

Al-Ghazali on Self-Regulation: The Integration From Psychological Concept

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Abstract. Self-regulation is the human ability to control their impulsive behaviour for reaching the goal settings. In Psychology, self-regulation skill involved the controlling impulsive behaviour, forethought, and self-reflection. Self-regulation stimulates the people to reach their goals and achievements which also brings them to the happiness. However, the Tasawwuf came before the age of psychology that trained the people to improve personal quality by controlling and regulating themselves from the unimportant things to reach the happiness. Especially, Al-Ghazali's legacies in human psychology. This research aims to explore what is Al-Ghazali's perspective about self-regulation that came from psychology. The analysis descriptive was employed and the data was obtained by library research from Ihya' Ulumuddin, Kimiya Sa'adah and several supported articles about ar-riyadloh. The result of this study found that Al-Ghazali had been putting the intention about several methods in self-regulation which is similar with Ar-Riyadhoh and mujahadatun-nafs in practical approach, tazkiyatun nafs as the result, and the concept of nafs scientifically. The nafs itself is the main desire to motivate the people to behave beyond their cognitive skills and social moral and interactions. Al-Ghazali employed some steps to self-regulate such as Muraqabah, Muhasabah, and mujadah. In Conclusion, Al-Ghazali viewed the regulation as some activities to avoid the human from the misery by controlling the impulses which brought the people to not reach the goal or their happiness.

Keywords: Self-Regulation, Psychologist, Al-Ghazali, Riyadhoh.

Introduction

In the era of cognitive psychology, psychologists such as Zimmerman, Bandura, Brown and Miller have been developing sustainly about how the people can reach the happiness and goals by self-regulation.[1] Self-regulation is the skill of individual that involved controlling behavior, thoughts, and emotions requires a well-planned strategy to achieve the set goals.[2] The concept of self regulation referred to the behaviour adaptation of individual from a bad habit and matched social norms among their community.[3], [4] The happiness itself was meant as the goal and the quality of life.[5] This task has been run in order to develop psychological well-being among individuals themselves and among their societies.

Self-Regulation, along its development in these centuries, related to several context such as social behaviour, learning, and addictive behaviour. In the social behaviour context, self-regulation is the ability to control their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to achieve personal goals. This context tended to moral adaptation and self-efficacy among the intrapersonal relations.[3] The social cognitive self-regulation involved several steps that have to be done such as self-monitoring, self-judgement, and self-reaction. Self-monitoring referred to what people should monitor, observe, and motivate to one's behaviour, feelings and thought. Self-judgement referred to judge behaviour of one trough standard development of self and social reference. While, self-reaction is the step of one's behaviour to respond self-judgment with rewards or corrective actions.

In the context of addiction behaviour, Self-regulation is the ability of individuals to regulate behaviour, thought and will to reach certain goals. According to Neal and Carey, self-regulation is about the individual's capacity to facilitate goal-directed behavior; delaying gratification in the short-term to achieve a goals.[4] Self-regulation in this context was indicated by impulse control and goal

settings. Impulse control was defined as the extension to which individuals are able to control impulses that hinder their goals. Goal settings was process in which individuals determine goals for themselves that will be reflected in their behavior in achieving those goals.[4]

Meanwhile, in learning and education context, Self-regulation is an individual skills to completely regulate individual or learner to own learning process. The self-regulation learning referred the strategy of learner to achieve academic desire based on feedback of the learning and skills included.[6] According to Barry J. Zimmerman, there are three phases for self-regulation learning. First, is Forethought Phase which involved the strategy for planning & goal setting. Second, is performance phase self-control & self-observation Focusing attention, using strategies, self-recording. Third, is self-reflection phase Self-evaluation & adaptation Self-judgment, self-reaction, adapting strategies.[7]

The concept of self-regulation appeared in nowadays in order to help people from self's problem such as distractions and impulsive behaviour that impacted to academic or life performance, and bad habits.[8] However the concept of self-regulation has been initiated by muslim scholars, especially from the sufisms who enlight all scholars and psychologist to brainstorm their idea in psychology notion.

