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Review

Self-regulatory flexibility

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Robust associations of self-control with successful goal pursuit have been amply demonstrated. Much less is known about the psychological processes that occur when people grapple with self-control conflicts and that may contribute to successful goal pursuit. Influenced by the neighboring fields of emotion regulation and coping, self-regulatory flexibility has been identified as one of such potential processes. The aim of this review is to provide an overview of selected models of regulatory flexibility, empirical evidence on associations with self-regulatory success, and to identify avenues for future research.

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Self-regulation, Self-control, Flexibility, Strategies, Repertoire, Variability, Strategy-situation fit.

Self-regulatory flexibility

Self-control helps people to successfully pursue their goals. People with good self-control are physically and mentally healthier, have more academic and professional success, and stable personal relationships [1,2]. Central to the concept of self-control is the presence of conflict between competing motivations [3]. It has been defined as the “ability to override impulses to act, as well as the ability to make oneself initiate or persist in boring, difficult or disliked activity” (p. 477, [4]), consistent with the idea that people typically deal with three

different types of conflict: inhibition, initiation, and persistence [5].

Consider a student who needs to work on a tedious assignment. The student experiences an initiation conflict when they should get started with the assignment but does not feel like it. Once started, a persistence conflict emerges when the student feels like quitting even though they should continue. Finally, an inhibition conflict emerges if a temptation (e.g., an incoming smartphone message) potentially derails the student from working on the assignment.

Traditionally, self-control research mainly focused on the regulation of impulses and desires (i.e., inhibition conflicts). Correspondingly, it has long been assumed that inhibition is the central process that brings about success, but this idea has been increasingly questioned [6,7]. Instead, diverse self-regulatory strategies have come into focus [7,8], inspired by research in the neighboring fields of emotion regulation and coping [9]. For example, consider the student whose attention is caught by an incoming message, evoking a conflict between the goal to focus on the assignment and the allure of the incoming message. The student could react by putting the smartphone in flight mode and/or moving it out of sight (situation modification), by redirecting attention to the assignment without engaging with the smartphone (attentional deployment), or by convincing themselves that the assignment has priority (cognitive change, [10]). All of these (and other) self-regulatory strategies may be effective in this situation. Even though we have used an inhibition conflict as an example, many strategies can be applied to all three types of conflict.

A reasonable idea is to figure out which regulatory strategies are generally more effective than others. Yet, this approach may be too simplistic: Findings from emotion regulation research suggest that strategies that are effective in some contexts can be ineffective or even backfire in others [11,12].

In this article, we present a brief overview of the emerging field of self-regulatory flexibility - the idea that the context-dependent application of self-regulatory strategies to deal with self-control conflicts may help successful goal pursuit. In the first section, we

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present basic ideas and theoretical models of regulatory flexibility. Next, we review recent studies testing some of these theoretical ideas in everyday life contexts. We end by outlining avenues for future research.

What is self-regulatory flexibility?

We define self-regulatory flexibility as the context-dependent application of self-regulatory strategies. A person regulates flexibly when they detect relevant context characteristics and select self-regulatory strategies that they deem promising to deal with the challenges of this context. Note that the idea of self-regulatory flexibility is used in slightly different ways in the literature: Some authors merely refer to this systematic coupling between strategies and context characteristics, independent of whether this coupling is adaptive. After all, a person could reliably opt for an ineffective strategy in a given context. Other authors simply assume that flexible regulation is adaptive [13].

The idea of “context” is used in a broad sense. It can refer to personal features of the actor (e.g., demographics, personality), situational features (e.g., characteristics of the self-control conflict, the presence of other people), and even cultural factors (e.g., cultural

