

Can L2 motivation be modelled as a self-system? A critical assessment

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ABSTRACT

Some two decades ago, Dörnyei (2005) proposed that motivation for L2 learning could be modelled as a self-system. Despite the profound influence of Dörnyei's scholarship and impact of the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) model, the fundamental premise that motivation for L2 learning can constitute a self-system has escaped critical scrutiny. Highlighting how the self-system constitutes a framework within which self-referential cognition is organized, and that self-appraisal occurs in relation to socially-derived standards (Bandura, 1978; Higgins, 1990), this article critically assesses the utility of a self-system conceptualization. This is accomplished by addressing five problem areas connected with the L2MSS and which relate to the model's self-system conceptualization: the "fantasy problem" (nondifferentiation of desire and fantasy), the "ought-to L2 self problem" (unspecificity of relevant others and internalization processes), the "integrativeness problem" (difficulty of incorporating affiliation motives), the "learning experience problem" (failure to account for relational and biographical influences), and the "context problem" (inadequate modelling of learner–environment interactions). Critical engagement with these problem areas demonstrates how the self-system conceptualization embodied in the L2MSS is tightly circumscribed, and how a self-regulatory system framework can provide greater utility.

1. Introduction

In research investigating individual differences (IDs), the primary task of any theory is to define the concept (the ID in focus) and to specify its components (Li et al., 2022). While the major models of L2 motivation all draw on theory building from social and cognitive psychology, domain specificity (whether constructs target behaviour particular to language learning) and conceptual fidelity (alignment with originating paradigms) vary significantly (Ryan, 2019). Many models are closely aligned with parent theories. Notable are Noels' (2001) application of self-determination theory to explain the degree of internalization of the language learner's behaviour, and recent work developing understandings of the roles of grit and engagement in L2 learning (e.g., Hiver et al., 2021; Teimouri et al., 2022). In other cases, theories from mainstream paradigms have provided a conceptual base upon which models specific to SLA have been developed. Notable here are Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model, which reflects theories of infant identification and first language learning (Mowrer, 1950), and Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), which draws on constructs from self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) and the theory of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

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While the socio-educational model and the L2MSS have been highly influential, the latter has found broader reach. Around the globe, Dörnyei's (2009) model has been successfully used in monolingual and multilingual contexts, and in relation to single and multiple target languages (TLs) (Csizér, 2019). Measured in outputs, the L2MSS has witnessed continual growth (Liu, 2022). Meta-analyses have demonstrated the model's utility (Al-Hoorie, 2018; Yousefi & Mahmoodi, 2022). In programmatic work directed to model development, a revision that better accommodates promotion and prevention motives within the original tripartite framework has improved predictive capacity (Papi et al., 2019).

However, despite the attention that the L2MSS has received, and the volume of work now generated, the premise that motivation for language learning can be modelled as a self-system has escaped critical attention. While the innovation in Dörnyei's model involved "reframing L2 motivation as part of the self-system" (2005, p. 93), elaborated discussion of the functioning of self-systems, and justifications for why motivation for L2 learning might constitute a self-system are missing from his work. Likewise, in critical engagements with Dörnyei's scholarship, appraisals of the "self-system" conceptualization are similarly absent. In particular, it is unclear whether a self-system relating to L2 motivation would be circumscribed to the components incorporated in the L2MSS, or whether a wider array of motivational sources could be encompassed. Despite two decades of research, and the ventilation of varying concerns – notably the role played by vision (Hiver & Al-Hoorie, 2020), the lack of a clear distinction with goal-setting (Al-Hoorie & Al-Shlowiy, 2020), and the failure to measure discrepancies between current and future selves (Thorsen et al., 2020) – the "self-system" conceptualization at the core of the L2MSS remains the elephant in the room.

Some twenty years after Dörnyei (2005) first proposed that motivation for language learning could be conceptualized as a self-system, the purpose of this article is to critically evaluate this key contention. In the absence of previous accounts in the L2 motivation literature, in the first part of the article we examine self-system conceptualizations in cognitive psychology. Here, attention is closely trained on the function of the self-system as a mechanism for self-appraisal, and how representations of self and others constitute evaluative referents. After explaining the role of standards – criteria or "benchmarks" that function as a basis for self-evaluation and self-regulation (James, 1890/1948) – we then map out a spectrum of standards that can influence the psychological significance of a social activity such as L2 learning. With a typology of self-evaluative standards serving as a backdrop, in the second part of the article we consider whether a self-system conceptualization can provide a productive way of accounting for L2 learners' motivation. This is accomplished by addressing five problem areas affecting the L2MSS, and which relate to the model's "self-system" conceptualization: the "fantasy problem" (nondifferentiation of desire and fantasy), the "ought-to L2 self problem" (unspecificity of relevant others and internalization processes), the "integrativeness problem" (difficulty of incorporating affiliation motives), the "learning experience problem" (failure to account for relational and biographical influences), and the "context problem" (inadequate modelling of learner–environment interactions).

2. The self-system

In cognitive psychology, perception and cognition constitute "functional and adaptive systems" (Higgins & Bargh, 1987, p. 387). Although definitions vary, a self-system can be understood as a framework within which self-referential cognition is organized. As Bandura (1978) has made clear, "a self system is not a psychic agent that controls behavior [but] refers to cognitive structures that provide reference mechanisms and to a set of subfunctions for the perception, evaluation, and regulation of behavior" (p. 348). It is because self-referential thoughts are systemically connected – as opposed to being executively controlled – that cohesion and stability in regulated behaviour are created (e.g., Hoyle et al., 2019; Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). When understandings of self-referential processes and regulatory phenomena are sought, the self-system can provide a valuable conceptual framework (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987; Moretti & Higgins, 1999a, 1999b; Stein & Markus, 1996).

While the configuration of a self-system can differ depending on the theoretical perspective adopted, there is common emphasis on functional components and the influence of the social environment (Oosterwegel et al., 1993). Because self-systems are adaptive, content and structure should be understood as sensitive to situational variation. Unlike core aspects of the self, which are chronically accessible and generally unaffected by social circumstances (e.g., Markus & Wurf, 1987; Scholer & Higgins, 2014), a self-system comprises constellations of self-knowledge and self-conceptions that become accessible in particular situations. Sensitive to prevailing circumstances, the aspects of a self-system operational in a social situation will show alignment with the beliefs, goals, and expectations that an individual brings to the situation, and with the characteristics and particularities of the situation as a context of social action (Higgins, 1990; Markus & Wurf, 1987). Consequently, as Bandura (1978) has noted, a self-system can provide a way of accounting for the variations that people "typically show in their self-reactions under different situational circumstances, on different activities, and at different times" (p. 348). Emphasizing the role of contextual variation, Fiske and Taylor (1991) have suggested that the self-system should be understood as "a collection of at least semi-related and highly domain-specific knowledge structures" (p. 182).

