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## Splitting the L2 Self-Guide: Ways Forward for Motivation Research

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### Abstract

Drawing on Markus and Nurius's (1986) theory of possible selves and Higgins's (1987) theory of self-discrepancies, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) developed the *L2 self-guide*, a construct explaining the generation of motivation for language learning. Because Dörnyei focused on convergences in the source theories, L2MSS researchers have come to regard possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-guides (Higgins, 1987) as differing manifestations of a common underlying phenomenon. However, when constructs are similar, but not identical, assumptions of equivalence can lead to theoretical and methodological confusion (Lawson & Robins, 2021). Drawing on observations by MacIntyre (2022; MacIntyre et al., 2009a, 2009b) in critical engagements with Dörnyei's scholarship, this article addresses disparities in the source construct conceptualizations. It considers the implications that follow when sibling constructs are viewed as identical, and when possible selves and self-guides are conjoined in a unitary construct. Together, conceptual divergencies in the source constructs and concerns about the validity of L2MSS scales (Al-Hoorie, et al., 2024a, 2024b) mean that the L2 self-guide should be disassembled. Ultimately, it is only if possible selves and self-guides are understood and investigated as discrete constructs that the value they may have for L2 motivation research can be fully assessed.

**Keywords:** *L2 Motivation, Possible Selves, Self-Guides, Standards, L2 Motivational Self System, Sibling Constructs*

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The variations in approach to possible selves shown in Higgins's and Markus's work should be kept in mind as the concept of possible selves is studied in the language learning domain.

MacIntyre, MacKinnon and Clément (2009, p. 54)

### **<sup>1</sup>Introduction**

Peter MacIntyre's work has uniquely shaped the psychology of language learning (PLL). It is hard to imagine PLL in its current form (or in any form) without his contributions. Although MacIntyre was supervised by Robert Gardner, the progenitor of research on motivation for language learning, his work with Gardner and other colleagues has focused on emotions (e.g., Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2024; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994), willingness to communicate (e.g., MacIntyre & Charos, 1996; MacIntyre et al, 1998; MacIntyre & Wang, 2021), and applications of positive psychology (e.g., MacIntyre & Mercer, 2014; MacIntyre et al., 2019). Yet, MacIntyre has maintained a keen interest in motivation. Not primarily regarded as a "motivation researcher", and without a particular model or framework to defend, he has offered erudite appraisals of the directions in which the field has moved. In particular, he has cautioned against unwarranted conceptual plurality and an uncritical adoption of new constructs. As he and his colleagues observed some 25 years ago, "simply adding new conceptual terms, without mapping out new conceptual territory, seems like a wasteful exercise" (MacIntyre et al., 2001, p. 485). Sounding a similar note, MacIntyre (2002) warned how "listing potential additions to the literature is not at all difficult compared to the heavy theoretical and empirical work required to specify how [new and established] concepts interact" (p. 55).

It was concerns with conceptual and methodological rigor that prompted MacIntyre's engagement with the entry of possible selves into SLA. In two co-authored chapters in Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2009) anthology on motivation, language identity and the L2 self, MacIntyre and his colleagues (2009a, 2009b) addressed the benefits – and pitfalls – of a model of motivation for L2 learning based on the self. Among the cautions sounded in the first of these chapters (a close reading revealing considerably more than the six specifically identified!), there is the warning not to ignore differences in the conceptualization of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-guides (Higgins, 1987). However, as with other cautions sounded in this chapter, researchers have been slow to appreciate the issues involved. Revisiting MacIntyre's original and recent commentaries (MacIntyre, 2022; MacIntyre et al., 2009a, 2009b), in this article we offer a critical appraisal of issues arising from the assumption that possible selves and self-guides are sufficiently similar to warrant amalgamation in a unitary construct: the *L2 self-guide*.

### **The L2MSS and Differences in Conceptualizations of Possible Selves and Self-Guides**

The L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) has two primary components: the *Ideal L2 Self* (a construct encompassing attributes associated with a successful language-user, and that the individual would ideally like to possess in the future), and the *Ought-to L2 Self* (which refers to attributes of a successful language-user that the L2 learner

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believes they are obligated to possess to meet the expectations of significant others and to avoid potentially negative consequences). Described as L2 self-guides, they originate from constructs developed in two areas of theorizing: (a) Markus's (1977) work on self-schemata and the theory of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), and (b) Higgins's work on the accessibility of social knowledge (Higgins & King, 1981), the functions of self-evaluative standards (Higgins et al., 1986), and the development of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987). While convergences between these paradigms received careful consideration in Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) scholarship, far less attention was paid to divergences. In the absence of robust conceptualizations of divergent aspects, possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-guides (Higgins, 1987) have come to be regarded as differing manifestations of a common underlying phenomenon. Dörnyei's (2009) assertion that "possible selves are often referred to as 'future self-guides'" (p. 15) has been unchallenged, and "future self-guides" have formed the focus of much contemporary L2 motivation research. However, an uncritical assumption of equivalence can be problematic. Sibling constructs – constructs that are similar but not identical – can create problems if they are conjoined (Lawson & Robins, 2021). As a close reading of the literature reveals, possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-guides (Higgins, 1987) differ in important respects. They may not be as similar as L2MSS researchers have come to assume (Henry & Liu 2024a).

#### *The Relationship to the Self*

The first notable difference involves the relationship to the self (Henry & Liu 2024a). Possible selves are defining components of the self-concept. When activated, possible selves "contribute to the fluidity and malleability of the self" (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 965). In contrast, self-guides are separate from the self-concept. They form part of an interpretive framework through which the *actual self* (the person's self-concept) is evaluated. A self-guide is fittingly named. It "guides" behaviour and steers actions in directions where a person's *actual self* can more closely approximate their ideals and aspirations. A self-guide is thus a representation that *shapes* the self (Higgins, 1987, 1990; Higgins et al., 1986).

