms of meeting survival and reproduction goals. In line with a similar thought, Suri *et al.* (2015) also comments on the way emotional regulation is used to maintain relationships, closeness and cooperation. These are seen as being inherent in the child. Eisenberg and Fabes (1992) have also included emotional regulation to be one component of self-regulation. For example:

“[W]hen he loses he tries to react that he has lost but usually takes just a few minutes for him to calm down” (OJK, Personal Communication, 2019).

Controlling one’s emotion emerged as one of the basic themes through the interviews. The recurring notions of a child being able to soothe oneself in the face of distressing situations, the ability to calm down from an excitable state and the management or ability to control their own anger

1.1.2. Temperament of the Child. Temperament is defined as a pattern of thought and behaviour that is consistent over time. These include the personal values, morals, expectations, defences, coping strategies. With most of these characteristics being internal dispositions or nature of the child these can be viewed as being strongly self-regulatory and often considered to be at the core of the child’s temperament (Rothbart *et al.*, 2011; Atherton *et al.*, 2019). When asked about how a participant perceived the ability to self-regulate, the following was the response:

“[A]s a parent...these type of behaviors that he had exhibited I feel that number one these are inherent characteristics of as a child he passes through that phase of growing up especially at that age group” (FRS, personal communication, 2019).

In relation to this Kopp’s model (1982) posits that self-regulation emerges only after 3-4 years of age. Posner and Rothbart (2007) also posit that it is only at this age that executive

attention system is fine-tuned as evidenced in the child's effortful control. Additionally Kiss *et al.* (2014) in their review have found that the development of self-regulation in early childhood is dependant upon the child's temperamental traits and the influences of parental and environmental factors.

1.2. Autonomy. From a self-determination theory perspective, when a person is autonomously motivated they act with a sense of willingness and their own volition (Deci and Ryan, 2012). The sense of being able to take direct action that will result in real change plays a major part in helping people feel self-determined. Under this theme two basic themes emerge – autonomy of the child and independent choice-making

1.2.1. Autonomy of the child. This basic theme is related to how a child initiates their own actions and also the ability to reason out with their parents on various topics such as the modification of a study routine or even studying on one's own accord. Participants conceptualize this as being an important part of the child's general repertoire of behaviour. In particular they also viewed it as a process of taking responsibilities on various aspects of their lives. These actions are usually intrinsically motivated and it may also include an element of effortful control where a dominant response is substituted for a sub-dominant response (Posner & Rothbart, 1985).

For example:

“[W]hen he had just joined school I used to be there while he studies but as he moved on from one class to the other he try to take that responsibility on his own” (OJK, personal communication, 2019)

Studies have argued that autonomy is a western concept that is inapplicable to the eastern cultures (Iyengar and DeVoe, 2003). However, there has been some evidence in terms of autonomous behaviour as enhancing well-being irrespective of cultural backgrounds (Chirkov *et al.*, 2003). In the data as well, autonomous behaviour such as those related to doing one's own work on time, taking actions on one's own and independent choice making, emerged as themes while discussing self-regulation.

1.2.2. Independent choice making. This basic theme related to how a child makes decisions on one's own. Most of the participants implied that this decision making was linked to the amount of independence that was given to the child.

For example, participant EWS expressed:

“They need that as well because sometimes as parents I feel, especially me I'm very strict with them. So they need to have an outlet and they need to have their own decision otherwise I don't want them to be constantly scared or not being able to make independent choices” (EWS, personal communication, 2019)

In the little space that was mentioned in many of the transcripts, three common areas of independent choice making were seen in terms of food, clothing, and toys. Other areas were in terms of when to study, hobbies and choice of outing place. Participants in

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the study viewed this as a way in which the child is able to express their own individuality, express their likes and dislikes and to express their age-appropriate behaviour as well. Participants also believed that this choice-making however, should be in context to what they felt are needed for the child and not that a child should have a free hand at everything. In the context of self-regulation, independent choice making can be seen in terms of the ability to plan one's own behavior, in line with Grolnick and Ryan's (2002) conceptualization.

