

The Need for a Unified Language Framework in Extrinsic Interpersonal Emotion Regulation Research

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Abstract

With increasing research interest in extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation, this paper aims to address the critical need for a unified language framework to strengthen and support these research efforts. Despite increasing interest and research in this area, the lack of consistent terminology poses significant challenges to conceptual clarity and scientific progress. By examining the current landscape, the authors identify the proliferation of varied terms across disciplines, which threatens to hamper effective communication and collaboration, and thus, progress. This paper first argues for the necessity of a unified terminology and then proposes a possible methodological approach to achieve this. A Delphi study that provides a frame for the collaborative effort of subject matter experts is outlined. Establishing such unified language framework is expected to enhance research quality, foster innovation, and facilitate knowledge accumulation in the field.

Keywords: *extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation, unified terminology, emotion, regulation, delphi study*

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While emotion regulation has traditionally focused on examining how individuals manage their own emotions (intrapersonal emotion regulation; Gross, 2015); the last decade or so has witnessed a remarkable surge in curiosity surrounding extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation, exploring how we regulate the emotions of others (Niven, 2009; Nozaki & Mikolajczak, 2020). As an example of such burgeoning interest, a recent call for papers for a special issue in *Emotion* attracted more than 100 submissions in an area of research still in its infancy.

The Current Landscape: A Maze of Terms

Although the popularity of extrinsic emotion regulation research is an exciting area for those working in the field, the lack of conceptual positioning creates a challenge to make meaningful progress. This ambiguity likely stems from the initial adoption of the term *interpersonal emotion regulation (ER)*, which has been used to describe two different processes (intrinsic vs. extrinsic; Zaki & Williams, 2018). Despite both processes targeting emotion regulation in a social context, the crucial distinction lies in the initiator of the regulation attempt. Specifically, intrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation unfolds when a target actively seeks emotional support from others, whereas extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation transpires when the regulator takes the initiative to engage with the target in aiding them with their emotions.

The use of a single term to describe these two different mechanisms can promote confusion and misinterpretation in research and practice, by obscuring the directional nuances inherent in both intrinsic and extrinsic processes. Thus, some researchers have adopted the term *extrinsic emotion regulation* (MacCann et al., 2024; Nozaki & Mikolajczak, 2020). The conceptualisation of extrinsic emotion regulation within the literature is relatively consistent, predominantly centred on the notion of modulating the emotional experiences of another person (Butler, 2015; Gross, 2015; Kwon & López-Pérez, 2022; López-Pérez et al., 2016; López-Pérez, 2018; MacCann et al., 2023; Niven, 2017; Nozaki & Mikolajczak, 2019; Walker et al., 2023;

Walker, 2024; Zaki & Williams, 2013). More precisely, Nozaki and Mikolajczak (2020, p. 3) define extrinsic emotion regulation as “an action performed with the goal of influencing another person’s emotion trajectory; it can aim to decrease or increase either negative emotion or positive emotion”. This definition and the core features discussed in Nozaki and Mikolajczak serve to distinguish extrinsic emotion regulation from other related concepts (Zaki & Williams, 2013) such as social sharing of affective states (Rimé, 2009), social support (Bolger & Eckenrode, 1991), and motivations for the affect improvement of others (Goetz et al., 2010).

Alongside the exponential growth of extrinsic emotion regulation research (see Figure 1), there are an increasing number of terms currently being used to describe the process of influencing the emotional experience of another person (see Table 1). The diversity of terms may also be influenced by the various research fields concurrently examining extrinsic emotion regulation. Just within psychology, for instance, developmental psychology typically refers to extrinsic emotion regulation as ‘comforting’ (López-Pérez et al., 2016) while social psychology uses the term interpersonal emotion regulation more broadly (Williams et al., 2018). The divergence in terminology usage across disciplines exacerbates the challenges encountered in undertaking comprehensive studies of emotional dynamics.