Possible selves and self-guides can each be a component of a self-system or a self-regulatory system. However, once activated, a possible self constitutes a part of the self-concept. It becomes an element of the *working self-concept*, the conception of the self that constitutes the self "of the moment" and which is "functionally relevant" (Nurius, 1989, p. 287). In contrast, self-guides are external to the self. A self-guide offers a perspective *on* the self. It has an evaluative function. It provides a reference point from which the self is appraised (Higgins, 1990).

#### *Form*

Another difference involves form (Henry & Liu 2024a). Possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-guides (Higgins 1987) both explain behaviour that arises from incongruences in a person's perception of current and desired attributes. While in both cases, a perception of circumstances that could pertain in the future is compared with a perception of currently existing (actual) circumstances, representations differ in phenomenology. Possible selves are images of the self in future situations (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Conjured in the imagination, laced with fantasy, and frequently involving orientations to a longer-term future, possible

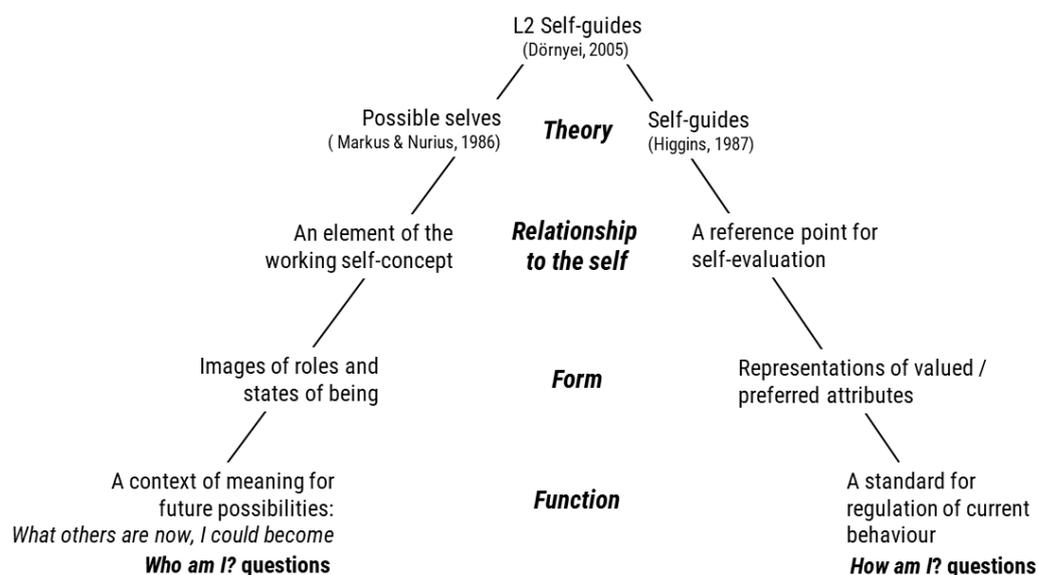
selves are “imagined roles and states of being” (Markus & Nurius 1986, p. 954). In contrast, a self-guide is a self-evaluative *standard* (Higgins et al., 1986). Standards are knowledge structures. A standard provides a point of reference for self-evaluation. As a social standard (Higgins, 1990), a self-guide constitutes a representation of *attributes* that are desired or preferred *by* the individual themselves, or which the individual believes to be desired or preferred *for* them by important others.

### Function

A final difference involves function (Henry & Liu 2024a). Possible selves develop in contexts that are personally meaningful. They are activated in situations where behaviour is generally intentional. Possible selves create a context of possibility. Speculations about potentiality are prompted, and personal futures are assessed. Projecting into their imagined future, the individual “may vividly elaborate hoped-for images of himself of herself as ‘being a famous musician’, ‘becoming a good psychologist’, or ‘having a happy family’” (Markus & Cross, 1990, p. 595). When activated, a possible self invokes “*Who* am I ...” questions. In contrast, a self-guide provides a point of reference from which the actual self is evaluated. Attributes that are desired, valued, or preferred, provide the criteria for self-appraisal (Higgins 1987; Higgins et al., 1986). Influencing “social information processing and emotional–motivational states” (Higgins 1990, p. 310), standards function in ways that regulate behaviour. When a self-guide is activated, focus is on the present. Self-evaluation invokes “*How* am I .....” questions.

### Figure 1

A Theory Map of Possible Selves and Self-Guides (Henry & Liu, 2024a)



## Implications

Constructs that exist in a grey area between being “different enough to be considered distinct” yet “similar enough to be considered identical” can create theoretical and methodological complications (Lawson & Robins, 2021, p. 344). Problems arise when constructs that appear to be similar (but which in fact are different) are used interchangeably, or when they are conjoined within a superordinate construct. This, we have argued, is the case with the L2 self-guide (Henry & Liu, 2024a). With reference to the concerns raised by MacIntyre in his commentaries on the L2MSS (MacIntyre, 2022; MacIntyre et al., 2009a, 2009b), and drawing on the differences discussed in the preceding section and illustrated in the theory map in Figure 1, we consider eight implications for L2 motivation research that stem from the assumption that conceptual overlap between possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-guides (Higgins, 1987) is sufficient to justify amalgamation in a unitary construct. We begin this discussion by considering the issue of identity.

