



Reflections on the Relevance of “Self-Regulation” for Native Communities

The construct of ‘self-regulation’ may be problematic in its applications beyond Euro-American cultures, in part because it implies a self-centered orientation. Instead, the primary orientation of many cultures, including many Native American cultures, is the community. In this brief, we consider ‘self-regulation’ from these divergent perspectives with the intention that the underlying value of the construct and the research underlying ‘self-regulation’ may be made more apparent and relevant for Native communities. Much of the material in this brief is based on work conducted by the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), described in a series of four reports referenced throughout the brief (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/toxic-stress-and-self-regulation-reports>). Through engaged dialogue with tribal colleagues, colleagues working in tribal communities, and additional review of published research, we have attempted to reconcile the disconnect between the focus on the self implied in the self-regulation literature and the community centered orientation of tribal communities. Any remaining issues are solely the responsibility of the primary authors of the Self-Regulation and Toxic Stress series.

Although it sounds like something internal to an individual, self-regulation develops within relationships and is dependent on predictable, responsive and supportive environments.

What is self-regulation and why is it important?

Self-regulation plays a foundational role in promoting well-being across many domains including mental, emotional, and physical health. As a scientific research construct, self-regulation has been defined as the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions (Murray, Rosanbalm, Christopoulos & Hamoudi, 2015), including a variety of actions necessary for success in relationships, school, and the workplace. As such, self-regulation can be thought of as an umbrella construct (see Figure 1) that encompasses many different terms that describe similar skills and processes such as executive functioning, flexibility, and effortful control. Good self-regulation skills promote resilience, coping, stress management, and goal attainment. The development of self-regulation is embedded within relationships and culture. For example, caring adults teach the values of their community as they provide support and guidance beginning in infancy and continuing throughout adulthood.

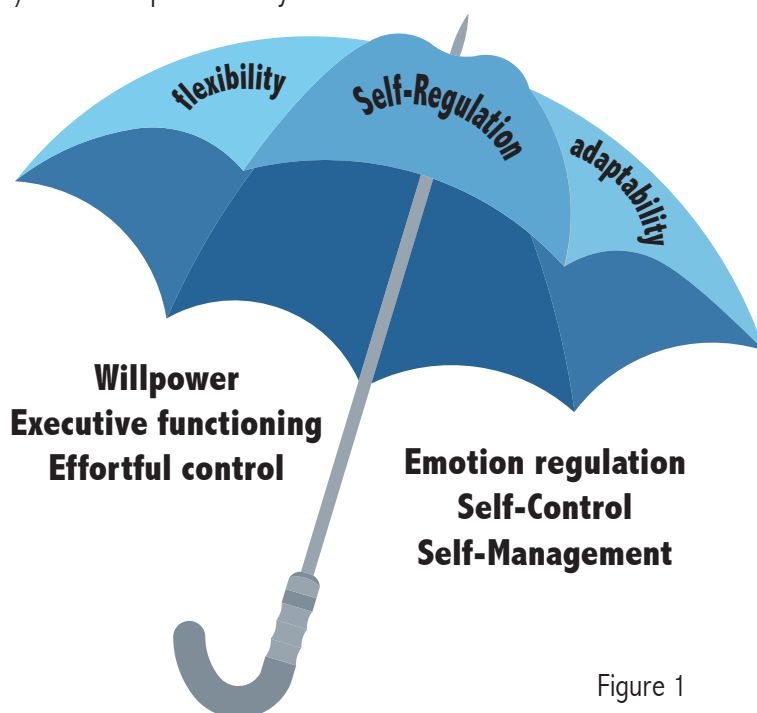


Figure 1

A critical component of how individuals learn self-regulation is through the 'co-regulation' provided by parents and other caregiving adults.

How is self-regulation built?

