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Don't tell me what to do! The anti-ought-to self and language learning motivation

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), this study explores the motivational profiles of two L1-English-speaking advanced language learners of Chinese and Arabic. Through narrative inquiry, this study investigates the dynamic nature of each learner's language learning journey. Data were collected via interviews, which took place in informal environments. The interview instructions encouraged participants to tell their language learning story; there was no prompting of the "motivation" theme on the part of the interviewer; however, there was a focus on the implications of the "other" dimension (external influences, such as specific individuals and contexts). As such, this study examines the dynamicity of the potentially synergistic relationships of the ought-to and anti-ought-to selves. The main findings show that the anti-ought-to self has a "dominant" relationship with the context, in contrast to the "submissive" relationship of the ought-to self; the findings also illustrate the dynamicity of the psychological aspects of self, as these selves fluctuate throughout the language learning experience. Implications of this study include the importance of language educators understanding the relationship of the context to motivational development and change. The results also indicate that the anti-ought-to self could be the missing link to explanatory value of the L2MSS.

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1. Introduction

This study was conducted to explore the relationship of the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) and Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST), specifically examining the role of context in developing the different selves of language learners. The study contextualizes the anti-ought-to self within the L2MSS framework (theory building) and conceptualizes the dynamic interaction between learner and context (motivation and CDST) in order to fill the gaps in motivation research and the field of SLA broadly construed (Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015).

Complex systems are "systems that are heterogeneous, dynamic, non-linear, adaptive and open" (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008, p. 36). Regarding language learners, de Bot, Lowie, and Verspoor (2007) explains: "from a [C]DST perspective, a language learner is regarded as a dynamic subsystem within a social system" (p. 14). As such, the operationalization of the complex systems discussed in this study are the motivational profiles of the individual learners, who are part of the larger social context in which the language learning experiences took place. Through narrative inquiry, this study explores the non-linear and dynamic nature of each learner's language learning journey with a specific focus on the selves influenced by the "other" dimension: the ought-to and anti-ought-to selves. Although previous research indicates the existence of the anti-

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ought-to self (Thompson & Vásquez, 2015), the current study serves to connect the anti-ought-to self to the existing L2MSS model, particularly in conjunction with the “other” dimension in Higgins' (1987) Self-Discrepancy Theory by examining experiences of L1-English participants who learned languages other than English (LOTEs).

2. Literature review

2.1. The L2 Motivational Self System

Dörnyei's (2009) L2MSS posits that language learning motivation is primarily composed of *the ideal self*, *the ought-to self*, and the *learning experience*. The ideal self is who a learner would like to become in terms of language ability (internal desires); inquiries into a learner's ideal self oftentimes involve “imagine” or “envision” as descriptors in questionnaire items. The ought-to self is who the learner feels that he or she is obliged to become based on external pressures, such as pressure from friends, authority figures, or in terms of general societal expectations. The learning experience is a compilation of the past and current experiences of a language learner, which affect subsequent language learning experiences.

Dörnyei (2009) derives the “self” portion of the L2MSS (ideal and ought-to selves) directly from the work of Higgins (1987, 1998) with additional influence from Markus and Nurius (1986). The ideal self “represent[s] one's own or a significant other's hopes, wishes, and aspirations for oneself.” An ought self (which corresponds to Dörnyei's ought-to self) “... represent[s] one's own or a significant other's beliefs about one's moral responsibilities and who one should or ought to be” (Higgins, 1998, p. 10). Higgins also discusses promotion and prevention foci:

The promotion focus is concerned with accomplishments, hopes, and aspirations ... Ideal self-guides, therefore, have a promotion focus. The prevention focus is concerned with safety, responsibilities, and obligations ... Ought self-guides, therefore, have a prevention focus” (p. 16, italics in original).

L2MSS research indicates that a strong ideal self is essential for language learning motivation, and thus, success in language learning. The ought-to self, however, is sometimes not included (i.e. Ryan, 2009), or when it is, has inconclusive results (i.e. low Cronbach's alphas or no group distinctions; Csizér & Lukács, 2010; Lamb, 2012; Thompson & Erdil-Moody, 2016). As the theoretical rationale for the ought-to self is Self-Discrepancy Theory, the role of context needs further scrutiny.

2.2. The L2MSS and CDST

Learners who are motivated by ought-to selves are those who are learning a language because of external expectations (elements in the larger complex system). The dynamic interaction between learners and context can be conceptualized as learners being the “submissive” component and context as the “dominant” component (i.e. the external pressures prevail). This realization of self is quite different from that of learners' ideal selves, which can be conceptualized as learners being the strong element, in charge of their own destiny. Thus, what is potentially absent from the L2MSS framework is a dynamic interaction of the language learners (the complex system under investigation) and the context (the larger system of which the learner is a part) in which the language learners are interpreted as the “dominant” component, employing active resistance against societal expectations as a key source of motivation – the *anti-ought-to self* (Thompson & Vásquez, 2015). This future self guide is motivated by the *opposite* of what the external pressures demand: choosing to study a language to go against the norms of society. The anti-ought-to self can emerge when engaging with a commonly-studied language (such as English in the Chinese context), if one were to choose a language major over something potentially more lucrative (such a degree in engineering or medicine), as well as with a language that is less commonly studied (such a language other than Spanish in the U.S. context). The anti-ought-to self can develop in both foreign and second language contexts, and includes “ought-to” in the nomenclature because of the strong influence of events and pressures outside of the learner as the primary motivating components of this self guide. The anti-ought-to self could also have a relationship with the ideal self, being that the visual concept that learners associate with a successful language learning process is, in fact, to do what people do *not* expect them to do. Incorporating the anti-ought-to self into the L2MSS would allow for the type of future self that defines the learner as the prevailing force in the language learning process.

The anti-ought to self is inspired by Reactance Theory. An example of psychological reactance, or resistance to social influence, is when American youth are determined to drink because of the strict age laws regarding alcohol consumption. While ubiquitous in the psychology literature, Reactance Theory (Brehm, 1966; Brehm & Brehm, 1981) has not been incorporated into the mainstream SLA motivation literature. Nevertheless, there have been references to the importance of a concept, such as in MacIntyre (2002), who stated that it was “proposed by critics for addition to the literature on language learning motivation” (p. 59) and indicated that it could “show the complexity of our motivational experiences” (p. 60). Additionally, Goldberg and Noels (2006) referenced reactance as to why the students who attend a university with an exclusively French curriculum have both a stronger Francophone school identity in French, as well as a stronger Anglophone identity at home (p. 438). Both of these examples illustrate early elements of the anti-ought-to self concept in SLA literature.

With English-speaking language learners in the context of the U.S., Thompson and Vásquez (2015) incorporated psychological reactance, coined as the “anti-ought-to self,” as an explanation of the motivation of two of the three learners in the study, Alex and Joe, who studied Chinese and German. In Alex's case, his anti-ought-to self emerged as a reaction to his Chinese TA who doubted his capability of learning Chinese. In Joe's case, his anti-ought-to self was a reaction to competition with German native speakers in his classes, and aptly describes himself as “a González in a group of Germans” (p. 169). The

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