Sufism perspective has spilled this concept and built the theory of self-regulation which implied some steps to do.[9] Self-regulation in sufism perspective employed several variables of self-regulation such as vision (*ghayah*), planning (*ahdaf*), strategy (*takhtik*), implementation (*tatbiq*), and evaluation (*muhasabah*) to live a life that is a great mission for a person to get closer to God and reach their goals.[2] These variables were matched by what psychologist stated on self regulation such as goal settings, self-observation, etc. In addition, the concept of *nafs* contributed to build self-regulation which implied the human psychological states around his relation to god. Then, the characteristic of *nafs* would show the behaviour. This detail concept was initiated by Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali.¹

Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (died 505 H) stated in his great work, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, a self regulation and the grand theory of human psychology. Al-Ghazali divided the term of *nafs* in the context of human psychology archetype and ordinal degrees of human behaviour. The concept of *nafs* in archetype included the potential of reason (*quwwatul 'ilmy*), the potential of desire (*quwwatu as-syahwah*), the potential of anger (*quwwatul ghodlob*), the potential of justice (*quwwatu-l- 'adl*). While in the context of psychological state of human being, Al-Ghazali divided to 3 degrees; *Nafs Lawwamah*, *Nafs Ammarah*, and *Nafs Muthma'innah*.² The *nafs* according to Al-Ghazali beared the concept of tasawwuf self-regulation which is called by *ar-riyadloh*.

Ar-riyadloh is the concept of sufism in self regulation. Al-Ghazali defined it as a the cognitive regulation and potential controls to imply the good attitude.³ This term was similar by *mujahadah* (against the impulse) and *tazkiyatun nafs* (self-purification). Al-Ghazali implied 2 steps for self regulation included *Muraqabah* (the awareness that God is always watching), *muhasabah* (self-evaluation), and *mujahadah*. This concept was researched by several studies along this decades in order to elaborate and integrate it to islamization of psychology.

Al-Qur'an was a reference of self-regulation. In the *surah Al-Hasyr* (18), Allah said that the man should to regulate their behaviour;

¹ [16], pg.. 878, 879

² Imam Abi Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Kimia Al-Saadah*, ed. Najah Oud, *Majma' Al-Rasail Al-Imam Al-Ghazali* (Cairo, Egypt: Dar-elmokattam, 2010)., pg. 5-6; Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*., pg. 878, 879, 881-883.

³ [16], pg. 940, 944, 1766

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَلْتَنْظُرْ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ ۚ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

which means: “O you who have believed, fear Allah. And let every soul look to what it has put forth for tomorrow - and fear Allah. Indeed, Allah is [fully] aware of what you do.”

This verse of the *Al-Qur'an* showed that Allah emphasized the importance of self-examination and setting clear goals to achieve more beneficial and long-term results. This verse explains that each individual must reflect on what they have done and what they will do in order to achieve more ambitious goals.[17]

The previous study by Monita and Amaya explained about the result of theoretical analysis of self-regulation between sufism practice and the meaning of self-regulation itself.[2] This research analysed the similarities and differences theoretical aspect in self-regulation between psychologist and sufism. The result of this study showed that the similar indicator between sufisms and psychologist were achieving goals, self-control, setting personal management goals, and considering behavior when acting. While, the different aspect of this concept was the perception about the aspect of self-assessment or self-reflection focuses on whether the value of an action is important or not, based on its original purpose, whereas in Sufism, it is based on what is pleasing to Allah SWT and following the example set by the Prophet Muhammad. The intended goal also highlights a difference, where self-regulation aims to achieve self-control to cultivate a good character for oneself, whereas Sufism seeks to attain true peace and happiness that is pleasing to Allah SWT. The final difference lies in the formation of individual personality. In self-regulation, the formation of personality is the primary factor in shaping one's character, while in Sufism, it is shaped by the values taught by the Prophet Muhammad and the knowledge that teaches one to do good. [2] This research merely discussed the surface of sufism concept without telling the specific agent beyond the theory.

The next previous study was researched about self-regulation learning in Al-Ghazali's perspective that majorly implied Zimmerman's self-regulation learning.[18] This study showed the comparison between Zimmerman and Al-Ghazali's self-regulation concept. As known, Zimmerman implied 3 phases in self regulation learning included forethought, performance, and self-reflection, this research told that Al-Ghazali implied the self-regulation learning in *ikhlaq*. *Ikhlaq* meant putting a stress in learning into a good deeds.

The previous study also attempted to observe the implementation of *tazkiyatun-naafs* in some Islamic boarding school in Tangerang, Indonesia.[19] This research reported the implementation in tasawwuf self-regulation in *tazkiyatun-naafs*. The result of this study showed that the observed subject of the research demonstrated that the Tazkiyatun Nafs approach significantly contributes to the spiritual well-being of students, encompassing personal, communal, environmental, and metaphysical dimensions.

Those previous studies will be completed by explaining specifically about great scheme of Al-Ghazali's Tasawwuf self-regulation in this research. This research aims to explore self-regulation or *ar-riyadhloh* in sufisms perspective.