In a self-system conceptualization, the social context is viewed as a determinant of the system. The composition of the self-system is affected by information received about the self, from the context. In self-appraisal – the key function of the self-system – self-relevant information will often derive from representations of situationally implicated others, and the self in situationally relevant states. A representation can reflect the individual's own perspective on the "attributes (e.g., traits, appearance, performance, outcomes, opinions)" they possess or would ideally like to possess, as well as the perspectives of relevant others (Higgins, 1990, p. 310). These representations are cognitively interrelated. As Moretti and Higgins (1999a, p. 190) have explained, "representations related to individuals' own perspectives and the inferred perspectives of others exist together within the self-system".

3. Self-appraisal and social standards

As a model of regulation, the self-system provides opportunities to identify discrete yet interrelated influences (Higgins et al., 1986). For researchers working with self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), the targeted elements of the self-system are a person's self-guides: their ideal and ought selves (Moretti & Higgins, 1999a; 1999b). However, while self-guides have important regulatory functions – directing behaviour towards outcomes that are desired by the individual and/or are expected of them by significant others – they constitute a particular category of self-evaluative standard.

Standards are “criteria” or “benchmarks” that provide a basis for self-evaluation, and which have regulatory functions (James, 1890/1948). Reflecting “socially constructed beliefs about what is desirable or undesirable” (Higgins & Nakkawita, 2021, p. 89), standards are points of reference that are both personal and social. Beyond self-guides, regulation can be shaped by other types of standard where social others and societal groups provide the points of reference for self-appraisal (Higgins, 1990; Higgins et al., 1986; Moretti & Higgins, 1999a).

In programmatic work investigating behavioural regulation (e.g., Higgins, 1987, 1997; Higgins, 2019; Higgins & King, 1981), Higgins and colleagues developed a general framework of social standards (Higgins, 1990; Higgins et al., 1986). As Higgins et al. (1986) have explained, “such a framework is necessary to appreciate the complex role of standards in the process of self-evaluation and the full extent of possible individual differences in their use” (p. 25). In proposing a comprehensive framework, the key postulate is that different kinds of standard are implicated in the evaluation of properties that relate to the self and to others. The framework encompasses three categories of standard: factual points of reference, acquired guides, and imagined possibilities (Higgins, 1990; Higgins et al., 1986). Further, in relation to a person's chronic representations of goals and expectations which they may bring to a situation, and representations that relate to the social others who constitute the situation, a functional distinction is made between person and situation variables (Higgins, 1990). An overview of Higgins' (1990) categorization of social standards is provided in Table 1. Thereafter, each category is described.

3.1. Factuals

Factuals are representations of beliefs about possessed attributes. They can include traits, perspectives, opinions, and other social attributes. Factuals are subjectively experienced as real existing entities (although a perception does not need to be objectively accurate). A *social category factual* is an individual's representation of a standard pertaining to the attributes of the members of a social category or group. Social category factuals influence regulatory responses to reference groups. In self and social evaluation, social category factuals can function as reference points. While social category factuals involve representations of groups, a *meaningful other factual* is a person's representation of a factual standard defined by the attributes of a particular other who is meaningful to the individual, and who can provide a reference point for self-evaluation. A person represented as a meaningful other may or may not be a personal acquaintance of the perceiver.

A *biographical factual* has a temporal dimension and involves a person's representation of a factual standard which is defined by their own past attributes. Performances and attributes from the recent and distant past can function as reference points for self-evaluation and in this way influence current behaviour. Finally, a *social context factual* is a person's representation of a standard that is defined by the attributes connected to an immediate context of people whom the person is exposed to and is aware of. Like social category, meaningful other and biographical factuals, social context factuals have a self-referential function and provide a point of reference for self-evaluation.

3.2. Guides

In Higgins's (1990) typology, Guides are the representations of attributes that are valued or preferred for a particular social target (the self, a specific other, or a social group). These can be perceived from the standpoint of the self, a specific other person, or a social group. In Higgins's (1990) typology there are four *Self guides*: Ideal self-guide (own); Ideal self-guide (other); Ought self-guide (own);

Table 1
A modified version of Higgins's (1990) classification of types of social standards.

	Personal	Situational
Factuals	Social category factual Meaningful other factual Biographical factual	Social context factual
Guides	Self-guides <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideal self-guide (own/other) • Ought self-guide (own/other) Normative guides <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideal normative guide (meso/macro) • Ought normative guide (meso/macro) 	Social context guides <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideal social context guide • Ought social context guide
Possibilities	Self-possibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can self-possibility (own/other) • Future self-possibility (own/other) 	Social context possibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can social context possibility • Future social context possibility

Ought self-guide (other). The *Ideal self-guide (own)* is a person's representation of the attributes that they would ideally like to possess and includes hopes, wishes and aspirations. The *Ideal self-guide (other)* is a person's representation of the attributes that one or more significant others would ideally like them to possess. They include the hopes, wishes and aspirations held for them by significant others. The *Ought self-guide (own)* is a person's representation of the attributes that they feel they ought to possess. It involves the person's own beliefs about their duties, obligations and responsibilities. Finally, the *Ought self-guide (other)* is a representation of the attributes that one or more significant others believe that they ought to possess. They involve the person's own beliefs about significant others' perceptions of the duties, obligations and responsibilities that befall the individual.

The Guides category also includes *Normative guides*. In contrast to self-guides – which are individual standards and involve representations of valued end states for the individual themselves – normative guides are representations of attributes “that some group prefers or demands that others possess when engaging in particular roles and situations” (Higgins, 1990, p. 312). The size of the group can vary, from people in general, to particular types of social constellation. Further, the individual may or may not be a member of a reference group. Importantly, while self-guides are perceived as individual standards, normative guides are perceived as shared standards. There are two Normative guides. The *Ideal normative guide* is a person's representation of the attributes that a particular group would ideally like people to possess in particular situations and in particular roles. They are attributes which are perceived as desired and preferred in socially defined roles and situations. In contrast, the *Ought normative guide* is a person's representation of the attributes that a particular group believes people ought to possess in socially defined roles and situations. They are attributes which are perceived as demanded and prescribed in such roles and situations.