There is considerable evidence that self-regulation can be strengthened and taught within the context of warm, responsive relationships and with an intentional focus on skill-building (Murray et al., 2016). This process is similar to how literacy is acquired, with multiple opportunities for learning over time. One reason the term “self-regulation” is useful is because it has a strong multi-disciplinary evidence base including many effective interventions (Murray, Rosanbalm & Christopoulos, 2016). A critical component of how individuals learn self-regulation is through the “co-regulation” provided by parents and other caregiving adults. Co-regulation involves warm and responsive interactions in which support, coaching, and modeling is provided to facilitate the ability to understand, express, and modulate thoughts, feelings, and behavior across the lifespan. It is the moment-to-moment interactions between infants/children/youth and their caregivers that are critically important. To learn more about the development of self-regulation in key developmental phases (infants/toddlers, preschool, elementary, middle school, high school, and young adult), a series of snapshots is available online (<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/research/project/toxic-stress-and-self-regulation-reports>). For each phase of development, the reports provide a listing of the affiliated skills developing, a description of what co-regulation looks like, and key considerations for promoting self-regulation.

What are some of the concerns about the term “self-regulation” for Native American communities?

The words that comprise “self-regulation” (e.g., ‘self’ and ‘regulation’) may be problematic for many Native communities that emphasize community and learning through observing, internalizing, and doing. Self-regulation may still be relevant for Native communities because it occurs in relationships, it can be developed through a range of different ways of learning, and it serves the well-being of whole communities. For example, learning how to “self-regulate” is

a relational endeavor with children first learning how to regulate their thoughts, feelings, and emotions in the context of family and community relations; this type of framing is consistent with many Native ways of raising children. Within tribal communities that choose to consider this construct, self-regulation may be better represented by a more global term that is more holistic than the construct used in Euro-American research.

What might a more holistic definition of self-regulation encompass?

According to some Native American scholars, a more holistic definition of self-regulation would refer to a balance among ones’ culture, community and self, with a focus on the whole person including mind, body, emotion, and spirit (Rowan et al., 2014). A holistic definition would also emphasize the interconnectedness of these domains. Being interconnected also means being aware of one’s connections to others, to the land, the water, ancestors, and the spirit world (Harcharek & Rexford, 2015) and behaving in ways that preserve these interconnections. The orange umbrella in Figure 2 provides a revision of the blue umbrella that depicts self-regulation in Figure 1, whereby ideas like community mindedness, interconnectedness, balance, and vision are included to communicate what self-regulation might mean to some Native communities. Tribal languages frequently include words that English speakers might translate as self-regulation, even though these words actually convey a more holistic and community-oriented understanding of the



Figure 2





construct. For example, among the Inúpiaq, Inúguñiq is a construct that conveys the “spirit and essence of one’s experiences in the journey of becoming a whole human being” (Harcharek & Rexford, 2015, p. 25). To be a whole human being, one must have vision (future orientation and knowledge of one’s purpose, otherwise known as goal-directed behavior), have respect and act respectfully, be mindful of the community, and know that we are all interconnected.

In considering the relevance and appropriateness of the Euro-American construct of self-regulation to Native peoples, the development of self-regulation might need to be more clearly defined as a relational process to better fit the collective rather than individualistic focus of many indigenous cultures, in which individual existence is understood as inseparable from social groups such as family and community. The Euro-American construct does specify that self-regulation development occurs in the context of “co-regulation” (e.g., natural, everyday family interactions, as well as instruction, support, coaching, and modeling for self-regulation skills within these and other warm, responsive relationships) (Murray et al., 2015). Yet the specifics of the interactions of co-regulating children and parents or teachers may look different in different families and cultures. For example, in many Native communities there may be less emphasis on direct communication through verbal expression and more focus on watching, listening, modeling, and practicing (Bigfoot, 2011). Instead of direct skills instruction, guidance may be provided through expressive looks, touch, and other nonverbal forms of communication.

Many factors contribute to the extent to which an individual may engage in self-regulation in any situation including one’s biology, skills, motivation, caregiver support, and environmental and historical context.

In the face of prolonged or pronounced stress and adversity, including poverty and trauma at a population level, self-regulation development can be disrupted.

Fortunately, negative trajectories can be reversed with intervention and improved environmental conditions.

The notion of regulating the “self” might need to be altered to better fit the collective focus of many Native cultures where individual existence is understood as inseparable from social groups such as family and community.