Methodology

This research employed the qualitative method in literature review which through several steps such as collecting, classification, extraction, abstraction, and interpretation the data. In the data obtaining, library research was used to explore about Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali's works such as *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, *Kimiya' Sa'adah*, and several articles that explored Al-Ghazali's thought in human psychology for primary references.⁴ For secondary references, this research employed several

⁴ [25], [26], pg. 38

literatures from psychology and Tasawwuf which discussed about self-regulation, *nafs*, *riyadloh* or *tazkiyatun nafs*.

The Concept *Nafs* in Al-Ghazali's Perspective

Before delving deeper into the concept of self-regulation from the perspective of Al-Ghazali, it is essential to first understand his view on the psychological constitution of the human being. In his magnum opus, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Al-Ghazali outlines the foundational components that construct the human psyche, namely the heart (*qalb*), intellect (*'aql*), soul (*ruh*), and self (*nafs*). According to Al-Ghazali, these four constructs collectively shape how a person exhibits behavior in daily life, often manifested through *khuluq* (moral character or ethics). The heart (*qalb*) serves as the locus of perception and consciousness. The intellect (*'aql*) is a spiritual faculty that guides the self from ignorance to knowledge and from immorality to virtue. The soul (*ruh*) represents the essence of life and the transcendent dimension of human existence. However, in general terms, the *nafs* refers to the inner impulse that drives humans toward desires and anger, requiring discipline and regulation.⁵

Regarded to the levels of *nafs* quality Imam Al-Ghazali divided the *nafs* to three levels included *nafs ammarah*, *nafs lawwamah*, *nafs muthma'innah*.⁶

Nafs Ammarah

As what Al-Ghazali viewed the *nafs* as the potential of individual to desire and anger, the lowest level of personality is *nafs ammarah*. *Nafs ammarah* meant a personality that tends toward physical nature and pursues principles of pleasure.⁷ It draws people to commit base acts in accordance with their primitive instincts. Thus, the angry self is the place and source of evil and reprehensible behavior. In this condition, his animalistic nature and character are more apparent than his angelic nature. Anyone with this personality no longer has a human identity, because his movements and behavior are controlled by his own desires.[20]

Nafs Lawwamah

Al-Ghazali viewed the *Nafs Lawwamah* as an increased level of individual which was indicated by denying some forbidden desires and starting to follow the command of Allah.⁸ This level of *nafs* was a transition level between *Nafs Muthma'innah* to *Nafs Ammarah*. In this level, the individual would feel the dilemma of his self-regulations. Hence, sometimes the individual in this stage tended to beautify the desires and bad deeds rather than the obedient to Allah's commands.[20]

Nafs Muthma'innah

Nafs Muthma'innah was the level of human personality that has been endowed with the perfection of the divine light (*nūr al-qalb*) by Allah SWT.⁹ According to Imam Al-Ghazali, it represented the true essence of humanity that distinguished it from all other creations of God. This level of the self is constantly adorned with the remembrance (*dhikr*) of Allah, and is purified from the

⁵ [16], pg. 877-880

⁶ [16], pg. 878.

⁷ [16], pg. 878-879

⁸ [16], pg. 878

⁹ [16], pg. 878-879

influences of base desires (*shahwah*) and blameworthy traits. When the name of Allah is invoked, the heart finds serenity. This is what is referred to as the “tranquil soul.”[20]

Al-Ghazali stated that the human was formed, whether in the level of *nafs ammarah*, *nafs lawwanah*, or *nafs muthma'innah*, by the potential archetype such as *quwwatu-i'Ilmiy*, *quwwatu-l-ghadab*, *quwwatus-syahwah*, *quwwatu-l'adl*. *Quwwatu-i'Ilmiy* was meant by the potential of reason brought the people to the wise. However, if the individual did not use this potential, it would be the foolish man.¹⁰ Then, *quwwatu-l-ghadab*, or the potential of anger led the individual to brave if it was used as well.

Quwwatus-syahwah or the potential of desire was the potential that led to the bad desire. With the good deeds, it would tend to the mercious.[16] While, *Quwwatu-l'adl* or the potential of justice meant the power that motivates a person to act fairly in social interactions, decision-making, and self-control.[16] This potential implied the balance between all potentials that resulted the good personality or called by *khusnul khuluq*. [21]

Those levels of *nafs* brought to the manifestation of human behaviour. Therefore, Al-Ghazali initiated a concept that equaled the self-regulation in psychological term called by *ar-riyadloh*. According to him, this will be relevant for individual to do several processes of self-regulation. This term was initiated to increase the quality of individual personality.