1.3. Extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation refers to behaviour that is driven by external rewards (Ryan and Deci, 2002). Within the data that was collected, behavioural self-regulation was also contextualized to external social world and in the influence of the 'other'. This 'other' may include a person of authority such as parents or teachers, peers and society at large.

1.3.1. Learning by watching. Learning by watching or as Bandura terms it as 'observational learning' has been studied extensively in various contexts. Fryling *et al.* (2011) have given an extensive review of the literature surrounding observational learning. Among the participants, it was also seen that some of the self-regulatory behaviours are learnt behaviours either from parent, from media sources such as films, cartoon characters. This is also an example of how the parents own self-regulation has contributed to the child's self-regulation, where on observing the parent doing certain actions, the child may be motivated or inspired to model these behaviours. It is also perceived as how the children learn new and adaptive behaviours as well. For example,

"I think they have observed it...since I was a joint family so I guess they have seen that I listen to my mother, so they, I think they, just take me that way probably then we have to listen to dad because I tell them sometimes if they don't listen too" (SS, personal communication, 2019)

This also leads to the notion of deferring to authority is very strongly echoed in the data that has been gathered. Participants conceived this deference as being related to behavioural self-regulation in the way of 'control' aspect of behavioural self-regulation. However, self-regulation is usually understood as something internal and this control that the participants have spoken about is more in terms of an external agent applying a force on the child. For example:

"I'm a father, [and] according to him the perception is that I'm an authority. He will perhaps understand what I'm trying to convey so these are steps as a parent...are effective enough at this point of time to regulate such behaviors" (FRS, personal communication, 2019)

These findings are similar to Díaz and McClelland (2017). In the data gathered, deference to authority has been understood in terms of compliance to scoldings, understanding authority figures. The quotes show that by having these authority figures or an understanding of these figures increases the likelihood of increasing self-regulation in children.

1.3.2. Intergenerational Transmission. This theme is again in terms of how a child learns self-regulatory behaviour from parents. This manifests in various ways such as when a child is genetically predisposed to have greater self-regulation. For example, on asking about the way in which the participant has influenced the child, the response was: “I don’t know except genetically I don’t know about influence from environment, the ambiance around, I think he’s too small for that. I think its just genetics” (SN, Personal communication, 2019).

It is also in terms of values of the family or the parents, wherein values and a particular culture or habits have been passed on from generation to generation. The parents perceived that some of these values and ideals have been passed onto their children as well. For example:

“I think when it comes to being discipline I think this is something which I always made sure that you know I’m very particular right from when I was a kid in terms of doing things so I always used to tell them when I was in school you know before I even reached home I’ll finish my homework as I would want to play to do something else. So I try to inculcate that into them as well.” (EWS, Personal communication, 2019).

Here self-regulation is viewed as being disciplined and finishing work on time which the participant has inculcated in herself, she tries to inculcate in the children as well. These behaviours are further internalized by the child. This is also a way in which the contribution of the parents own self-regulatory strategies to those of the child’s. This is also seen for example in a religious context.

“Like for myself I normally have that practice of going to church which have made my younger one feel that yes I have to go and I realized this last Good Friday; I told him its good Friday and we have to go to church since its good Friday and he told me, ‘Today is not a Sunday, you never go to church on a Friday, only on Sunday, I’m not going.’” (IW, Personal communication, 2019)

1.3.3. Goal-orientedness from parents. This basic theme explores how children are given targets from parents to complete certain tasks. Often this has more to do with complying with parent requests and commands, though it guides the behaviours of the children in a productive manner. These request or commands emerge from the fact that they have to delay their gratification or have to work towards reaching the target. This also works along the line of reinforcement. For example:

“Like once a week we buy [a reward] for them, like Friday or the weekend so normally I would tell him that he were a good boy or if you know you do this this this and you prove that you can do it then on Friday, whatever you want I’ll give you. But only Friday, a weekend, that’s how we do it” (IW, Personal communication, 2019).