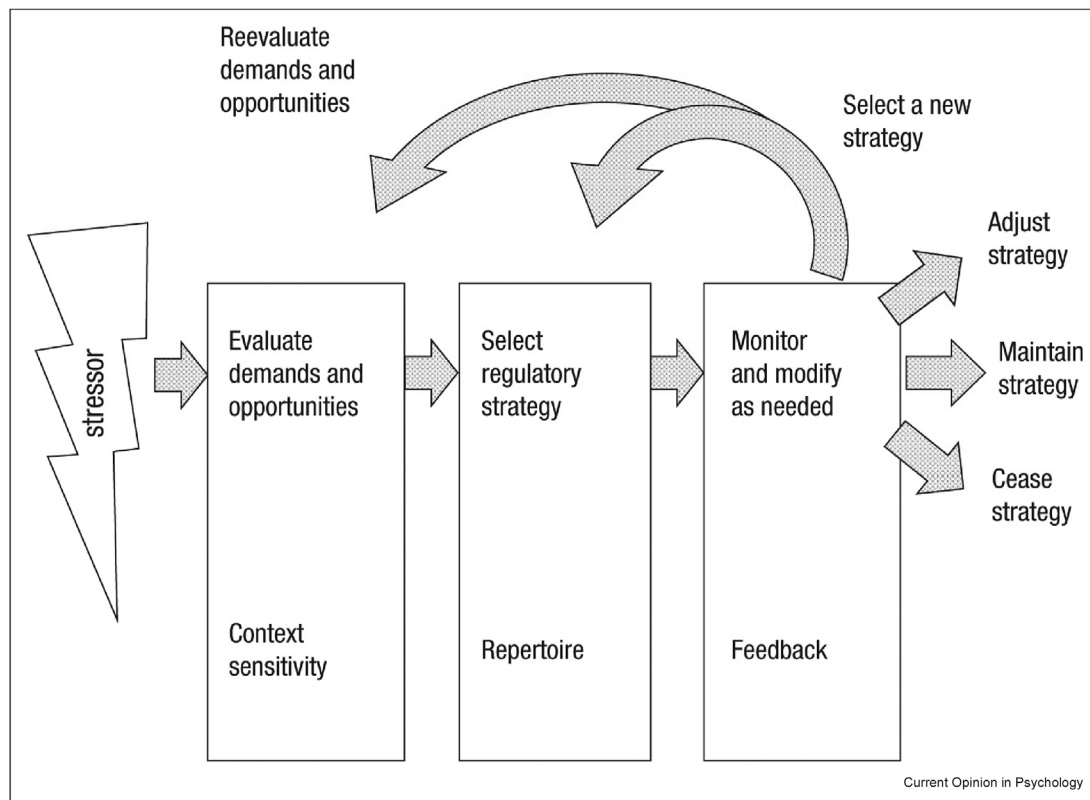
norms, [14]). In extant studies, researchers commonly referred to situational features to operationalize context.

There is considerable heterogeneity in how researchers conceptualized regulatory flexibility [13,15]. We discuss two theoretical models, the Regulatory Flexibility Model [16] and the Translational Framework of Regulatory Flexibility [13]. These models originated in the field of emotion regulation, but can be readily adapted to self-control conflicts. Recent broader models of self-control integrate contemporary thinking about regulatory flexibility even if they do not specifically revolve around this construct [17,18].

The Regulatory Flexibility Model

The Regulatory Flexibility Model [16] postulates three components that together form the construct of regulatory flexibility: *context sensitivity*, *repertoire*, and *feedback* (Figure 1). Persons with high context sensitivity are good at discerning the demands and opportunities of a situational context and to select the most appropriate strategy to address them. Persons with a broad repertoire have access to a large number of self-regulatory strategies. Just like a well-equipped toolbox allows to carry-out many different manual tasks, a broad

Figure 1



The Regulatory Flexibility Model by Bonanno and Burton (2013) [16]. Reprinted with permission.

repertoire allows people to adequately respond to diverse context demands. Finally, people with the ability to monitor feedback are able to detect the efficacy of regulatory efforts during a regulatory episode, adjust these efforts if necessary, and derive lessons learned for future episodes.

The model focuses on individual differences in the three components. For the field of emotion regulation, scales have been developed to assess each component [19–21]. Such scales could also be developed for the handling of self-control conflicts, but this has not been done yet. Of note, although the model focuses on individual differences, it makes assumptions about psychological processes during individual regulatory episodes. It is therefore possible to adapt the assessment of the three components to the level of individual situations.