Traditional child-rearing practices of Native people include many cultural activities that require physical fitness, the ability to adapt quickly to change, encourage perseverance, and the ability to focus and learn from watching closely and imitating the actions of elders, which may all contribute to the development of self-regulation.

How Native Beliefs, Values, and Practices May Promote Self-Regulation

Although each community and culture is unique and different, Native scholars concur that American Indian and Alaska Native peoples traditionally lived by values that encouraged living in respect, beauty, balance and harmony. From the core values of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy) to the Beauty Way of the Diné (Navajo), living as a traditional member of Native tribes meant learning to live in a way that promoted community harmony and well-being. Intrinsic in this way of life is an emphasis on modeling, teaching and reinforcing how to regulate emotions and behavior such that children develop the ability to successfully act in ways conducive to positive adjustment and adaptation to a rapidly changing environment. Historically, the US government prohibited many of the cultural activities that inculcated these values, and relocation to cities—which further disrupted these—was actively promoted, purportedly as a way to improve the lives of American Indians (Lobo, 2001).

Traditional child-rearing practices of Native people include many cultural activities that require physical fitness, the ability to adapt quickly to change, encourage perseverance, and the ability to focus and learn from watching closely and imitating the actions of elders, which may all contribute to the development of self-regulation. There are a wide range of activities specific to different Native cultures promoting these abilities: a few examples include involving children in traditional dancing, the planting of prayer sticks to

pray for their own tribal communities as well as the world, running for prayer, ceremony, playing traditional stick games, and going on long pilgrimages for religious purposes. In addition, many traditional activities involve music, including singing and drumming as prayer, celebration, and entertainment. Complicated rituals and ceremonies require children to learn through watching, listening, modeling, and oral and visual instruction (Bigfoot, 2011). All of these activities engage attentional control, working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control skills, which underlie cognitive aspects of self-regulation (also known as executive functions).

Native languages may also transmit traditional beliefs and practices related to self-regulation through words, forms of speech, and traditional ways of using language that may not have English equivalents. For example, Allen and Lalonde (2015) illustrated the value of oral storytelling as an effective form of regulating the behavior of others through not only the words being said but also through the use of patterned speech and recurring statements that emphasized key story elements and lessons. Indigenous language learning, as a part of dual or multi-language learning, may also provide a compelling and relevant way for youth to develop the cognitive skills needed to regulate emotions and behavior (Tsethlikai, 2015) as a growing body of research has demonstrated that bilingual youth have better inhibitory control skills than monolingual youth (Sorge, Toplak, & Bialystok, 2016; Bialystok, 2015).





Next steps for understanding self-regulation in Native communities

Although “self-regulation” is a construct that needs clarification and reinterpretation as Native peoples consider its potential usefulness, it may be relevant in many ways, including enhancing the understanding of current and historical challenges within Native communities and providing understanding of and affirmation for traditional cultural beliefs, values, and practices including Native language that may help to protect against further disruption and support cultural reclamation and revitalization efforts. Such beliefs and activities appear to have strong potential for strengthening self-regulation development and promoting resilience and well-being. A growing body of research demonstrates the role of self-regulation for health and wellbeing, although research using Euro-American constructs and methods on self-regulation in Native communities is sparse. Fortunately, emerging research in tribal contexts conducted by researchers supports the use of cultural values and practices to promote academic success, health and well-being (Allen et al. 2017; Donovan et al., 2015; Meyer & Tsethlikai, 2017; Tsethlikai, 2011).

Additionally, there are existing programs in Native communities for child welfare, child care, and youth development in which self-regulation supports could be incorporated, enhanced, or otherwise strengthened (e.g., Youth Leadership Development and Empowerment Programs supported by the Administration for Native Americans within the Administration for Children and Families). Ongoing research and discussion is needed among Native communities, intervention developers, funders, and policymakers to continue articulating the relevance of self-regulation for Native peoples and to leverage the potential of self-regulation informed interventions that are carefully adapted by Native communities in accordance with their cultures and priorities.

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