### *Implication 1: The Involvement of Identity*

The L2MSS was developed at a time when L2 motivation was being “reconceptualised and retheorised in the context of contemporary notions of self and identity” (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009, p. 1). In L2 learning and motivation, the role of identity has been widely acknowledged (Al-Hoorie & MacIntyre, 2020). Regardless of the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the major frameworks developed to explain the individual’s response to L2 learning, identity has had a central place (e.g., Al-Hoorie & Hiver, 2020; Noels & Giles, 2009; Norton, 2020). However, it should not be assumed that identity, as recognized in SLA (e.g., Norton, 2000; Ushioda, 2011), is identical to identity as understood in cognitive science. Drawing attention to these differences, Macintyre et al. (2009a, p. 57) were at pains to point out that the “theoretical strength of discussing the self does not lie in reiterating processes of identity formation and change”.

Possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-guides (Higgins, 1987) emerged in the cognitive psychology of the late 1970s and early 1980s. For cognitive psychologists, the self is an *inner psychological structure*. It involves the perception of having access to one’s thoughts and feelings, and the inferences that a person makes about themselves in relation to others. Identity is the *expression* of that structure in a social context (Baumeister, 1997, 2022). It is via personal and social identities that knowledge of the self is articulated (Oyserman, 2009).

While there is broad consensus regarding the relationship between self and identity, there are differences in the ways in which identity is implicated in the conceptualization of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-guides (Higgins, 1987). In the theory of possible selves, identity is relevant in relation to the envisioning of a personal future. As Markus and Nurius (1986) have made clear, possible selves involve the “constructive nature of the self” (p. 954). Providing an image of the self in a different guise – “what others are now, I could become” – a possible self implicates a personal and a social identity (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). As Oyserman and Horowitz (2023) have explained, “possible self-based researchers predict that people with specific possible future identities will engage in future-focused action tied to these possible identities (e.g., ‘becoming an A-student’ will lead to studying)” (p. 76).

In scholarship outlining the nature and function of self-guides and associated self-evaluative standards (Higgins, 1987, 1990; Higgins et al., 1986), notions of identity (current or future) are largely absent. Rather, self-guides and other types of self-evaluative standard, are representations of attributes that are desired or preferred by the individual, or which the individual believes to be desired or preferred for them by significant others. Of course, a valued attribute can also be part of an aspired-to identity. However, it need not be. Or it might be in certain situations. Reflective of how self-evaluative standards can extend beyond the person's *own* desires and preferences, self-guides are theorized to exist at varying levels of internalization. For example, an *introjected self-guide* would represent “the felt presence of others in the self” (Moretti & Higgins, 1999b, p. 190). In this case, the regulation of behaviour would be accomplished through the need to maintain self-esteem by conforming to expectations attributed to significant others, rather than the desire to achieve a particular identity.

Obscured in Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) original theorizing, these differences have been poorly appreciated in subsequent work. Yet they are important. In circumstances where languages and language learning are in close alignment with a person's abiding values and key dimensions of their personality, and in situations where a person's “core identity is bound to language” and where “the self obviously becomes a prominent and salient concern to the conscious mind” (MacIntyre, 2022, p. 90), *possible selves* can provide a valuable means of modelling motivation (e.g., MacIntyre et al., 2017) and persistence in L2 learning (e.g., Henry, 2023). Frameworks that take identity as a starting point, and that incorporate a *possible self* (a vision of a personal future), *self-concordant goals* (goals that are personally relevant), and *autobiographical knowledge* (representations that involve personality-based preferences, general events expected to be encountered in life, and future life periods), have the potential to explain the sustained pursuit of proficiency (Henry, 2020). However, a preoccupation with identity should not be assumed to be typical for all language learners (Thomas et al., 2021). Nor should a preoccupation with the future (a point to which we return later). In situations where identity is not “bound to language”, and when it is not a “salient concern” (MacIntyre, 2022, p. 90), the modelling of motivation for L2 learning may be better accomplished through the application of Self Determination Theory (Oga-Baldwin, 2024), and in integrated frameworks where, for example, *self-guides* and other self-evaluative standards can provide plug-in constructs that can capture sources of socially derived motivation (Henry & Liu, 2023, 2024a, 2024b).

### *Implication 2: A functional Structure Incorporating Social Influences*

The most telling of the cautions sounded by MacIntyre et al. (2009a) remains the least understood. This involves the challenge of explaining the role of *the other in the self*: “how one construes oneself and ‘others’ in a given context” (MacIntyre et al., 2009a, p. 57). Pointing out how a self system framing presumes a conceptualization of interactions between individual and context, MacIntyre et al. (2009a) noted how Dörnyei's work was silent on this point. Given that “a specific contribution of the L2 self-system would be to provide a *functional structure* accounting for the integration of identity processes” (MacIntyre et al., 2009a, p. 58, emphasis added), this gives cause for concern.

As we have emphasized in related articles (Henry & Liu, 2023, 2024a, 2024b), in the publications in which the L2MSS was originally developed and in subsequent work, Dörnyei's

interest was in vision and the effects that visualization of a desired future could have on motivation (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005, 2009, 2014, 2020; Dörnyei et al., 2016). Even if the nomenclature of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) is reflected in the L2 self-guide construct, regulatory processes were not Dörnyei's primary concern. Sparse engagement with Higgins's theorizing in Dörnyei's own writings and in the work of researchers who have drawn on the L2MSS is unfortunate.

For researchers of L2 motivation prepared to engage with Higgins's scholarship, there is much that is of interest. Supervised by Wallace Lambert at McGill University, Higgins was well aware "of how language, thought, and society impact one another" (Higgins, 2019, p. vii). In contrast to the work on possible selves (e.g., Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989), Higgins (1990) provided detailed conceptualizations of the regulatory functions attributable to mental representations of social others and social and societal norms. Importantly, he developed explanations for how self-guides and other self-evaluative standards can provide a functional structure in the modelling of regulation in particular domains (Higgins, 1990; Moretti & Higgins, 1999a, 1999b).