The Translational Framework of Regulatory Flexibility

The Translational Framework of Regulatory Flexibility [13] operates on the level of individual situations or regulatory episodes. The model distinguishes three concepts: *regulatory variability*, *regulatory flexibility*, and *adaptiveness* (Figure 2). Regulatory variability occurs when a person employs self-regulatory strategies to varying degrees across a series of regulatory episodes. Regulatory variability is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for regulatory flexibility. The latter only emerges when the variability in strategy use is

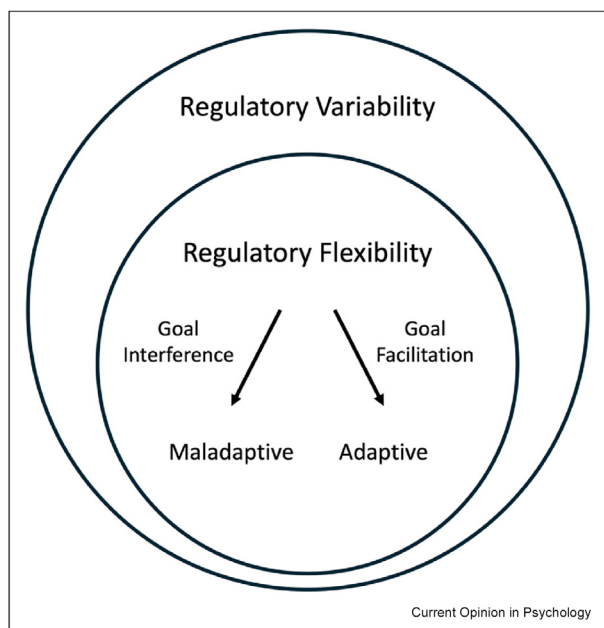
systematically synchronized with context factors (e.g., types of self-control conflict, social features). Finally, regulatory flexibility is adaptive if the systematic covariation of strategy use with context features more likely leads to a desired outcome (e.g., goal progress). When a person systematically responds to a certain challenge by employing an inefficient strategy, we observe regulatory flexibility that is not adaptive.

Regulatory variability can be operationalized in two ways (Figure 3). Within-strategy variability refers to the variability in the extent to which one particular strategy is employed across different regulatory episodes. Between-strategy variability refers to the variability in the extent to which different strategies are employed during one specific regulatory episode. Within-strategy flexibility occurs when the within-strategy variability covaries reliably with context characteristics (e.g., use of a given strategy in context A, but not B).

Between-strategy variability can also vary with context characteristics. However, different patterns of strategy use can lead to identical variability. Thus, between-strategy flexibility operationalized this way is unable to reveal whether the use of specific strategies in fact covaries with specific context characteristics (see Ref. [13] for an alternative). In summary, only within-strategy, but not between-strategy, flexibility is directly indicative of regulatory flexibility as defined above.

Taken together, the Regulatory Flexibility Model [16] is comprehensive in that it specifies three components of regulatory flexibility. The model focuses on individual differences, but makes assumptions about processes during regulatory episodes. The Translational Framework of Regulatory Flexibility [13] also allows

Figure 2



The Translational Framework of Regulatory Flexibility by Aldao et al. (2015) [13]. Adapted with permission.

Figure 3

	Reg Ep 1	Reg Ep 2	Reg Ep 3	Reg Ep 4	Reg Ep 5	SD within
Strategy 1	4	5	0	0	2	2.28
Strategy 2	0	3	4	4	3	1.64
Strategy 3	0	0	2	0	5	2.19
Strategy 4	5	3	1	0	0	2.17
Strategy 5	3	0	4	4	0	2.05
						2.07
SD between	2.30	2.17	1.79	2.19	2.12	2.11

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Illustration of variability within strategies across several regulatory episodes (SD within) and between strategies during one regulatory episode (SD between). Reg Ep = Regulatory episode. The figure depicts fictitious data from one participant who reported the extent to which they used any of five self-regulatory strategies across five different self-regulatory episodes on a scale from 0 (did not use this strategy at all) to 5 (used this strategy to a great extent). Bold numbers denote person-level estimates. Figure inspired by Ref. [22].

estimating individual differences in strategy use variability, a precondition of flexibility. It adds that flexibility may or may not be adaptive for goal pursuit. On the measurement level, it is possible to operationalize both models in terms of individual differences and in terms of situation-specific processes.

Empirical evidence

We briefly review empirical evidence on the reviewed models and additional ways to operationalize self-regulatory flexibility. Reviews on emotion regulation and coping flexibility can be found elsewhere [15,23].

