

Identity-based motivation and the paradox of the future self: Getting going requires thinking about time (later) in time (now)

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**Abstract** People can imagine their future selves without taking future-focused action. Identity-based motivation theory explains why. Hoerl & McCormack outline how. Present-focused action prevails because future “me” feels irrelevant to the choices facing current “me” unless future “me” is experienced as occurring now or as linked to current “me” via if-then simulations. This entails reasoning in time and about time. People mentally time travel, imagining the person they might become. Yet they often fail to take sufficient future-focused action (Oyserman et al. 2012; 2017). Why might that be? Identity-based motivation (IBM) theory explains why.

Thinking (about the self) is for doing. People’s actions fit what their identities imply. At the same time, which identities come to mind and what these identities imply for meaning making and action is dynamically constructed given the situation at hand (Oyserman 2007; 2009). Future “me” is abstract, uncertain, and later, in contrast, present “me” is concrete, certain, and now. Hence, on-the-mind future possible identities matter, yielding future-focused action only if they feel relevant to the constraints and opportunities afforded in the current situation (Horowitz & Oyserman, under review; Oyserman & James 2009). Then, experienced difficulties starting and keeping going will be interpreted as implying that taking future-focused action is important – a for “me” or for “us” thing to do. Otherwise, experienced difficulties starting and keeping going will be interpreted as implying that future-focused action is impossible – a “not for me” or “not for us” thing to do, a waste of time. Three different ways to trigger relevance are described in the literature (Horowitz & Oyserman, under review; Oyserman & James 2009). For ease of understanding, we term these “concretization,” “assimilation,” and “contrast.” Concretization entails automatically associating specific strategies for action to future “me” –hence, concretization focuses on current action and future possible identities. Rather than considering future “me” and strategies for action, assimilation and contrast focus on future “me” and current “me.” Assimilation entails including future “me” in one’s mental representation of current “me.” Contrast entails excluding future “me” from one’s mental representation of current “me” and using future “me” as a standard against which to judge current “me.” Each way of triggering relevance works. People are more likely to take future-focused action if their on-the-mind possible identities are linked to strategies for action, if future “me” feels close, connected to, or overlapping with current “me,” and if they experience a gap between a separate current and

future “me.” What is missing from this concretizing, assimilating, or contrasting account is a set of predictions as to when and how each is triggered. This gap can be addressed by synthesizing Hoerl & McCormack (H&M)’s dual (atemporal and temporal) reasoning systems perspective with IBM theory. H&M articulate two systems, a basic one that entails thinking in time, which they term the atemporal system, and a higher order one that entails thinking about time, which they term the temporal system. We use this atemporal and temporal framework to describe how and when an accessible (on-the-mind) future “me” can trigger future-focused action. First, consider concretization, in which people imagine possible identities linked with strategies. Here people are simulating actions directly, “seeing” themselves working toward future “me” as if this action is taking place in the present (Oyserman & James 2009). In H&M’s terminology, this concretization process takes place in the basic temporal updating system, which allows people to represent present actions and future “me” simultaneously in an atemporal landscape. Second, consider assimilation in which people imagine future “me” as near, part of, or overlapping with current “me.” Here, people are “seeing” the rewards of investing in future “me” as if these rewards were occurring in the present (Nurra & Oyserman 2018). In H&M’s terminology, this assimilation process also takes place in the basic temporal updating system, which allows people to represent future goals and present goals simultaneously in an atemporal landscape in which the future and present have equal weight. This seeming simultaneous experience of the future and present facilitates the experience: “future me is me” and that allows people to forgo current for future consumption in situations in which motivational control is needed to privilege “later” over “now.” Hence, reasoning within the temporal updating system is sufficient if future-focused action entails delay of gratification. Third, consider contrasting in which people experience future “me” as distinct from a current “me” that serves as a goalpost. The temporal updating system is not sufficient to accommodate this mental simulation because the temporal updating system does not represent time. This means that future and current “me” cannot be represented independently, nor can the relative temporal distance of any simulated future “me.” These aspects are necessary when the motivational force of future “me” comes from contrasting. To get going, contrasting requires that people mentally simulate a series of steps into the future with choices (forks along the way) and obstacles (roadblocks to be overcome) to move toward positive and away from negative future possible identities (Oyserman 2015). In H&M’s terminology, this contrasting process takes place in the more abstract, culturally marked, temporal reasoning system. The temporal reasoning system facilitates mental simulation of a series of “if-then” statements (if a situation, then an action) on a linear timeline in which current “me” and a temporally distant future “me” are represented. Mental simulation allows individuals to start taking action and to preserve motivation at choice points, and when obstacles (failures along the way) occur. Developmentally, the temporal updating system should be primary. It should be available even when the temporal reasoning system is not, for example, under cognitive load, and in other situations in which the capacity to reason abstractly is limited. These situations include risky contexts in which attention to “now” must be paramount. However, though the temporal updating system is sufficient to reason in time, the temporal reasoning system is necessary to reason about time, including reasoning about what a future “me” that is distinct from current “me” requires. We draw a number of important inferences from this distinction. First, people are less likely to take future-focused action if the ways in which they reason in and about time do not match the ways in which they imagine their future “me.” Second, people are less likely to sustain future-focused action under cognitive load if they rely on contrasting for motivation, because contrasting requires the temporal reasoning system, which

is less robust than the temporal updating system. Third, to be successful, interventions promoting future-focused action should match people's reasoning in and about time and the way they imagine their future "me."