As previously explained, a self-guide is a type of *standard* (Higgins, 1987, 1990). A standard "is a criterion or rule established by experience, desires, or authority" which derives from "past interpersonal experiences, knowledge of self and others, and current social contexts" (Higgins, 1990, p. 310). Standards are multifunctional. They can operate as points of reference, and as regulatory criteria (Higgins et al., 1986). When activated, a standard will influence both the significance of an event, and the ways in which a person responds. When action is socially motivated, and when it is directed to accomplishments that involve social outcomes (e.g., mastery and use of an L2), a standard that provides a criterion for self-evaluation "derives from and takes into account other people" (Higgins, 1990, p. 310).

To map the range of reference points that can provide criteria for self-evaluation and the regulation of social action, Higgins (1990) developed a general categorization of standards. Among other standards, Higgins's framework encompasses *normative guides*, *social context guides*, and *social category factials* (see Henry & Liu, 2023, 2024b, for a detailed exposition). Reflecting social, group, and societal norms, these standards provide the points of reference in relation to which social action is evaluated (Higgins, 1990; Higgins et al., 1986).

When the disparate strands in Dörnyei's theorizing are untangled, and when focus shifts from the function of possible selves (as images of imagined personal futures) to the roles played by self-evaluative standards in the regulation of behaviour, it becomes possible to gain an understanding of aspects of the self-concept that are "derived from group membership" (MacIntyre et al., 2009a, p. 58). Moreover, when use is made of Higgins's (1990) categorization of social standards, we are provided with the means to develop a "functional structure" (MacIntyre et al., 2009a p. 58) that can account for a range of self-evaluative processes likely to be implicated in the regulation of L2 learning behaviour. This, we have suggested, can take the form of a self-regulatory system (Henry & Liu, 2023, 2024b). In a self-regulatory system, focus is not primarily trained on the future (cf. possible selves). Rather, the focus of self-evaluation is on the present, and the attributes of the *actual self* (Higgins, 1990).

*Implication 3: A Focus on the Actual Self*

Engaging with Dörnyei's proposals, MacIntyre et al. (2009b) argued that "the potential advantage of using a possible selves approach lies in the comparison of present and future states, highlighting the discrepancy between them to understand the sources of language learning motivation" (p. 209). A decade later, MacIntyre (2022) could observe that the "discrepancy remains largely untested" (p. 87). Even though measurement of actual–ideal discrepancies has been empirically demonstrated (Thorsen et al., 2020), and the importance firmly established (Henry & Cliffordson, 2017), research has been minimal and the role of the actual self in L2 motivation remains poorly appreciated.

As we have suggested, one of the consequences of the focus on "self and identity" (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009) has been to deflect attention from the evaluative functions of self-guides. A self-guide is aptly named. As a reference point for appraisals of the self and a regulatory criterion, it *guides* behaviour. It steers actions in directions where a person's actual (current) self can become closer to their ideals and aspirations (Higgins et al., 1986). As Higgins (1987) has made clear, the focus of self-discrepancy theory is on "discrepancies between one's self-perceived attributes and some standard or self-guide" (p. 332). While various standards can be utilized in self-evaluation (Higgins et al., 1986), and while there are varying types of self-guide (Higgins, 1990), there is only one *actual self*. Moreover, it is the attributes of the actual self that are subject to appraisal. The attributes represented in a self-guide (or other standard) provide a point of reference.

With appreciation of the function of standards (Higgins, 1990) follows recognition of the need to pay greater attention to the actual self, and to processes of self-evaluation where *current* attributes are appraised in relation to those that are desired or preferred. While self-evaluation and appraisals that focus on the attributes of the actual self are beclouded in L2MSS scholarship, research investigating the validity of scales measuring the ideal L2 self has put self-evaluation firmly into the spotlight (Al-Hoorie et al., 2024a, 2024b). In the first of two studies, Al-Hoorie et al. (2024a) demonstrated how the ideal L2 self was not found to be discriminant from linguistic self-confidence. Rather, the items purporting to measure the ideal L2 self seemed more likely to invoke appraisals related to self-efficacy, as opposed to a degree of discrepancy between an ideal and a current self. In a second study (Al-Hoorie et al., 2024b) results of exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses demonstrated that the ideal L2 self and ability beliefs could not be adequately distinguished. Qualitative analyses revealed how evaluations of a group of survey-takers who responded to 4 ideal L2 self items were dominated by beliefs about current ability and/or self-esteem. Reflecting on these findings, the researchers suggested that ideal L2 self items might not be measuring "actual–ideal discrepancies as hypothesized in the L2MSS, but rather the respondents' ability beliefs about performing the acts mentioned in the items" (Al-Hoorie et al., p. 16).

Taken together, the findings reported by Al-Hoorie and his colleagues suggest that even when items present a *potential future*, it is evaluations of *ability* that are induced. Rather than a projected future state, or an identity that differs in quality from that which currently pertains, scales measuring the ideal L2 self seem more likely to capture appraisals of perceived capacity. But that is not all. Even when ideal L2 self items specifically invoke a situation likely to trigger thoughts about a possible self (e.g., the item 'When I think about my future job, I always imagine myself using English' discussed by Al-Hoorie et al., 2024b), it would be wrong to

assume that evaluations of current attributes are not involved. As Macintyre (2022) has reminded us, when the self comes to mind “composite imagery from past, present and future mixes together continuously” (p. 86).

The problems of discriminant validity shown to afflict the L2MSS scales (Al-Hoorie et al. 2024a, 2024b) highlight the need for theoretical as well as methodological refinement (Oga-Baldwin, 2024). For a model of motivation predicated on the learner’s identification of a discrepancy between current and desired/preferred attributes, the minimal attention given to self-evaluation and processes of self-appraisal is nothing short of remarkable. It is ironic that the key innovation associated with the L2 self-guide construct – the targeting of a discrepancy where *current attributes* are appraised in relation *an evaluative standard* – remains so poorly understood. By dismantling the L2 self-guide construct, and by focusing on the ways in which self-guides and associated standards (Higgins, 1990) can provide benchmarks against which the current abilities of L2 learners are appraised, there may be opportunities to bring clarity to these currently murky waters.