Additionally, the Guides category also includes *Social context guides*. In contrast to normative guides, Social context guides are context-dependent situationally focused representations. The *Ideal social context guide* is a person's representation of the attributes that people who are participants in a particular social context or situation would ideally like other participants to possess. These attributes are desired and preferred by context participants. In contrast, the *Ought social context guide* is a person's representation of the attributes that people who are participants in a particular social context or situation ought to possess. These attributes are demanded and prescribed by context participants.

3.3. Possibilities

Possibilities are standards that involve representations of attributes that are perceived to be nonfactual. Although they have not actually existed, they are perceived as possible. That is, they might exist, could exist, or will exist. Possibilities can be perceived as realistic or unrealistic. *Self-possibilities* refer to beliefs about the possibilities of oneself. Like self-guides, self-possibilities have own and other standpoints. The *Can self-possibility* is a person's representation of the attributes that they themselves, or another person/other people, believe that they can potentially acquire, or have the capacity to possess at some future point. The *Future self-possibility* is a person's representation of the attributes that they themselves, or another person/other people, believe that they are likely to possess. *Social context possibilities* refer to input from the momentary context concerning a target person's possibilities (can and future).

4. The conceptualization of motivation for L2 learning as a self-system

In the L2MSS (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009), motivation for language learning is conceptualized as a self-system in which two sources of discrepancy are operational. Motivation can be generated through a desire to approximate a self-image as an L2-speaker (an ideal L2 self), or to possess L2 attributes expected by significant others (an ought-to L2 self). These components are complemented by a third element, the L2 Learning Experience (L2LE). Although its status within the self-system is unclear, the L2LE is conceptualized as encompassing experiences involving the language learning process and situated motives related to the learning environment.

4.1. “The fantasy problem”: Can a self-system conceptualization sufficiently distinguish fantasy and desire?

The first problem area involves the degree to which the ideal L2 self represents a state of being that is sought-after and actively desired. While the ideal L2 self is conceptualized as a potentially potent source of motivation – generated by an image of the self engaged in future L2 use – there are ambiguities in its operationalization (Al-Hoorie, 2018). Rather than representations of an

Table 2

The function of self-possibilities and ideal self-guides in a model constructed around an expanded self-system conceptualization.

Standard	Representation
Self-possibilities	
Can self-possibility (own/other)	L2 attributes that an individual (own/other standpoint) believes they can potentially possess. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker I can be in the future.</i>
Future self-possibility (own/other)	L2 attributes that an individual (own/other standpoint) believes they are likely possess. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker I am likely to be in the future.</i>
Self-guides	
Ideal self-guide (own)	L2 attributes that an individual would ideally like themselves to possess. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker I would ideally like to be in the future.</i>
Ideal self-guide (other)	L2 attributes that a significant other would ideally like an individual to possess. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker my (mother/father/partner/family) would ideally like me to be in the future.</i>

identified or desired outcome, item formulations have tended to involve abstractions that lack connections to an underlying target, aspiration, or end-state. Reviewing results of investigations into L2 learners' visionary capacity, Hiver and Al-Hoorie (2020) have questioned the central role attributed to sensory images involving future L2 use, arguing that the results of empirical work do not provide unambiguous evidence of purported effects. Indeed, Al-Hoorie (2018) has suggested that "it might be appropriate to relabel the standard ideal L2 self scale to *the imagined self*, and reserve the ideal L2 self label to an improved measure that can accommodate a current–future discrepancy" (p. 736, original emphasis). Aligned with the emphasis on emotions central to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), this would involve a representation of a future state that is desired to a degree that discomfort is caused on awareness of a psychological distance between current and ideal L2 capacities.

In the typology of social standards (Higgins, 1990; Higgins et al., 1986), *guides* and *possibilities* differ in phenomenology and function. While *guides* constitute representations of valued attributes and desired end-states (i.e., targets to aim at), *possibilities* involve a person's potential, taking the form of representations of futures that might, or could be possible (i.e., positive potential that could be realized) (see Table 2). In making this distinction, Higgins (1990) describes possibilities as being akin to James' (1890/1948) notion of the "potential self", and as phenomenologically similar to possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Desire begins in the imagination. However, it does not always translate into "action-oriented representations" (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989, p. 213). Framed as a self-system, the L2MSS is unable to adequately distinguish between fantasy and desire. However, in an expanded conceptualization, opportunities to effectuate such a distinction seem possible. Representations that involve attributes that are actively desired and that can encompass action-orientations (i.e., self-guides) can be distinguished from attributes that relate to a person's potential and are possibly attainable (i.e., possibilities) (Higgins, 1990; Higgins et al., 1986). However, this does not mean that possibilities are supererogatory – hollow counterpoints that contrast with the regulatory qualities of guides. In certain situations, possibilities can function as prototypes. Materializing through a recognition of potential, they can create conditions under which self-guides might subsequently develop. In a model embodying a broader self-system conceptualization, components capturing *self-possibilities* would be of particular value in situations where self-guides might be embryonic, such as when the motivation of younger L2 learners is in focus or, for older learners, at the beginning of a program of L2 learning.

4.2. "The ought-to L2 self problem": Can a self-system conceptualization account for regulatory influences attributable to the perspectives of a broader range of others?

The second problem area involves the role ascribed to the ought-to L2 self. As has been consistently demonstrated, the predictive capacity of the ought-to L2 self is significantly weaker than the ideal L2 self. In Al-Hoorie's (2018) meta-analysis, the ought-to L2 self could account for only a third of the variance on criterion measures of that explained by the ideal L2 self. Questioning the validity of the construct, MacIntyre (2022) has pointed out that in the theorizing underpinning the ought-to L2 self, "the process of internalizing the beliefs of others is not specified" (p. 87). If the ought-to L2 self is to remain viable, MacIntyre argues, it will be "critically important to assess not only the strength of imagined expectations held by other people but, more importantly, the learner's volitional acceptance of those edicts" (2022, pp. 87–88). Thus, in a model where motivation for L2 learning is conceptualized as a self-system, two critical issues arise. These involve the need to adequately account for the range of other people who might wield an influence, and the degree to which perceptions of pressure emanating from the expectations of these others are internalized by the learner.