Context sensitivity

Context sensitivity is conceptualized as an individual difference variable in the Regulatory Flexibility Model [16]. Adapted to the level of individual self-control conflicts in everyday life, higher self-reported context sensitivity was associated with more self-regulatory success in managing conflicts of initiation, persistence, and inhibition in two experience sampling studies [24,25].

Repertoire

Strategy repertoire is the second component in the Regulatory Flexibility Model [16] and the most comprehensively investigated component of flexibility to date. In two experience sampling studies, persons with a broader strategy repertoire were more likely to successfully resolve everyday life self-control conflicts of initiation, persistence and inhibition [24,25].

If recurring self-control conflicts are more likely successfully managed across longer time spans, one would expect that the beneficial effects of a larger repertoire accumulate over time and help to pursue personal goals. Indeed, across eight samples and various goal domains (e.g., health, academic), a broader repertoire was associated with better subjective goal progress and some (but not all) domain-specific outcomes (e.g., consumption of healthy food, adaptive financial behaviors) [26]. This was similarly the case for three different indicators of strategy repertoire [27–29]. In two further cross-sectional field studies, more than 19,000 high school students reported the self-regulatory strategies they had employed while preparing for the (high-stakes) SAT college admission test [30]. The more strategies the students reported having employed, the better their SAT scores. Follow-up analyses suggested that students who used more strategies spent more time studying, which in turn helped them to attain better test scores. Taken together, a broader strategy repertoire was associated with various superior outcomes, irrespective of how repertoire was operationalized.

Responsiveness to feedback

Responsiveness to feedback is the third component in the Regulatory Flexibility Model [16]. It entails three

sub-components: monitoring of one's behavior during a regulatory episode, adjusting one's regulatory efforts in response (e.g., adding another strategy), and deriving lessons for future regulatory episodes. Engaging in more monitoring and more actively deriving lessons learned for the future were associated with better self-regulatory success when managing daily self-control conflicts [25]. Unexpectedly, adjustment to regulatory efforts in response to monitoring was negatively associated with regulatory success, possibly because the way the respective question was framed implied low levels of success, thus inevitably tying adjustment to regulatory effects with poor regulatory success. In a different study, a conglomerate of monitoring and adjustment of regulatory efforts predicted self-regulatory success for conflicts of initiation and inhibition, but not persistence [24]. Thus, the evidence to date is partly, but not consistently in line with the idea of a conducive role of feedback for self-regulatory success.

Variability

Variability in strategy use is a precondition for flexibility in the Translational Framework of Regulatory Flexibility [13]. People were more likely to persist in an aversive everyday life activity if their between-strategy variability in this particular regulatory episode was high [31]. This effect generalized to the dispositional level: Persons with generally higher between-strategy variability reported better persistence in aversive activities. Within-strategy variability was not associated with self-regulatory success. These findings conceptually replicated in the context of inhibition conflicts in an unpublished reanalysis of data reported in Ref. [32]. In Ref. [31], between-strategy variability additionally partially mediated the association between trait self-control and self-regulatory success.

Strategy-situation fit

Strategy-situation fit exists if certain combinations of strategies with context characteristics render better self-regulatory success than other context-strategy combinations. Although strategy-situation fit is not an integral part of the reviewed models, it closely fits the understanding of adaptive regulatory flexibility as the context-dependent application of self-regulatory strategies. Hence, in other fields, strategy-situation fit has been viewed as a valid operationalization of regulatory flexibility in its own right [15].

Empirically, strategy-situation fit has been examined by investigating whether certain strategies are more effective for certain types of self-control conflicts [33], for resisting desires in some domains than others (e.g., food/drink, work/study, [34]), or as a function of desire strength [34]. In each case, strategy-situation fit emerged for some strategy-context combinations, but these were exceptions rather than the rule (see also [35]).

Open questions

In this emerging field, multiple conceptual and empirical questions wait to be addressed. We recommend three ways to move forward. First, we appreciate the diverse and fruitful theoretical development around the construct of regulatory flexibility. At the same time, the field needs to find a good balance between theoretical proliferation and consolidation to avoid a “jingle fallacy” - the erroneous assumption that two distinct things are the same because they bear the same name” (p. 184, [36]). Currently, it is unclear how different theoretical conceptualizations relate to each other, both conceptually and empirically.