#### *Implication 4: The Operationalization of Ideal and Ought L2 Selves*

Back in 2009, one of the major concerns voiced by MacIntyre and colleagues involved the conceptualization of the L2 self-guide construct. If future selves were to provide “a framework to understand L2 motivation”, they argued, there would be a need “to clearly define what is appropriately conceptualised as a possible L2 self” (MacIntyre et al., 2009a, p. 50). While L2MSS research has witnessed a proliferation of “L2 selves” – a point to which we will return – the conceptualization of the ideal L2 self construct has been all but ignored. Researchers have relied on Dörnyei’s (2005, 2009) original descriptions. In the absence of a robust explication of differences between possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-guides (Higgins, 1987), researchers whose work is based on the L2MSS have simply assumed that the constructs are equivalent.

However, failure to engage with dissimilarities in the conceptualization of possible selves and self-guides is not without consequences. In empirical work, there has been a notable tendency to operationalize the ideal L2 self as a *possible self*, and the ought-to L2 self as a *self-guide*. In the scale most widely used in L2MSS research (Taguchi et al., 2009), the ideal L2 self is measured by items targeting *visionary capacity*, and which are formulated to capture the *imaginal elements of a personal future* (e.g., ‘I can imagine myself studying in a university where all my courses are taught in English’). In contrast, the ought-to L2 self is measured using items that target *beliefs about desired/preferred attributes* (e.g., ‘Studying English is important to me because an educated person is supposed to be able to speak English’). Similar divergencies can be found in another frequently used scale (Moskovsky et al., 2016). Here, the ideal L2 self involves the vision of a personal future (e.g., ‘I can imagine myself living abroad and having a conversation in English’), whereas the ought-to L2 self is captured by sets of beliefs (e.g., ‘Being able to speak English will add to my social status’). Moreover, there is an assumption that the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self *both* involve vision, imagery and identity. Reflecting Dörnyei’s (2020) overriding concern with vision, it is not uncommon to find arguments that the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self both involve self-relevant imagery, but that conjured images can differ with regard to internalization (e.g., Jiang et al., 2024).

Similar inconsistency can be found in work on regulatory focus (Papi et al., 2019). Here, L2 self-guides are bifurcated to reflect own and other standpoints. In this work, the ideal L2 self/*own* is operationalized using items that target the *imagination* (e.g., ‘I can imagine a day when I use English effectively to communicate with people from all around the world’). In contrast, the ideal L2 self/*other* is measured by items that target *beliefs* (e.g., ‘If I master the English language, the people who are important in my life will be proud’) (Papi & Khajavy, 2021). Differences in construct operationalization mean that caution is needed when interpreting these findings. In Papi and Khajavy’s (2021) study, results showed that while the ideal L2 self/*own* was a negative predictor of L2 anxiety, the ideal L2 self/*other* was a positive predictor. Similar results were found for L2 enjoyment. Here, the ideal L2 self/*own* was a strong positive predictor, while the ideal L2 self/*other* failed to explain any variance. While the study was designed to explore the effects of a distinction in regulatory standpoint (Higgins, 1987), it is equally possible to account for the results in relation to the differential operationalization of ideal L2 self/*own* and ideal L2 self/*other*. While the former accords more with the conceptualization of a *possible self* (e.g., ‘I can imagine a day when I speak English fluently with international friends/colleagues’), the latter aligns with the notion of a *self-guide* (e.g., ‘My family will be proud of me if one day I master the English language’). In a study using similar scales to explore the effects of L2 selves on measures of persistence and motivational intensity, comparable findings emerged (Feng & Papi, 2020). Results of multiple regression analyses demonstrated how ideal L2 self/*own* was a significant predictor of motivational intensity, while ideal L2 self/*other* was not. While it has been suggested that results from these studies can be interpreted as “confirming the validity of the standpoint distinction” (Feng & Papi, 2020, p. 6), an alternative explanation can be found in the operationalization of the constructs as, respectively, a *possible self* (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and a *self-guide* (Higgins, 1987).

Given the extent to which L2 self-guides are currently used in research exploring regulatory standpoints (e.g., Feng & Papi, 2020; Jiang & Papi, 2021; Papi & Khajavy, 2021; Tahmouresi & Papi, 2022; Zhou & Papi, 2023), and the concerns now voiced about measurement practices in L2 psychology (e.g., Sudina, 2021), addressing problems in the conceptualization and operationalization of the L2 self-guide needs to be a major priority. Conceptual and methodological rigor go hand in hand (Oga-Baldwin, 2024). Study quality (Plonsky, 2024) will be improved only when the conceptual entanglements ensnaring the L2 self-guide are suitably unravelled.

#### *Implication 5: Intra-Individual Variation, Multilingualism, and Higher Order Selves*

Following on from the preceding discussions – and MacIntyre et al.’s (2009a) observation that a person can have different selves that “may not necessarily be closely related to one another” (p. 46) – we turn now to the issue of intra-individual variation in the self-concept. Reflecting on the complexity of the self, MacIntyre et al. (2009a) noted that bilinguals have been shown to endorse different values when communicating in their different languages, and that knowledge structures relating to these languages can also differ. They argued that because the self is “a highly variable concept, not only cross culturally but also intra-individually”, in a self-system conceptualization of L2 motivation intra-individual differences need to be adequately accommodated (MacIntyre et al., 2009a, p. 55).