Al-Ghazali's Perspective On Self-Regulation (*Ar-Riyadloh*)

Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (died 505 H) has contributed to make a great concept in general human psychology either practically or scientifically. The book of *Ihya' Ulumuddin* showed *ar-riyadloh* as a self-regulation.¹¹ *Ar-Riyadloh* itself meant the process of individual to regulate the potential of his desire and bad attitude to the better tendentious or good deeds.¹² *Ar-Riyadloh* implied some method that involves training oneself to always behave well.[11] This concept was equaled by the term *mujahadah* which meant the effort of individual to take the preventive action from the desires and negligence then bringing it to the pleased attitude by Allah.¹³ Another phrase with similar meaning was *tazkiyatun nafs* or the an effort to cleanse oneself of arrogance and self-praise.¹⁴ Regarded to those both phrases, Al-Ghazali suggested the steps to do self-regulation for individual from the desire (*syahwah*) that brought him to the suffers and unreachable goals by self-regulation in eating, sleeping, speaking, and being patient.

Al-Ghazali attached Yahya bin Mu'adz Ar-Razi's statement about the goals of the *ar-riyadloh* which implied some steps of regulations around 4 indicators; eating only as much as necessary, sleeping only as much as necessary, speaking only as much as necessary, and being patient in enduring disturbances from all creatures.¹⁵ From eating sparingly comes the extinction of desire, from sleeping sparingly comes clarity of will, from speaking sparingly comes protection from various calamities, and from patience in enduring disturbances comes the attainment of spiritual goals. Thus, Al-Ghazali said that the *ar-riyadloh* as the regulation of human potential that formed human

¹⁰ Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, 940; Imam Abi Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad Al-Ghazali, *Kimia Al-Saadah*, ed. Najah Oud, *Majma' Al-Rasail Al-Imam Al-Ghazali* (Cairo, Egypt: Dar-elmokattam, 2010), pg. 31

¹¹ [16], 929

¹² [16], 940

¹³ [16], pg. 941

¹⁴ Al-Ghazali, *Kimia Al-Saadah*, pg. 5; Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, pg. 942

¹⁵ [16], pg. 932

character. In addition, Al-Ghazali optimized the steps by involving *muraqabah*, *muhasabah*, and *mujahadah* as the parts of individual self-regulation.

Muraqabah

Muraqabah was the feeling of an extraordinarily great power from Allah SWT in overseeing every behavior of His servants.¹⁶ *Muraqabah* required the individual to be careful self-disciplined, and self-monitoring. The *muraqabah* demanded the individual to be careful about everything he does in the next with the feelings that Allah always be in his side. The self-discipline referred to do anything but in the corridors of pleased behavior by Allah. And the self-monitoring is doing reflection and considering which provided real meaning and impact if implemented well in every individual behaviors.[22]

Muhasabah

Muhasabah is the ability of individual to self-reflect and self evaluate about everything has been done from the speech, attitude, words, and behavior in worshipping Allah and the relationship to the social environment.¹⁷ Individuals were demanded to always introspect themselves by increasing their devotion to Allah SWT and be willing to learn from the past for improvement and success in the future. Al-Ghazali, *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, pg. 1777-1779; Mutmainnah, "The Analysis of the Roles of *Muraqabah* and *Muhasabah* as Internal *Hisbah* Instruments to Enhance Sharia Compliance in Islamic Bussiness."

Mujahadah

After the previous three steps, the individual had to against the impulses and desires from *nafs ammarah*.¹⁸ *Mujahadah* was the act of resistance against lust and desires, as well as an effort to combat all the bad traits and behaviors caused by lustful anger by struggling in the worship to Allah.¹⁹ *Mujahadah* was purposed to heal a sick heart that leads to an unethical society from a moral and emotional standpoint and causes various problems in everyday life.²⁰

Discussion

According to the concept of Al-Ghazali in self-regulation, it was similiar with the subdimensions of self-regulation according to psychologist. Al-Ghazali put the intention on the concept self-regulation's step by *muraqabah*, *muhasabah*, and *mujahadah* which are similiar with the steps or subdimensions in psychologhist perspective. In Al-Ghazali's perspective, *muraqabah* referred to the deep awareness that every human action is under the constant observation of God, which encourages individuals to regulate their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. This parallels Bandura's concept of self-observation in self-regulation theory, where individuals actively monitor their behavior according to internal standards.²¹ Zimmerman's model also reflects this process during the performance phase, in which learners monitor their strategies to ensure alignment with their goals. Barry J Zimmerman, "Becoming a Self-Regulated Learner.", pg 68 Thus, *muraqabah* can be understood as a form of self-monitoring that integrates both cognitive and spiritual dimensions.