Development of L2 skills is a socially gated enterprise (Hall, 2018). In a model where L2 motivation is conceptualized as a self-system, identifying the range of others who can constitute the self's "inner audiences" (Horney, 1946) becomes highly important. In the L2MSS, the ought-to L2 self is conceptualized as concerning "the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations" (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). However, the range and categories of social others who might be regarded as holding expectations remains unspecified. When operationalizations of the ought-to L2 self are examined, questionnaire items indicate that it is often a highly restricted category of significant others who are implicated, frequently the learner's parents (e.g., Papi et al., 2019).

However, as Higgins (2019) has made clear, the sense in which a person becomes a significant other is a situational accomplishment. Although self-guides first develop through a child's interactions with its caregivers, not all self-guides will originate in close dyadic relationships:

Table 3

The function of ought self-guides and normative guides in a model constructed around an expanded self-system conceptualization.

Standard	Representation
Self-guides	
Ought self-guide (own)	L2 attributes an individual believes they ought to possess. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker I feel I ought to be in the future.</i>
Ought self-guide (other)	L2 attributes that a significant other believes they ought to possess. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker that my mother/father/partner/family expects me to be in the future.</i>
Normative guides	
Ideal normative guide (meso)	L2 attributes that a social group would ideally like people to possess. Attributes perceived as wanted and preferred. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker that the people in a social group would ideally like me to be.</i>
Ideal normative guide (macro)	L2 attributes that the wider society would ideally like people to possess. Attributes perceived as wanted and preferred. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker that the wider society would ideally like me to be.</i>
Ought normative guide (meso)	L2 attributes that a social group believes people ought to possess. Attributes perceived as demanded and prescribed. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker that the people in a social group think that I ought to be.</i>
Ought normative guide (macro)	L2 attributes that wider society believes people ought to possess. Attributes perceived as demanded and prescribed. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker that the wider society thinks that I ought to be.</i>

There are a variety of other life experiences that influence the development of self-regulation. In addition to parents, a wide range of significant others (e.g., other family members; teachers; social, political, and religious figures; and fictional characters) are important in molding the self-guides that individuals adopt. (Moretti & Higgins, 1999a, p. 211).

Co-workers, managers, and advisors can all become “others” who have a “viewpoint” on the self (Higgins, 2019, p. 159). Thus, the range of others whose expectations have the potential to wield an influence can be far wider than the people with whom the learner is closely related. As well as attributes that close significant others desire or expect, in a model where motivation for L2 learning is conceptualized as a self-system, the range of social others who can express a view needs to extend beyond ideal (*other*) and ought (*other*) self-guides.

Yet, the influence of social others is not limited to other standpoints associated with ideal and ought self-guides. As introduced earlier, an additional type of guide can operate alongside a person’s self-guides. *Normative guides* encompass the injunctions of a broader “internal audience”. Normative guides involve representations of attributes that a certain social group can demand or prefer that others possess when engaging in particular roles in social situations (see Table 3). In this sense, normative guides are standards perceived as “shared” by the members of a group (Higgins, 1990, p. 312; Higgins, 2019).

In a self-system, the range of represented others holding views on the self can be extensive. As Markus and Cross (1990, p. 585) point out, in the self-system “others are the larger ‘society’ in its various forms”. In this light, and in relation to social influences that affect an activity such as L2 learning, the self-system conceptualization embodied by the L2MSS is highly compressed. In a broader conceptualization, *ideal normative* and *ought normative* guides would be encompassed within a regulatory framework. Reflecting ecologies of social influence, these guides encapsulate social group influences at meso- and macro-levels.

As previously noted, perhaps the greatest disappointment with research conducted with the L2MSS has involved the poor predictive qualities of the ought-to L2 self. Prior to Papi et al.’s (2019) upgrade, studies showing sizeable effects for the ought-to L2 self were few and far between (Al-Hoorie, 2018). Accounting for these disappointing findings, the explanation consistently offered is that the ought-to L2 self is less internalized. In Dörnyei’s original theorizing, the ought-to L2 self was conceptualized as having a prevention focus, the argument being that it involved “more extrinsic (i.e. less internalized) types of instrumental motives” (2009, p. 29). Although Dörnyei (2020b) came to revise his understanding of the model’s other components, he continued to view the ought-to L2 self as “an externally sourced, ‘imported’ vision”, arguing that it functioned in “a ‘secondary,’ watered-down manner” (Dörnyei, 2020b, p. 124, original emphasis).

Internalization concerns the manner in which regulation by external events is transformed into regulation by internal events (Hartmann & Loewenstein, 1962). Often, internalization will be incomplete. *Introjection* (Schafer, 1968) refers to partial, rather than full internalization (Deci & Ryan, 1985). As Moretti and Higgins (1999b, p. 188) have explained, in a self-system model internalization involves “the gradual transformation of regulatory functions provided by significant others and society into inner regulatory mechanisms”. As they make clear, it is through internalization that we can come to “adopt, as our own, self-regulatory guides or standards that once existed external to the self” (Moretti & Higgins, 1999b, p. 188).

In accordance with theories of internalization (Hartmann & Loewenstein, 1962; Schafer, 1968), guides can be typologized into three categories: *identified*, *introjected*, and *independent*. With reference to self-guides, Moretti and Higgins (1999b, p. 190) offer the following explanation:

Identified self-guides are adopted as one’s own and shared by ourselves and others. These self-guides are integrated as part of the true self and represent a perceived shared perspective on the self with significant others. In contrast, introjected self-guides are those self-guides that represent other’s standards for the self, but are not adopted as one’s own. Introjected guides are not fully integrated into the self, but represent the felt presence of others in the self. Finally, independent self-guides are those guides that are uniquely one’s own.

In a model where motivation for L2 learning is conceptualized as a self-system, it becomes necessary to account for the degree to which a language learner internalizes the beliefs, hopes and expectations of relevant others. In relation to self-guides, application of Moretti and Higgins’s (1999b) typology of internalization provides a means by which this can be accomplished.

4.3. “The integrativeness problem”: Can a self-system conceptualization sufficiently capture the learner’s response to acquiring attributes of a TL community?