Second, all reviewed evidence came from correlational data that precludes the conclusion that (components of) regulatory flexibility causally contributed to superior self-regulatory success. To examine causality, experimental studies in the laboratory [37] and interventions in the field are necessary [38,39].

Finally, it is desirable to learn more about how (dispositional) self-regulatory flexibility is situated in a nomological net of other individual differences (e.g., trait self-control, conscientiousness, [40]) and whether it can account for the associations of broader personality traits with relevant outcomes [31].

Conclusion

Self-regulatory flexibility is an emerging field of research that builds on rich theorizing in neighboring fields [13,15,16] and is incorporated in recent self-control models [17,18]. Empirical research testing these theoretical ideas is still scant, but the available evidence suggests that regulatory flexibility may be an important aspect of people’s regulatory skill set that helps them to make progress toward their goals.

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Malte Friese: Conceptualization, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Funding acquisition
Sebastian Bürgler: Conceptualization, Writing - Review & Editing
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During the preparation of this work, the authors did not use AI and AI-assisted technologies.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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- * of special interest
- ** of outstanding interest

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Further information on references of particular interest

25. In a 10-day experience sampling study including $N = 503$ participants and up to eight daily questionnaires (resulting in 9,639 reported self-control conflicts), the authors investigated several components of flexibility, most of them subsumed under the term “metacognition”. Using self-reports, the authors found positive associations of most components with momentary self-control success, including metacognitive knowledge (which entails the context-sensitive use of strategies), monitoring, and strategy repertoire (of up to 26 different self-regulatory strategies). Three possibly related constructs (planning, evaluation, and poly-regulation) furthermore showed positive associations with self-regulatory success. However, the authors found negative associations between self-control success and response to feedback (e.g., changing a strategy during a self-control conflict).
26. In this paper, the authors investigated whether having a larger strategy repertoire may be conducive to goal progress. In eight cross-sectional samples, a larger repertoire was associated with subjective goal progress across domains (healthy eating, academic performance, saving money). Repertoire was also associated with self-reports of healthier eating and adaptive financial behaviors, but not snack intake and subjective credit score. These findings were robust to different operationalizations of strategy repertoire.
31. This study is the first to investigate strategy variability, a key prerequisite for flexibility, in the context of self-control. The authors used an experience sampling dataset comprising 264 participants who reported 1,923 self-control conflicts of persistence. For each conflict, participants indicated the intensity with which they employed 18 different strategies. The study examined 1) the associations between various indicators of strategy variability and self-control, and 2) whether these indicators could explain the relationships between trait self-control and both perceived self-regulatory success and affective well-being. The authors found that only variability between strategies was significantly associated with self-regulatory success, beyond the mean levels of strategy use. Furthermore, the associations between trait self-control and both everyday self-regulatory success and affective well-being were partially mediated by between-strategy variability.

33. ^{*} Using a pooled dataset of two experience sampling studies (including 14,067 reported self-control conflicts), the authors investigated 22 different self-regulatory strategies regarding their popularity and efficacy. Generally, eight strategies were positively and three negatively associated with the self-reported success in dealing with an experienced self-control conflict. However, and more important to the topic of flexibility, the analyses showed that some strategies varied in efficacy depending on the type of self-control conflict experienced (i.e., whether it was a conflict of initiating an aversive activity, persisting in such an activity, or inhibiting impulses to act). Furthermore, people who more frequently fit strategies to the type of conflict for which they appear to be useful also reported higher levels of self-regulatory success in general.
34. ^{*} In this study, 197 participants reported their use of six different strategies when trying to resist unwanted desires. All six strategies proved to be effective. Additionally, using more than one strategy—something participants did in 25% of self-control conflicts—was also beneficial for self-control. Goal reminders and promises to indulge later were more likely to be used for stronger cravings. Participants also preferred different strategies for different types of cravings (e.g., food, leisure, work, etc.). Future research could explore whether these preferences manifest as individual patterns of context-sensitive strategy use, an indicator of flexibility as described by [13].
- However, these associations were only found for some of the strategies.