When looking across disciplines (not only psychology), key terms being used include (but are not limited to), extrinsic emotion regulation (Gross, 2015; Kunst, 2024; Nozaki & Mikolajczak, 2020; MacCann et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2023), social emotion regulation (Grecucci et al., 2015; Sahi et al., 2023a; 2023b), interpersonal affect regulation (Niven et al., 2009; Parkinson & Totterdell, 1999), interpersonal emotion regulation (Dixon-Gordon et al., 2015; Marroquín, 2011; Niven, 2017; Reeck et al., 2016; Rimé, 2007; Zaki, 2020) extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation (Zaki & Williams, 2013), other-oriented emotion regulation (Segal et al., 2024; Yaari & Tamir, 2023), other-based emotion regulation (Petrova & Gross, 2023), and interpersonal co-regulation (Butler & Randall, 2013a; 2013b; Saxbe & Repetti, 2010. For a more detailed discussion of extrinsic emotion regulation in the workplace see Troth et al., 2018).

Figure 1.

Published Research Papers Identified in Scopus Covering the Terms Used to Describe the Regulation of Others' Emotions from 1985 to Present.

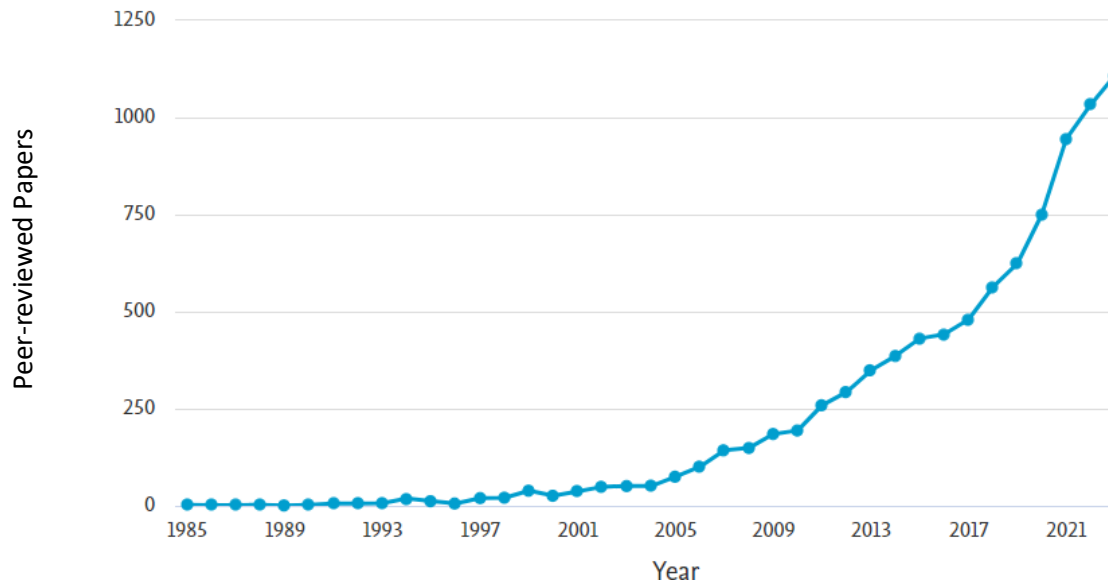


Table 1.

List of Fields Currently Examining Regulation of Others' Emotions, the Number of Papers Published Between 1985 to Present, the Percentage of Publications Represented by Each Field, and Examples of Terms Used Within Each of the Associated Fields in Order of Frequency of Use.

Field	No. Papers	Publication Percentage	Terms
Psychology	5261	33.6	Interpersonal emotion regulation, extrinsic emotion regulation, interpersonal affect regulation, social emotion regulation, other-oriented emotion regulation, extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation, other-based emotion regulation, interpersonal co-regulation
Medicine	5181	26.7	Social support, interpersonal emotion regulation, co-regulation, emotional support, social regulation, compassionate engagement, social buffering
Social Science	1708	10.9	Social support, co-regulation, social regulation, interpersonal emotion regulation, emotional support, social buffering
Neuroscience	1487	9.5	Social support, interpersonal emotion regulation, social regulation, emotional support, co-regulation, social buffering
Arts & Humanities	654	4.2	Social support, interpersonal emotion regulation, social regulation, emotional support
Biochemistry	431	2.7	Social support, interpersonal emotion regulation, co-regulation, emotional support, social regulation, social buffering
Nursing	321	2.0	Social support, emotional support, co-regulation, interpersonal emotion regulation
Business	240	1.5	Interpersonal emotion regulation, social support, emotional support, social regulation
Multidisciplinary	232	1.5	Social support
Environmental	230	1.5	Social support, interpersonal emotion regulation, compassionate engagement, emotional support
Other		5.9	These publications used a mix of the above terms
Health	210		
Pharma	175		
Computer Science	154		