One of the primary arguments supporting a self-system approach was that integrativeness (Gardner, 1985) lacked relevance in contexts without identifiable communities of TL-speakers (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009). Seeking to align the L2MSS with previous work, Dörnyei’s contention was that a more coherent picture of affiliation related motivation could be gained if focus was redirected to “identification aspects” connected to the learner’s self-concept (2005, p. 98). Integrativeness, he suggested, could “be re-labeled as the *Ideal L2 Self*” (p. 103).

Subsequently, Dörnyei pulled back from this position. Revising his argument, he shifted to a perspective where the ideal L2 self and integrativeness could be regarded as complementary forms of identification, albeit with a varying locus (Dörnyei, 2020a, 2020b; see also Claro, 2020). While this framing enabled an accommodation of integrativeness within the L2MSS (as a component of the ideal L2 self), as a solution it is at odds with a self-system conceptualization. As the literature on social standards reveals, regulatory influences that connect to affiliation with other social groups are not subsumed within the construct space of an ideal self-guide (Higgins, 1990; Higgins et al., 1986).

As Markus and Cross (1990) make clear, the self should “be theoretically understood as having structures that include others

[where] others may provide sources of standards or possibilities” (p. 596). Consistent with the categorization of social standards (Higgins, 1990; Higgins et al., 1986), in a model where motivation for L2 learning is conceptualized as a self-system, integrativeness cannot be incorporated as a dimension of a self-guide. Relating to attributes and characteristics associated with a factually existing community or a category of social others that function as a reference group, the construct space onto which integrativeness would map equates with a *social category factual*.

Factuals are standards that involve a person’s beliefs about the actual attributes of a group of other people (Higgins, 1990). While attributes characteristic for members of a social category or assemblage can be represented in relation to groups where the individual is already a member, they can also extend to groups to which the person does not currently belong. Like other standards, social category factuals have regulatory properties. Representations of the qualities and attributes associated with members of a social category or group can also function as points of reference in self-appraisal (Higgins, 1990).

As is immediately apparent, Gardner’s (2020) definition of integrativeness as constituting “the cultural influences on the learner’s reaction to acquiring attributes of the other cultural community” (p. 11) corresponds closely with Higgins’s (1990) description of a social category factual: a standard that involves a person’s beliefs about attributes that are associated with another social group (see Table 4). Once again, the self-system conceptualization embodied by L2MSS can be understood as highly constrained. Reflecting the self-referential and evaluative aspects in Gardner’s (2020) definition – “the learner’s reaction to acquiring attributes of the other cultural community” (p. 11, emphasis added) – in a model that aligns with a self-system conceptualization (Higgins, 1990; Moretti & Higgins, 1999a), integrativeness would constitute a factual standard where representations of attributes relating to TL-speakers, TL-groups, and TL-communities provide points of reference for self-appraisal.

4.4. “The learning experience problem”: Can a self-system conceptualization sufficiently account for diverse experiences of L2 learning and acquisition?

Like the ideal L2 self, Dörnyei came to revise his view of the L2 Learning Experience (L2LE). Initially, Dörnyei had suggested that since the L2LE was designed to capture the “situated, ‘executive’ motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience”, it could be conceptualized “at a different level from the two self-guides” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). Subsequently, he acknowledged that the L2LE had been highly undertheorized, and had functioned as a “place-holding umbrella term that would need to be fine-tuned at one point” (2019, p. 22). MacIntyre (2022) has taken a similar view, suggesting that the manner in which the L2LE has been operationalized (via items rating the impact of factors such as the teacher, the learning content, peer groups, and experiences of success) meant that it had “become almost synonymous with L2 attitudes” (p. 88).

Aligned with his work on L2 engagement (Dörnyei, 2020; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020), Dörnyei (2019) suggested that the L2LE could be redefined as “the perceived quality of the learner’s engagement with various aspects of the learning process” (p. 25). In proposing that engagement (Skinner et al., 2008) could fill the construct space of the L2LE, it is evident that Dörnyei harboured certain reservations. As he admitted, the L2LE component “represents a conceptual tradition that cannot be easily harmonized with the well-established theoretical basis of the possible future selves” (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 20). Although Dörnyei acknowledged that a conceptualization consistent with self-based theorizing would have been preferable, it appeared out of reach:

The only relevant idea that I have had in this respect over the past decade was to harmonize the three constituents of the L2 Motivational Self System by relating each to the notion of *experience*: “Thus, the new approach concerned two future self-guides associated with *imagined experience* and a third constituent rooted in *actual experience*” (Dörnyei, 2014, p. 9; emphasis added). However, while this formulation made conceptual sense, it did not facilitate the development of any new measurement procedures because of the vagueness of how *experience* should be understood and operationalized. (Dörnyei, 2019, p. 23, original emphasis).

Leaving aside the fact that, like self-regulated learning, engagement is best understood as influenced by self-appraisal processes *within* the self-system (see Fig. 1, below and Henry & Liu, in review), the problems afflicting the L2LE similarly relate to the restricted scope of the self-system conceptualization embodied by the L2MSS. In contemporary contexts, the L2 classroom “is less *the* centre of most learners’ learning, than just one of many centres” (Reinders & Benson, 2017, p. 574, original emphasis). Consequently, in any model seeking to explain regulatory influences affecting L2 acquisition, the classroom needs to be understood as one of potentially many “nodes” that constitute individualized and interconnecting webs of experience (Reinders & Benson, 2017). As with other experiences of L2 learning/acquisition, motivational experiences are interrelated; experiences in one context shape experiences in another (Henry & Cliffordson, 2017). Thus, rather than context-specific attitudes to L2 learning (Dörnyei, 2009), or perceptions of engagement in particular settings (Dörnyei, 2019), in a model constructed as a self-system, self-appraisal would take place in relation to standards that relate to *situations* and to *time*.

In essence, the difficulty of encompassing sources of motivation arising from diverse experiences of L2 learning is similar to the

Table 4

The function of social category factual in a model constructed around an expanded self-system conceptualization.