To a large extent, research on the intra-individual variability of L2 self-guides has drawn on work from the possible selves paradigm (Markus & Nurius, 1986), specifically the function of the *working self-concept* (e.g., Markus & Kunda, 1986) and the dynamic properties of possible selves (e.g., Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). For example, Henry (2015) outlined the interactions that can take place in the working self-concept of the L2 learner. In work on motivation and multiple language learning (Henry, 2017; Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Liu, 2022a, 2022b), it has been suggested that higher-order *multilingual selves* can emerge from interactions between L2 selves that relate to the learner's different languages.

Equally, it has also been recognized that in many contexts where people are engaged in the processes of learning and speaking different languages, an individual can experience the sense of being obligated to be, or to become multilingual (e.g., Liu, 2022a; Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2014). In such circumstances, it has been suggested that a different type of higher-order self-guide – an *ought-to multilingual self* – can develop (Liu, 2022a). Rather than interactions between possible selves related to different languages, the ought-to multilingual self is seen as a product of interactions between language ideology, the learner's immediate social and linguistic environment, and learner internal factors (Liu, 2022a). Reflecting how an *ought self-guide* functions as a “normative, socially prescribed self that involves individuals' beliefs about what others believe they ought to be like” (Higgins et al., 1986, p. 5), Liu (2022a) has argued that the ought-to multilingual self captures a perception of a “need to expand the linguistic repertoire” (p. 251) primarily driven by social and societal expectations and pragmatic needs.

Even when conceptual differences between possible selves and self-guides are explicitly acknowledged – as in the development of multilingual selves (e.g., Henry, 2017; Liu, 2022b) – the problem of construct overlap/distinctiveness is ultimately the same as in work where differences have been obscured (e.g., Papi et al., 2019). Rooted in the theory of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), the ideal L2 self involves imagination, visionary capacity, and mental time travel. In contrast, the ought-to L2 self is grounded in the notion of a regulatory self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987). As well as the language learner's own desires for L2 accomplishment, an ought self additionally involves beliefs about the hopes and expectations of significant others. Regardless of whether issues of non-equivalence involve conceptualization or operationalization, the glossing of divergencies in the source constructs creates confusion. In this light, MacIntyre et al.'s (2009a) warning that the self exhibits a high degree of intra-individual variation is prescient. With appreciation of the intra-individual variability of the self, and recognition of the conceptual distinctiveness of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-guides and associated social/societal standards (Higgins, 1987, 1990), there are good arguments for dismantling the L2 self-guide. With this achieved, models that build on the particular qualities of the respective source constructs can be developed.

#### *Implication 6: The Introduction of Additional Selves*

As well as highlighting the intra-individual variability of the self, MacIntyre et al. (2009a) made a further important observation. Noting that a person can have many different selves, they make the point that these selves “may not necessarily be closely related to one another” (p. 46) and, when selves are poorly aligned, that a person can “experience tension” (p. 47). In L2MSS research, tensions between unaligned or competing selves have been poorly

understood. In part, this is due to the parsimony of the L2MSS model. It is also a consequence of a theoretical blind spot where both the content and the functionality of the L2 learner's self-system have escaped critical scrutiny (Henry & Liu, 2023). The absence of such work presents challenges. It is one of the reasons behind the proliferation of selves and liberal use of the "self" as a label for almost any empirically identified phenomenon (Al-Hoorie, 2018; MacIntyre, 2022). It has also served to deflect attention from the regulatory processes that a self-system model would be expected to capture (MacIntyre et al., 2009a).

Rather than further increasing the number of "selves" in attempts to capture the idiosyncrasies of L2 motivation – and risk continued accumulation of "conceptual clutter" (Al-Hoorie, 2018) – it would seem more profitable to focus on the *functionality* of self-regulatory systems (MacIntyre et al., 2009a). To illustrate this point, we can look at the *anti-ought-to self*, a construct designed to capture the desire to go against the grain of societal discourse by learning a foreign language (Thompson, 2017; Thompson & Vásquez, 2015). Developed in case study research exploring the motivation of highly successful L2 learners in the United States, the anti-ought-to self captures the phenomenon of how learning a foreign language can involve "going against societal expectations" (Thompson & Vásquez, 2015, p. 172). Conceptualized as "a reaction to societal pressures in the opposite manner than is defined in Dörnyei's ought-to L2 self dimension" (Thompson & Vásquez, 2015, p. 171), the anti-ought-to self is suggested to be a potentially powerful source of motivation. In support of the construct, Thompson and Vásquez (2015) have made clear that while "the L2MSS framework is directly influenced by Higgins (1987), the dimension of 'I' versus 'other' is not strongly articulated in the L2MSS [and] appears to be insufficiently recognized for its consequences for motivation" (p. 161). Developing this reasoning, they argue that:

...because the ought-to L2 self retains explanatory gaps in the model, it is reasonable to assume that another dimension is at work within the construct of motivation. We propose the construct of psychological reactance as such an extension of the construct of L2MSS, understood as the urge to perform an action specifically because someone gave advice to the contrary (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981).

(Thompson & Vásquez, 2015, p. 161)

Thompson and Vásquez (2015) are undoubtedly right. There *are* "explanatory gaps in the model", and it *is* reasonable to assume that "another dimension is at work within the construct of motivation". However, despite the intuitive appeal of a novel construct such as the anti-ought-to self, there can be longer-term dangers associated with the merging of disparate theories to fit empirical findings without first considering whether the original framework can be refined to account for the new phenomenon. It is a danger that is compounded when, in the originating framework, constructs suffer from validity problems (Al-Hoorie et al., 2024a, 2024b; Henry & Liu, 2024a).