¹⁶ [16], pg. 1769, 1771

¹⁷ [16], pg. 1777

¹⁸ [11]., pg. 123

¹⁹ [16], pg. 1781

²⁰ [27], pg. 58

²¹ [3]., pg. 250

Al-Ghazali defined *muhasabah* as self-evaluation of one's deeds, assessing both virtuous and wrongful actions. This aligns closely with self-judgment and self-reflection in Bandura's and Zimmerman's models. In Zimmerman's framework, this corresponds to the self-reflection phase, where individuals evaluate the effectiveness of their strategies and outcomes to improve future actions.²² However, *muhasabah* extends this concept by incorporating moral and transcendental elements, making self-evaluation not merely a psychological process but also an ethical and spiritual one.

Mujahadah, according to Al-Ghazali, is the struggle against base desires and negative impulses through persistent discipline. This resonates with Zimmerman's notion of self-control in the performance phase and Bandura's concept of self-reaction, where individuals respond to self-evaluation by adjusting effort or strategies.²³ Yet, *mujahadah* carries an additional spiritual orientation: self-regulation is pursued not only for worldly achievements but also for attaining divine pleasure. This integration illustrates that self-regulation in the Sufi tradition encompasses both psychological mechanisms and spiritual objectives.

Table 1. The Integration Concept of Self-Regulation

	Common Psychologist	Self-Regulation in Social Context (Albert Bandura)	Self-Regulation in Learning Context (Barry J. Zimmerman)	Al-Ghazali's Self-Regulation
Theoretical Frameworks	Cognitive Psychology	Cognitive Psychology/Social Cognitive Theory (SCT)	Cognitive Psychology, Behaviorism	The Sufism Psycholgy (the types of <i>nafs</i>)
Definition	Self-regulation is the skill of individual that involved controlling behavior, thoughts, and emotions requires a well-planned strategy to achieve the set goals (Neal & Carey, 2005)	The behaviour adaptation of individual from a bad habit and matched social norms among their community	An individual skills to completely regulate individual or learner to own learning process.	<i>Ar-Riyadloh</i> : The process of individual to regulate the potential of his desire and bad attitude to the better tendentious or good deeds.
Factors	Bad habit, Addictive behaviour, Negative outcomes	Moral Adaptation, Self-Efficacy	Academic performance, Learning Strategy	Optimalization for reaching tranquil souls, happiness, and good attitude

²² Zimmerman, "Attaining Self-Regulation: A Social Cognitive Perspective.", 21-22; Zimmerman, "Becoming a Self-Regulated Learner: Beliefs, Techniques, and Illusions.", pg. 69.

²³ Bandura, "Social Cognitive Theory of Self-Regulation", pg. 260-262; Zimmerman, "Becoming a Self-Regulated Learner: Beliefs, Techniques, and Illusions.", pg. 69

				(<i>Khusnul Khuluq</i>).
Steps and Indicators	Impulse Control, Goal Settings.	Self-Monitoring, Self-Judgement, Self-Reaction.	Forethought Phase, performance phase, self-reflection Phase	<i>Muraqabah, muhasabah, mujahadah.</i>

Conclusion

The psychologist who kept the struggling in forming the concept of self-regulation concept merely concerned in psychological dynamic and behaviour's scope of human nature. It only explained the process of individual in regulating himself to match social norm and certain conditions in his environmental. According to Al-Ghazali, self-regulation is an important process in to develop the human soul, which includes controlling desires, self- evaluation, and cultivating good deeds. He emphasizes that the human soul, by nature, tends to follow the impulses of desires if not trained and controlled. Therefore, self-regulation must be achieved through mujahadah (struggle against desires), and riyadhah (continuous spiritual training). Al-Ghazali viewed self-regulation not only as a means for moral improvement in this world but also as a path toward tazkiyatun nafs (purification of the soul), which leads one closer to Allah. Thus, self- regulation in Al-Ghazali's perspective is holistic, encompassing integrated spiritual, moral, and behavioral dimensions.

This study was limited by scope of research and data collecting. We hope for further research and researchers who put the interest in developing Islamic or Sufisms Psychology to make a psychometry and apply the terms and concept of Al-Ghazali's Self-Regulation and initiate with field research gor strengthening evidence-based data.

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