Standard	Representation
Factuals	
Social category factual	L2 attributes associated with the members of an L2 community or groups of L2 speakers. In simple terms, <i>how am I as an L2 speaker in comparison with people who are TL speakers, and with the members of a TL community/communities.</i>

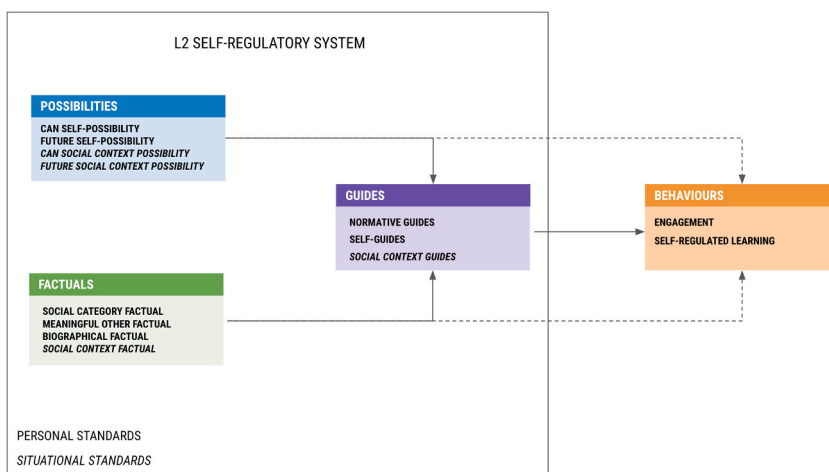


Fig. 1. L2 self-regulatory system.

previous problem areas. The restricted self-system conceptualization embodied within the L2MSS has the effect that regulatory effects traceable to representations involving “interpersonal experiences” (Moretti & Higgins, 1999b, p. 187) remain unaccounted for. In relation to the experiences of L2 learning – an activity that is social by nature (Hall, 2018) – self-appraisal needs to be understood as taking place in relation to points of reference that involve socially generated standards. As with integrativeness, in a model constructed around an expanded self-system conceptualization, forms of regulation encompassed within the construct space of the L2LE would involve the operation of *factuals*.

Factuals differ from guides in functionality and represented knowledge. In contrast to self-guides (which serve as future-oriented reference points for the self), factuals reference socially-generated experiences. Experiences can be linked to the person’s past (biographical factual), and to currently existing important others (meaningful other factual) (see Table 5).

Biographical factuals involve temporal comparisons. Implicating episodic knowledge, they constitute self-evaluative standards based on the person’s past attributes and current performances. Representations can relate to how the individual is as an L2-learner/speaker in the present, and how they have been in the past. Differently focused, meaningful other factuals involve social comparison. They constitute self-evaluative standards which relate to attributes ascribed to important individuals, such as peers and teachers. Implicating procedural knowledge, meaningful other factuals involve representations of how the individual acts and responds in relation to these important others (Higgins, 1990).

Further, because meaningful others become “meaningful” in relation to social action, meaningful other factuals also function as reference points for judgments made about activities and pursuits. When a belief, orientation, or action is “confirmed” by a meaningful other, it can be transformed from being experienced as potentially true (a subjective truth), to being experienced as true in a more real and concrete sense (an objective truth). Consequently, the value of pursuing an intrinsic goal can arise from autonomous processes (i. e., through an ideal self-guide) and from the perception that it is valued by others and is “socially verified as being worthwhile” (Cornwell et al., 2017, p. 263). Higgins (2019) explains the social verification of standards in the following way:

Standards that we share with significant others can also be used to evaluate other objects and events, how we feel about things that we observe and engage with in the world. For example, what counts as a good or great movie, or a good or great hamburger, often depends on our shared standards with others. Moreover, individuals can have different significant others who have different standards, and how they evaluate something can depend on which significant other is salient (accessible) at the time of evaluation. (p. 124).

Through the operation of meaningful other factuals, self-appraisal can extend to activities and events. When participating in a classroom activity, or engaging in an online interaction, the perception of an interrelatedness with a teacher, fellow student, or interaction partner, can generate a sense that the activity is meaningful, relevant, and worthwhile.

In a model constructed around a broader self-system conceptualization, regulation connected to appraisals involving previous and current experiences of L2 learning can be modelled through the operation of biographical and meaningful other factuals. In this way,

Table 5

The function of biographical factual and meaningful other factual in a model constructed around an expanded self-system conceptualization.

Standard	Representation
Factuals	
Biographical factual	L2 attributes of self engaged in L2 learning in the past and in previous situations. In simple terms, <i>how am I as an L2 learner/speaker in this situation in relation to how I was in previous similar situations.</i>
Meaningful other factual	L2 attributes of individuals with current importance (an L2 teacher, an L2 learning peer, an online interaction partner). In simple terms, <i>how am I as an L2 learner/speaker in relation to a person of importance to me.</i>

regulatory influences arising from interpersonal experiences in interconnecting contexts of learning and acquisition can be accommodated.

4.5. “The context problem”: Can a self-system conceptualization adequately capture learner–environment interactions?

Like the previous problem areas, the final issue involves the parsimony of the self-system conceptualization which the L2MSS embodies. Here, the difficulty involves adequately accounting for regulatory influences traceable to representations of perspectives, values, and expectations held by people encountered in varying social contexts and situations. For each of the preceding problem areas, we have seen how, in its original and revised forms, the L2MSS fails to take full account of influences relating to social and relational elements of L2 learning. But that is not all. In the L2MSS, influences on regulation that link to the settings in which L2 learning takes place are not adequately modelled. This stands in marked contrast to other models in L2 psychology – for example Gardner’s (1985) socio-educational model, Noels’ development of SDT-framed models of L2 motivation (e.g., Noels et al., 2016) and Clément’s (1986) socio-contextual model – which are constructed in ways that accommodate and account for interactions between the learner and the social environment. While in these models, learner–environment interactions are conceptualized as feedback loops (Gregersen et al., 2020), in the L2MSS a narrow focus on self-guides, and an undertheorized L2LE component have the effect that the social contexts in which learning takes place function as backdrops rather interconnected parts of the self-system. This is not because context is unimportant (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Rather, it has proved difficult to identify and circumscribe the boundaries between what is external to the learner, and what is internal. It is a challenge which involves conceptualizing and operationalizing interconnections between learner and context. To use Ushioda’s (2015) words, it involves the question “how far do we integrate psychological and historical elements of context that are internal to the learner before we decide that we are dealing with learner characteristics rather than contextual characteristics?” (p. 49).