In seeking understanding of how "societal expectations" (p. 172) might collide with an ideal L2 self, possible selves theory offers little guidance. In contrast, Higgins's (1990) framework of social standards and the conceptualization of their regulatory functions brings useful insights. While Higgins's theory does not include a model of working cognition akin to Markus and Nurius's (1986) notion of the *working self-concept*, representations of self-

evaluative standards are seen as highly interconnected (Higgins et al., 1986; Moretti & Higgins, 1990a, 1990b). While standards will often converge in related clusters, oppositions can also occur. Self-guides are particularly likely to exhibit tensions with other standards, not least normative guides and social context guides (standards that encompass expectations attributed to social and societal groups) (Higgins, 1990). While in many situations, normative and social context guides will influence a person's self-guides in ways that bring alignment, there can also be circumstances where a self-guide and a normative or social context guide can be misaligned. In such circumstances, "self-regulatory and self-evaluative conflict" can arise (Higgins, 1990, p. 321).

By acknowledging and investigating interactions between unaligned and potentially antagonistic standards, the experience of wanting to learn a foreign language despite social and societal edicts to the contrary can be adequately accommodated within a self-system model of L2 motivation. For the participants in Thompson's studies (Thomson, 2017; Thompson & Vásquez, 2015), regulatory experiences can be explained through conflict resolution processes that involve the concurrent operation of an *ideal self* (the desire to become a person who speaks the target language) and *normative* and *social context guides* (socially and societally generated norms indicating that speakers of English have no reason to learn an additional foreign language). Thus, when a novel situation or phenomenon is encountered, the adoption of a systemic approach can be effective not just in stemming the "proliferation of self-related concepts" (MacIntyre, 2022, p. 87). It can also enhance conceptual understanding of intra-individual variation and regulatory processes within the self-system.

#### *Implication 7: The Combination of Idiographic and Nomothetic Approaches*

As MacIntyre et al. (2009a) could observe, research into possible selves has often involved methods that take "a distinct qualitative bent", where participants "spontaneously generate possible selves in open-ended surveys" (p. 53). In their chapter on the measurement of L2 self-guides – and in particular the ideal L2 self – MacIntyre et al. (2009b) argued that "one of the advantages of using a possible selves framework is looking at the integration of present and future selves and how various elements of those selves work together *for an individual*" (p. 209, emphasis added). With a focus on current and possible selves and their interrelationships, MacIntyre and colleagues developed this argument by explaining how "implicating the self by contemplating one's future increases the demands for the various aspects of self to make sense together" (p. 209).

To capture the idiosyncrasies of L2 learners' motivation, while also understanding how aspects of self "make sense together" (MacIntyre et al., 2009b, p. 209), idiographic measurement techniques hold much promise. As Haberman et al. (2022) have pointed out, while "ideals can be somewhat idiosyncratic", "norms are more pervasive and relate to all the group members to whom the norms apply" (p. 253). Still, it is hard not to imagine that some degree of idiosyncrasy will apply even at the level of social groups, or in relation to social and societal norms. However, when nomothetic measurement is used, important idiosyncratic aspects of these standards can be missed. This does not mean that we should abandon nomothetic measures in favor of a purely idiographic approach. While the *content* of social standards might well vary across individuals, in relation to *function* normative standards are likely to operate according to more generalizable principles. Thus, to investigate the effects of

self-guides and other self-evaluative standards, combined idiographic–nomothetic designs are required (Haberman et al., 2022).

In L2 motivation research, measurement of the effects of standards such as ideal, ought and normative guides may best be conducted through a combination of idiographic and nomothetic approaches (see Henry et al., 2023 for a methodological discussion). The study by Haberman et al. (2022) provides a good example of how this can be accomplished. In this study, participants first idiographically generated their own *self* and *society standards* using open-ended questions. This ensured that the standards investigated were personally meaningful and relevant. Thereafter, for each generated standard, the researchers used nomothetic rating scales to measure the degree of importance and the extent of self-perceived attainment. Statistical analysis enabled the identification of more general patterns and provided opportunities to perform between-person comparisons. Of particular relevance for L2 motivation, a combined idiographic–nomothetic approach has the additional advantage of enabling measurement of the internalization of an operational standard. For example, endorsement of an identified standard could be assessed using a rating scale reflecting the intrinsic–identified–introjected–external continuum (Henry et al., 2023).

*Implication 8: The Timescales at which Self-Evaluation is Operative*

Introducing his chapter in Al-Hoorie and Szabo’s (2022) recent anthology, MacIntyre observed that “psychology takes on subject matter that can be notoriously difficult to define and measure for research purposes” (p. 83). It is no secret that the timescale at which the L2MSS has been investigated is very different to the timescale at which self-evaluation actually takes place (Henry & Liu, 2024b). While processes observed on one timescale can create the conditions for processes observed on another (Van Geert, 2020), the timescale at which individual differences emerge (and can be measured in survey-based research) should not be confused with the timescale at which possible selves and self-guides are functionally operable. Surveys that rely on retrospective, aggregated self-reports cannot adequately capture the dynamic, real-time interplay of possible selves and self-guides at the moment-to-moment level (Zirekel, et al., 2015). The same is true for retrospective interviewing. While these methods can provide valuable insights into general patterns observable over time, experimental methods are needed to examine how possible selves and self-guides may influence learners’ immediate thoughts and behaviours as they engage in L2 tasks. Research from educational psychology can provide insights into how such experiments might be developed (Oyserman & Horowitz, 2023). For instance, Landau et al. (2014) conducted experimental manipulations of metaphoric framing. Participants were primed to frame their academic possible identity using a “goal-as-journey” metaphor versus alternative framings such as “goal-as-contained-entity”. The researchers then measured the immediate effects of such framings in terms of academic intentions and task effort. The study demonstrated how experimental methods can capture immediate effects of possible selves on actual behaviour, and how evidence beyond retrospective self-recollection can be supplied.