These goal or target that the parents have set, show that the child will be able to receive something if they are able to behave in ‘proper’ manner. Putting it succinctly, participant

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OJK has this to say about goals:

“[I]f we put a goal in front of them and explain to them the right path and the right way and put a target on them and show them the right way, it should be done in proper way or a correct way then yes they will do that” (OJK, Personal communication, 2019)

1.3.4. Socialization and goal-orientedness from School. Children begin school in the early childhood phase. Their understanding of the social world a child on starting school begins socialization outside the family and begins to interact with peers and teachers. In relation to schooling, play is a key element in the process. Through the process of play, the child learns the process socialization and emotional regulation as well (Joy & Sathiyaseelan, 2018). Further there is also an interaction with formal education system wherein, the child has certain academic goals from the system. For example

“The younger one is in different school and the elder one is in a different school so I have noticed that earlier the younger one when she was in pre nursery, unruly and... she’s very careless, she’ll just throw things around but now I think like last year she was very indiscipline but this year I have noticed quite a change in her like when she comes home she knows when she comes back and when its time for us to know when its time for the kids to do their homework, the little one will take out her book and she will try to solve things on her own so again both of them know when its time for them, like they don’t question anymore.” (EWS, Personal communication, 2019)

Here we see that interaction with the formal education system has increased their behavioural self-regulation. In relation, an interaction with peers can also mold self-regulation, for example:

“I have seen him playing, arguing with his friends or with his peers I find that sometimes he’ll say, ok we’ll do it again. He gets along after that. Its not that after that he stops the game or he comes to me blabbering that this is done and this is done. No, no. that doesn’t happen much. Also in school he follow rules because he knows that in school he has to do it” (OJK, Personal Communication, 2019)

This shows that an interaction with peers in school has moulded the child’s behavioural regulation and emotional regulation.

Limitations and implication of the study

The limitations of this study are that a comprehensive conceptualization of self-regulation would include the perceptions of other stakeholders such as teachers and children. Further, the findings may not be generalizable to the population as the sample is small. Implication include that these findings can be included in intervention programmes to increase self-regulation among children. In addition, these findings can be used in parenting programmes which focus on improving a child’s behavioural and emotional regulation. Future directions of research include a further cross-cultural analysis of perceptions of self-regulation and an inclusion of various stakeholders such as teachers and children as

well.

Conclusion

The themes that emerged from data gathered have been in support of the theorizations of self-regulation as a concept that is multi-dimensional and having many aspects. The perceptions that were gauged show that self-regulation in children as behaviour that is driven by having goal; that is subservient to authority; that is driven by factors such as temperament and the self-autonomous or independent choice making that the child exerts.

Declaration

This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru, India

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Appendix A– Interview Schedule

Interview Guide

1. Can you explain your child's behaviour in situations where he/ she for example, is able to wait for their turn, can he wait till the food arrives, can he/she manage his frustration when he/she loses a game. Does he/she engage in self-talk to regulate his behaviour?
 - What do these behaviours mean to you or how do you interpret them?
 - Do you reward your child based on these abilities (please explain: if yes, how ; if no, why?)
2. Can you give me more examples of such behaviours where he/she is able to regulate his behaviour to suit the given situation?

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3. At home, can you elaborate on the practices that you undertake to enforce/enhance these abilities?

- Can you explain how you perceive such practices?

4. As your child has joined school, can you tell me about the changes that you see in these behaviours?

5. Could you explain to me, some ways in which your child is able to control/regulate his/her behaviour without adult supervision?

6. Can you tell me about your child's behaviour with his/her peers?

7. Can you explain how you encourage your child to be independent?

8. Could you explain when or what are the areas that your child makes his/her own choice?

- Tell me more about it?
- How do you perceive this choice making?

9. Could you explain your own practices in self-regulation. Such as when you have to watch a movie, but you know that you have loads of meetings/work the following day so you decide to go to bed instead of watching it.

10. Can you explain if any such instances have contributed to your child's own self-regulatory behaviour?

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