Yet, as is clear in the literature on self-regulation, a self-system is highly sensitive to influences in social contexts (Markus & Cross, 1990; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Markus & Wurf, 1987; Moretti & Higgins, 1999a, 1999b; Stein & Markus, 1996). As Markus and Cross have reminded us, “what one ‘takes oneself to be’ is an interpersonal achievement, deriving almost entirely from the individual’s relations with others” (Markus & Cross, 1990, p. 576). Because relevant others are encountered in *particular contexts of social action*, there is a need to account for influences that relate to these contexts. As Higgins (1990) has made clear, standards for self-appraisal also pertain to the individuals who comprise the settings, contexts, and social situations in which actions take place.

Simply stated, standards can also connect to contexts. In some circumstances, situational standards can converge with a person’s self-guides. In others, however, they can be divergent. In cases of divergence, situational standards can impose contrasting sets of reference points for self-appraisal. As Higgins (1990) has explained, contextual referents which diverge from a person’s self-guides will often emphasize compliance and conformity:

Social control is the process by which participants in a context press for obedience to their rules, which may or may not be the same as an individual’s chronic guides (see Homans, 1950). The participants in a particular context can also emphasize social interaction goals and task goals that differ from the individual’s chronic guides. (Higgins, 1990, pp. 313–314).

So far, the standards in focus in our discussion have constituted representations of perspectives, goals, and orientations that a person brings to a situation. Yet, as we have now seen, a social context can have its own sets of expectations and constraints. Here, representations connect to the situation. They involve perspectives that “are emphasized and communicated by the participants in the immediate situation” (Higgins, 1990, p. 313).

To explain this distinction, it can be useful to draw on Ushioda’s (2009) “person-in-context” metaphor. As was the case with biographical and meaningful other factuals (discussed above), self-appraisal can take the form of person-in-context representations. However, in relation to settings, the relationship becomes reversed. In a context-in-person rendering, representations involve expectations and demands that connect to the social constellations that comprise the varying settings where L2 learning takes place. In this sense, appraisal of the self occurs in relation to the ideologies, expectations, practices and demands that permeate these contexts (Ushioda, 2009). Once again, the self-system conceptualization embodied by the L2MSS emerges as constrained. In a model

Table 6

The function of social context standards in a model constructed around an expanded self-system conceptualization.

Standard	Representation
Social context factual	
Social context factual	L2 attributes of participants in a current social context. In simple terms, <i>how am I as an L2 speaker in comparison with people in this social context.</i>
Social context guides	
Ideal social context guide	L2 attributes that participants in a current social context would ideally like other participants to possess. Attributes perceived as wanted and preferred by context participants. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker that the people in this social context think I would ideally be.</i>
Ought social context guide	L2 attributes that participants in a current social context believe people ought to possess. Attributes perceived as demanded and prescribed by context participants. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker that the people in this social context think I ought to be.</i>
Social context possibilities	
Can social context possibility	L2 attributes that a participant can possess as suggested by a current social context. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker I can be as suggested by the information in this social context.</i>
Future social context possibility	L2 attributes that a participant is likely to possess as suggested by a current social context. In simple terms, <i>the L2 speaker I’m likely to be as suggested by the information in this social context.</i>

constructed around an expanded conceptualization, opportunities to take account of person-in-context and context-in-person influences arise. When points of reference involve contexts, three types of standard can be implicated: *social context factuals*, *social context guides* (ideal and ought), and *social context possibilities* (can and future) (see Table 6).

5. Concluding discussion

Some two decades ago, Dörnyei (2005) proposed that motivation for L2 learning could be conceptualized as a function of the learner's self-system. Reviewing the literature in cognitive science where the self-system is described (e.g., Bandura, 1978; Cross & Markus, 1991; Oosterwegel et al., 1993; Hoyle et al., 2019), it is apparent that the conceptualization embodied in the L2MSS model is tightly circumscribed. A self-system is a structure of self-referential cognition that comprises a series of "reference mechanisms" (Bandura, 1978, p. 348). In self-appraisal, evaluations take place in relation to standards (Higgins, 1990). Constituting social, situational, and biographical points of reference, standards vary in orientation. In the L2MSS, however, points of reference are limited to standards encompassing representations of attributes and end states desired or preferred by the person themselves, or for them by closely connected others.

Aligned with Moretti and Higgins (1999b, p. 205), who describe how behaviour that is socially grounded can be modelled as "a self-regulatory system that represents a fluid but integrated shared reality about the self with significant others, including parents, peers and partners – and aspects of society in general", in this article we have identified a range of self-referential standards in relation to which the sources and directionality of L2 learning behaviour can be typologized. Reviewing five problem areas associated with the L2MSS, and drawing on a comprehensive classification of social standards (Higgins, 1990; Higgins et al., 1986), we have argued that the self-system conceptualization embodied in Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) model is unfavourably restrictive. Modelled as a *self-regulatory system*, an expanded range of influences on motivated behaviour can be accommodated.

First, by modelling motivation for L2 learning as a self-regulatory system, it becomes possible to incorporate a distinction between L2 futures that could happen and which involve a person's potential, and those that are currently valued and desired (Al-Hoorie, 2018). While the former equate with possibilities, the latter involve the operation of self-guides. *Second*, beyond the regulatory functions attributable to ideal and ought-to self-guides (Dörnyei, 2009; Papi et al., 2019), by modelling motivation for L2 learning as a self-regulatory system, opportunities to expand the self-system's "inner audiences" are presented (Horney, 1946; Moretti & Higgins, 1999a). Through the incorporation of normative guides (ideal and ought), it becomes possible to account for a broader range of social reference points relevant in appraisals of the self. Here, representations of attributes desired or preferred by relevant social and societal groups can function as important self-evaluative standards. *Third*, by modelling motivation for L2 learning as a self-regulatory system, it becomes possible to incorporate representations of beliefs about attributes associated with L2-speaking communities. Closely aligned with the conceptualization of integrativeness (Gardner, 1985, 2020), social category factuals provide a means of assessing influences that representations of TL-communities can have on motivated behaviour. *Fourth*, by modelling motivation for L2 learning as a self-regulatory system, opportunities to encompass varying temporal and situational representations are afforded. Because representations relevant in self-appraisal involve previous and current learning experiences (biographical factuals), and attributes associated with individuals who are relevant in contexts of L2 learning/acquisition (meaningful other factuals), motivation generated through experiences comprising an L2 learner's unfolding biography can be accommodated (Henry, 2023; Hiver et al., 2020; Papi & Hiver, 2020). *Finally*, by modelling motivation for L2 learning as a self-regulatory system, opportunities to account for regulatory sources emanating from the contexts in which L2 learning occurs can arise. In a self-regulatory system, representations of attributes that are expected or demanded in particular contexts of social action can function as points of reference in self-appraisal. Modelled as a self-regulatory system, "context-in-person" influences can be accessed through the operation of social context possibilities, social context factuals, and social context guides.