In addition to the need to rethink the conceptualization of the L2 self-guide construct, there is also cause to consider (a) the timescale at which processes might take place, (b) how these processes might differ for possible selves and self-guides, and (c) how processes can be appropriately targeted in research designs. Together with studies where the effects of priming

are investigated in relation to the pursuit of an activity such as L2 speaking or writing (Al-Hoorie & Hiver, 2023), the most promising avenues for future research seem likely to involve the application of combined idiographic–nomothetic methods (Henry et al., 2023) and experimental techniques that can capture real-time motivational dynamics and their impact.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The L2 self-guide (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) is a fascinating construct. The appeal of an aspect of the L2 learner’s self-concept that can keep them on track during the long-term process of acquiring an additional language has not only galvanized L2 motivation research (Boo et al., 2015; Liu, 2024). It has also contributed to the growth of interest in the psychology of language learning (PLL), and the quest to understand how people can thrive in the language learning experience (MacIntyre, 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2016). However, as MacIntyre (2022) has noted, “the choice to base a system of motivation on ‘the self’ was a bold move” (p. 90). The shift away from the Socio-Educational model (Gardner, 1985) and the introduction of the L2 self-guide construct “brought into play a vast body of research on the self” (MacIntyre et al., 2009a, p. 49). As MacIntyre and colleagues (2009a, p. 49) further made clear, the “vastness of the literature” and its “conceptual complications” could be “a double edged sword”. As well as potential benefits, there could also be pitfalls. In anticipation of the challenges that the L2MSS model and the L2 self-guide construct seemed likely to create, MacIntyre et al. (2009a, 2009b) advised that research taking a self-based approach should proceed with caution. As we have argued (see also, Henry & Liu, 2023, 2024a, 2024b), this advice has been poorly heeded. As reviews of work on L2 motivation readily reveal (e.g., Papi & Hiver, 2022), research has continued regardless.

Research drawing on the L2MSS has not only generated an extensive body of empirical work. It has also created a plethora of conceptual and methodological challenges (Al-Hoorie et al., 2024a, 2024b; Henry & Liu, 2023, 2024a, 2024b; Liu & Henry, 2025; Oga-Baldwin, 2024). The question which the field now faces is whether use of the self as the basis for a model of L2 motivation “has been worth the trouble” (MacIntyre, 2022). The modelling of L2 motivation as a self-system, and the problems stemming from the assumption that possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-guides (Higgins, 1987) are largely equivalent are both causes for concern (Henry & Liu, 2023, 2024a). In light of research demonstrating problems of discriminant validity affecting L2MSS scales (Al-Hoorie et al., 2024a, 2024b), we have arrived at a point where there are reasons enough to look to other models in furtherance of our understanding of motivation for language learning (Al-Hoorie et al., 2024a; Oga-Baldwin, 2025).

At the same time, we should not be hasty in discounting the value that possible selves and self-guides and other self-evaluative standards might have for L2 learning. Even if the “L2 self-guide” and the self-system model may no longer offer viable ways of exploring the motivation of language learners, the underpinning theories can have much to offer. With a nod to Cronbach’s (1956) labelling of researchers as “splitters” if they highlight subtle distinctions among constructs and dissect them into constituent elements, and “lumpers” if they tend to ignore differences and prefer to work with a broader umbrella construct, Lawson and Robins (2021) have argued that “when there are important conceptual distinctions between the constructs” it is “better to be a splitter than a lumper” (p. 359). In L2 motivation research,

unfortunate labelling and an emphasis on similarities has masked the many differences between possible selves and self-guides. In this regard, it is instructive to note that Higgins did not see an equivalence between the two constructs. Rather, in his categorization of social standards, possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) are equated with *self-possibilities*: specifically, the *can self-possibility*, “beliefs about one’s capability or potential”, and the *future self-possibility*, “expectations about the type of person they will become” (Higgins, 1990, p. 314).

To disperse the conceptual mist that has enveloped L2MSS research, and to redress the adverse effects that can arise when dissimilar constructs are assumed to be equivalent and are “lumped” together (Lawson & Robins, 2021), a dismantling of the L2 self-guide is needed. Enhancing precision in operationalization, and enabling a better fit between construct and methodology, splitting the L2 self-guide stands to improve study quality (Plonsky, 2024; Oga-Baldwin, 2025). It can also improve opportunities to incorporate the source constructs within broader integrative frameworks (King & Fryer, 2024). While possible selves can be relevant in situations where identity is a “salient concern to the conscious mind” (MacIntyre, 2022, p. 90) and can provide elements in multi-component models of persistence (Dörnyei & Henry, 2022; Henry, 2023), self-guides and other social standards have the potential to be incorporated within SDT frameworks, where they can offer a means of capturing regulatory effects stemming from perceptions of social and societal obligations (Henry & Liu, 2024a).

A point has now been reached where the L2MSS and the findings that the model has generated need to be reappraised (Al-Hoorie et al., 2024a, 2024b; Oga-Baldwin, 2024). At the same time, there have been warnings about taking hypercritical positions. Given the accumulated findings of L2MSS research it has been argued that work would be better focused on instrument development, rather than conceptual issues, and that refinement of the scales measuring L2MSS components offers the “optimal path for moving the field forward” (Papi & Teimouri, 2025, p. 10). However, without first addressing the conceptualization of the L2 self-guide and the many issues connected to construct validity and source construct equivalence, efforts seeking to improve the psychometric properties of L2MSS scales may not be of great value. Ultimately, it may only be possible to assess the contribution of Dörnyei’s innovations if we become “splitters” rather than “lumpers” (Cronbach, 1956; Lawson & Robins, 2021), and if possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-guides (Higgins, 1987) are investigated as discrete constructs. If this is achieved, we may be in a better position to consider whether use of the self as the basis for a model of L2 motivation has in fact been “worth the trouble” (MacIntyre, 2022, p. 90).

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## Ethics Declarations

### Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

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