There are additional related terms that are often associated with extrinsic regulation such as social sharing (Christophe & Rimé, 1997; Rimé, 1995; Rimé et al., 2020), and active listening (Jones et al., 2019; Kluger et al., 2024) but they are distinct. Following current theoretical frameworks in the field, social sharing would sit closer to intrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation, while active listening could be classified as a strategy of extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation. Although *broadening our view* is important (Petrova & Gross, 2023), a fundamental first step is establishing consistent use of terminology across the field. Additionally, Quesque et al. (2024) warn that the ambiguity associated with the obfuscation of terminology creates substantial barriers for early career academics as they attempt to get a foothold within the field as well as challenges with comparability between studies, generalisability of research, and measurement issues. By incorporating a formalised language framework while the field is still in its infancy, researchers can make more substantial, efficient, and structured advancements in furthering our understanding of extrinsic emotion regulation.

Risks Associated with a Lack of a Formalised Language Framework

Seminal works have discussed the importance of a unified approach to research (Leising et al., 2022), the trade-offs associated with rewarding prolific publication over research quality (Haslam & Laham, 2010), and the importance of openness to challenge and improvement of theory (Beckmann et al., 2024; Leising et al., 2022). However, research domains within psychology have not generally adopted a unified approach or research agenda, with this lack of unity contributing to several well-documented challenges in psychology with debates from emotional intelligence (Olderbak & Wilhelm, 2020), empathy (Wispé, 1986; 1987), and cognitive flexibility (Beckmann et al., 2024) and complex problem solving (Beckmann, 2019) to personality and individual differences research (Leising et al., 2022; Marsh et al., 2019), as well as replication issues in social psychology research

(Schimmack, 2020). A cautionary tale can be found in empathy research (Wispé, 1986). Profound division in terminology and concepts has resulted in multiple terms such as compassion, affective empathy, sympathy, empathic concern, cognitive empathy and others often used interchangeably (Batson, 2009; Coplan 2011; Vachon & Lynam, 2016). This has resulted not only in conceptual confusion, but measurement issues leading to challenges in synthesising and interpreting research outcomes. Consequently, the ability to compare and integrate empirical findings from diverse studies has become more challenging than necessary; significantly impacting the advancement of systematic and cumulative knowledge in empathy research.

Observing what has happened with other concepts in psychology, a lack of a unified terminology or *formalised language framework* will soon hinder the study of extrinsic emotion regulation process of iterative work, building upon, and expanding the work of peers, limiting collaborative efforts (Leising et al., 2022; Quesque et al., 2024), and contribute to the replication crisis in psychology. Continuing to develop new terms to describe the same construct, commonly known as the jangle fallacy (Leising et al.) will not only inhibit the accumulation of knowledge and progress in our understanding but will likely obstruct exciting discoveries in our field.

A Formalised Language Framework as a Solution

Establishing a formalised language framework for extrinsic emotion regulation is practically necessary. Enabling researchers to articulate their findings with precision and engage in meaningful discourse is arguably the point of having such language in the first place (Leising & Borgstede, 2020). Critics may argue that imposing too rigidly a framework might restrict creativity and the development of new ideas; however, such a framework does not serve to stifle creativity but rather serves to foster deeper innovation. Broadly, psychology is afflicted by jingle jangle fallacies. The *jingle* fallacy occurring when different