Beyond expanding the sweep of reference points that can be relevant to L2 learners' self-appraisals, there is a further way in which modelling L2 motivation as a self-regulatory system becomes important. In a critical evaluation of Dörnyei's scholarship, MacIntyre (2022) expressed misgivings about the utility of the L2MSS, and the applicability of the model's self-system conceptualization. Echoing Al-Hoorie's (2018) earlier cautions of the dangers of indiscriminate applications of a self-based approach, MacIntyre suggested that in situations where identity might not be immediately salient, self-guides might have little relevance. Arguing that a self-based framework might be meaningful only "where a study can justify why such a big concept [as the self] would be applicable" (p. 89), MacIntyre (2022) suggested that the applicability of the L2MSS might be limited "to situations in which the self obviously becomes a prominent and salient concern to the conscious mind" (p. 90).

From this perspective, the key question would involve identifying situations when a self-system approach might, or might not, be applicable. As Cross and Markus (1990, p. 730) have made clear, while people can have varying "ideas, beliefs, and images" involving the future, representations of desired states will be prevalent in "domains that are important for self-definition". For people for whom target languages and learning processes are closely aligned with core values and personality dimensions, a motivational model based on the self would seem applicable. As MacIntyre (2022) points out, "the self applies best to those situations in which the past, present, and future all are integrated and highly relevant within consciousness, situations in which one's view of themselves as a continuous entity matters" (p. 89).

At the same time, it would be wrong to think that a self-based approach will lack applicability in situations where L2 learning and self-definition lack intrinsic alignment. To avoid misunderstandings arising from the murky conceptualization in Dörnyei's model, there is a need to disambiguate motivational properties associated with the *self*, as a unique embodiment of the individual's personality and identity, and those associated with the functioning of the *self-system*, as a framework of self-referential cognition. To avoid a conflation of properties associated with the *self* and the *self-system*, a better understanding of the phenomenology of self-appraisal and

the functions of standards is required. While self-guides constitute an important type of standard, and while in situations where L2 learning is central to self-definition, ideal selves, multilingual selves, and rooted selves can all constitute powerful sources of motivation (e.g., Henry, 2017; MacIntyre et al., 2017), the range of standards implicated in self-referential cognition is far wider than a learner's self-guides. In a social activity such as L2 learning, standards which form points of reference in self-evaluation should not be understood as limited to desired/preferred end states. As reference points in self-appraisal, standards can also be established by interpersonal experiences and influences pertaining to social and societal contexts (Higgins, 1990).

Research into L2 motivation is valuable to the degree that the identification of variation also provides the means by which change can be effectuated. Form (the design of research) should be subordinate to function (its purpose) (Al-Hoorie et al., 2021). In relation to this argument, and Lewin's (1943) maxim *that there is nothing as practical as a good theory*, a self-regulatory system model might appear to disqualify itself. Higgins's (1990) theorization is highly complex. Differences between person and situation standards are subtle, and disambiguating the functions of the various standards is no easy task.

However, when it is appreciated that, at root, a self-regulatory system involves a shift in perspective, accessibility improves. In the L2MSS, the learner's identity has been regarded as central (MacIntyre, 2022). In a self-regulatory conceptualization, however, this changes. The nature of self-evaluation differs. Rather than "Who am I?" questions, self-evaluation involves "How am I?" questions. Closely resembling social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), where self-appraisal involves the monitoring of activity and the evaluation of performance, the self-regulatory system can be understood as providing a set of evaluative criteria in relation to which self-relevant information is processed (Henry & Liu, in review).

A visualization of the L2 learner's self-regulatory system is provided in Fig. 1. In this model, behavioural regulation takes place in relation to three types of evaluative criteria: *Possibilities* (where perceptions of individual potential provide reference points in self-appraisal), *Factuals* (where existing entities provide reference points), and *Guides* (where desired/expected end-states provide reference points). While each evaluative category is conceptualized as having a precursor function in relation to learning behaviour, possibilities and factuals are additionally conceptualized as having antecedent influences on the development of guides. Finally, in accordance with theories of self-regulation, *Behaviour* is conceptualized as self-regulated learning and engagement (Henry & Liu, in review).

When modelled as a self-regulatory system, self-appraisal takes place in a universe far wider than the orbits of the L2 self-guides. With the recognition that self-evaluation can take place in relation to a wider range of criteria, resources for supporting student learning also expand. In addition to ideal and ought self-guides (Dörnyei, 2009; Papi et al., 2019), a self-regulatory system model provides teachers with opportunities to work with issues equally central to L2 learning. When strategically prompted, self-evaluation can take place in relation to L2 learning biographies, anticipated life-history trajectories, interpersonal relationships in L2 contexts, beliefs and values associated with communities of L2-speakers, and the social and societal pressures connected to L2 learning. Strategies for working with self-appraisal are described in our OSF repository (DOI: [10.17605/OSF.IO/58CDB](https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/58CDB)).

To conclude, when motivation for L2 learning is modelled as a *self-regulatory system*, it becomes possible to disentangle motivational properties associated with the *self* (the embodiment of the L2 learner's personality and identity) and the *self-system* (a framework of self-referential cognition relevant to L2 learning). Aligned with the ecological and systems perspectives now shaping SLA (The Douglas Fir Group, 2016) and reflecting how in L2 motivation "any state of being or becoming is always in relation or seen as nodes in larger interconnected webs of human and social functioning" (Hiver & Larsen-Freeman, 2020, p. 298), the modelling of motivation as a self-regulatory system enables influences deriving from socially generated experiences to be captured. However, it is not only in relation to the design of research instrumentation that appreciation of the broader scope of self-regulatory standards becomes valuable. In accessing an expanded field of experience – where identity is just one dimension of the L2 learner's self-knowledge – a self-regulatory system model provides teachers with an expanded pedagogical toolkit.

Author statement

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