concepts are assumed to be identical because they are labelled with the same or similar term (e.g., papers published with the term ‘interpersonal emotion regulation’ describing different processes, that is, intrinsic vs extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation), and *jangle* fallacy occurring when the same construct is assumed to be different because it is described with different terms (Flake & Fried, 2020; e.g., ‘comforting’ in the developmental literature and ‘interpersonal affect improvement’ in the social psychology literature). With extrinsic emotion regulation research being conducted across multiple research domains from education to social psychology, personality and individual differences to clinical, and developmental psychology (and beyond) to business, economics, computing science, and beyond, there is potential for research in this area to become murky, and language to become domain specific. For example, the risk of repeating research efforts, and re-inventing the wheel (i.e., multiple surveys) becomes much more likely. However, working collaboratively within multiple domains and with several experts to develop consensus around terminology presents an excellent opportunity for the research in this area to be of high quality, meaningful, and impactful. To achieve this often requires collaboration, sometimes even trans-disciplinary collaboration.

Reaching expert consensus on the different terms currently used in the literature would certainly aid the research and development of new ideas, and improve current conceptual, measurement, and theoretical challenges. Ideally, this requires the development of a formalised language framework, measurements, and continued theory specification. Similar concerns were raised a decade ago in the broader emotion literature in which Izzard (2010) requested the help of 35 emotion experts to develop formalised definitions of emotion, emotion activation, functions, and regulation. Additionally, Leising et al. (2022, p. 4) recommend researchers engage in “structured social processes with the aim of building consensus among them”. Importantly, progressing toward a unified terminology in the form

of a formalised language framework is an iterative, continually developing process of which this paper represents only the beginning. The continued development and critical evaluation of such consensus is a valuable research objective in its own right (Leising et al.).

For example, when using the term *extrinsic emotion regulation* (or whichever term is collectively agreed upon), it should be strictly used to denote the concept of regulating others' emotions, and not for any other purpose (Leising et al., 2022). Similarly, no other term/s should be used to describe the regulation of others' emotions except that which is consensually agreed upon. The importance of unified, clear terminology in the 'harder' sciences has been discussed from physics to pharmacogenomics. For example, in genetics research precise and formalised language is critical for the effectiveness and efficiency of communication. Accurately using terms such as 'gene', 'allele', and 'locus' is crucial to avoid confusion and misrepresentation of research results not only among researchers, but importantly, by the public (Richards et al., 2015). Various expert groups (i.e., the Clinical Pharmacogenomics Implementation Consortium [CPIC]), provided recommendations for formalising the language used in pharmacogenomics research to ensure consistency in testing and reporting (Caudle et al., 2017). Such an approach would benefit the extrinsic emotion regulation research community.

Although the main focus of this paper has been situated around how to refer to the regulation of others' emotions (see above for multiple different terms), it is crucial to consider other terms used frequently in this research. These are terms such as (a) motivation, (b) goals, (c) processes, (d) tactics, (e) strategies, (f) actions, (g) target, (h) regulator, (i) self, (j) other, (k) flexibility and more. Defining such terms, again, is crucial for the development of a coherent and consistent framework with which to examine the regulation of others' emotions.

The Formalised Language Framework: A Delphi Study

We suggest that an effective next step toward developing a unified language framework to help build unity within this research field could be to conduct a comprehensive Delphi Study. The aim of such a Delphi study would be to collaboratively define key terms with the purpose of developing a formalised language framework for extrinsic interpersonal emotion regulation. A Delphi study systematically gathers and refines knowledge from a group of experts through a series of surveys with controlled feedback. It is a versatile method that has been applied to various fields from health services, economics, and technology research (Padel & Midmore, 2005), and can be adapted to different research needs such as idea generation, consensus building (Padel & Midmore, 2005) and the development of a formalised language framework (Caudle et al., 2017). The Delphi method is a structured approach ensuring anonymity among experts, iterative rounds of survey questions, and the aggregation of responses to reach a collective decision. The purpose of this approach is to minimise the impact of group dynamics and instead, encourage unbiased input building toward consensus. Overall, the Delphi method offers the field of extrinsic emotion regulation a systematic and rigorous approach to harnessing a wide range of expert opinions.

A Delphi Study: Methodological Details.

A Delphi study involves conducting multiple rounds of surveys or questionnaires with a panel of experts to achieve consensus on a particular topic. The development of a Delphi study includes carefully preparing a protocol to outline each of the rounds, what each round will entail, what constitutes consensus, and what contingencies are in place should consensus not be met by the *a priori* defined round (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). Drawing upon the various phases delineated in a Delphi study, the first step would be to build a database of researchers who are willing to contribute to this initiative. Eligibility for participation requires specialists to meet either of the following criteria: (a) possess at least two peer-reviewed publications in the relevant field or have completed or (b) be in the

process of completing a PhD in the relevant field of research. In reference to criterion a, the two peer-reviewed publications should be from indexed Journals, be in-press or published, or be submitted to a preprint server, while conference presentations/publications are sufficient, media articles are not. Ensuring diversity in the expert sample of researchers who take part in the Delphi study is crucial. Diversity should be actively sought in terms of multiple geographical regions, theoretical ‘camps’, disciplines (i.e., psychology, education, organisational/business, computer science, forensic science etc), career stage, and gender.

What is Involved in the Delphi Study

Researchers who take part would complete a set of survey questions up to a maximum of 6 timepoints to refine language and then invited to take part in a final online *townhall* to discuss the results of the study, and vote on a set of terminology. All researchers who participate in at least 80% of the study (and attend the townhall) would be formally acknowledged for their contribution in the published work. The pre-registration and associated materials for the Delphi study described here are available on the Open Science Framework (blinded for peer review).

Round 1: Initial insight and definition development. The purpose of round one would be to gather broad insights and definitions of key terms currently used in the field. Participants would be asked to provide their understanding of key terms (as outlined earlier). A range of open-ended questions would be used to collect researchers’ perspectives and identify common themes.

Round 2: Specifications of terms and definitions. In the second round, the terms and definitions would be refined based on insights collated and synthesised from round 1. Participants would review a summary of the key themes and definitions identified in round 1. They would then be asked to rate their agreement with these definitions using Likert-like

questions and asked to provide additional suggestions to help refine the list further. The purpose of round 2 would be to identify communalities and differences.

Round 3: Consensus building and refinement of terms. The aim of round 3 would be to finalise the terms and definitions with the most agreement and seek detailed explanations and/or modifications. Participants would be presented with the refined terms and understanding from round 2 and asked to provide detailed feedback on any outstanding issues and suggest further modifications. The purpose of this round would be to reach a higher level of consensus on the terms and definitions.

Round 4: Final review and confirmation. At this stage and on the condition that appropriate levels of at least 80% consensus have been reached, the final confirmation of agreed-upon terms and definitions would be proposed. Participants would review the final set of terms and definitions that have emerged from the previous rounds, and asked to confirm (or not), their agreement, and provide any last comments or suggestions. The aim of this round would be to achieve a final consensus and validate the framework.

Should consensus at round 4 be below 80%, an additional round (round 5) would be added with the aim to resolve outstanding issues, and to ensure a high level of agreement. Following the potential 5th round, one last final round (round 6) will be initiated if there is less than 75% agreement at round 5. It is important to note that the aim of the Delphi study is to bring together potentially different perspectives and positions in an effort to help the field of research to realise and conceptually accommodate meaningful differences while ensuring we avoid ‘muddying’ the field with the unnecessary array of diverse terms used to describe the same underlying constructs.

Townhall: Final consensus check and vote. The purpose of the town hall would be to bring researchers together, present the final framework with the full set of agreed upon terms and definitions, and to provide a forum for any final issues, concerns, suggestions, or

comments that may be useful for the final report, and to achieve full consensus. A full preregistration of the Delphi Study protocol including question development, is available on OSF (blinded for peer review).

Conclusion

Establishing a common vocabulary among experts is inherently complex due to differing theoretical perspectives. An empirical framework for assessing agreement on extrinsic emotion regulation could foster a more collaborative and coherent research environment, minimising the inefficiencies of isolated efforts. The central aim of this paper is to initiate the formation of a formalised language framework to aid the advancement of scientific research while not stifling scholarly innovation or discovery. The proposed collaborative approach using a Delphi methodology, represents a critical first step towards the continuation of good research practice, and achieving research outcomes that are comparable, generalisable, and largely identifiable. A proactive approach to establishing a formalised language framework is essential for sustaining vitality, innovation, and coherence in our field of research.

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