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Threats and Opportunities: Independent Dimensions of Goal Relevance Shape Social Cognition and Behavior

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People pursue goals. They seek to build friendships, find romantic partners, maintain close relationships, gain social status and resources, and stay healthy and safe. But pursuing goals requires assessing who, among the people around them, will help or hurt their ability to reach those goals—that is, who poses goal-relevant *affordances*. This article overviews recent advances and new predictions from an affordance management approach to social cognition and behavior. The central tenet of this work is that judgments of who helps or hurts goals are independent (rather than opposite ends of a single judgment): Who helps my goal, *and* who hurts my goal? For any goal, people judge others in one of four ways: as helping the goal, hurting the goal, both helping and hurting the goal, or as irrelevant to the goal. These perceived affordances change across goals: people who help one goal may hurt, both help and hurt, or be irrelevant to another goal. This simple, novel division of helping and hurting across goals has numerous implications for psychological phenomena. It provides a framework for understanding when and how two forms of devaluation will emerge—being seen to pose a threat and being seen as irrelevant—with implications for prejudice, stigmatization, and discrimination. It also provides a lens for understanding how and when others' appraisals of us may affect our own goal pursuit. The article concludes by discussing necessary next steps and promising new directions for applying this approach to understand social cognition and behavior.

Public Significance Statement
This article examines four ways people are perceived to impact one another's goals and what it is like to see other people as relevant versus irrelevant to goals. This framework is applied to understand why and when people are stigmatized, what it is like to be seen as relevant or irrelevant, and how people may try to change those perceptions.

Keywords: affordances, goals, motivation, relevance, social cognition

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This article starts with a simple premise: People judge both whether other people help their goals and, separately, whether other people hurt their goals. Treating these two judgments as independent provides an advance over existing approaches to goal relevance that often treat them as opposites and points to numerous novel implications. Using insights from the science of goals and motivation, this approach advances our understanding of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, by distinguishing between two forms of devaluation: threat- and irrelevance-based stigmatization. This approach can also help us to more richly

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understand both the psychology of seeing others as goal relevant or irrelevant (perceiver perspective) and of being seen by others as goal relevant or irrelevant (target perspective). In short, by drawing on theory and findings across multiple research areas, this approach offers a unifying framework for understanding how goals can shape a diverse set of psychological processes and outcomes, including social judgment and interaction, stigmatization and prejudice, objectification, close relationships, and impression management.

Appraising Others' Relevance: Threats and Opportunities

When an immunocompromised man at the grocery store sees a visibly sick woman coughing in the produce section, he may be concerned that she will threaten his goal of avoiding disease. In contrast, a university student walking along a dark street concerned for their physical safety may appraise the same coughing woman walking home from the grocery store as neither helping nor harming their goal to stay safe. Whereas the immunocompromised man may feel disgust toward the woman and keep his distance from her, the student may pay little attention to and disregard her. Here, we see that the coughing woman is appraised and treated very differently, depending on the goals of the people who encounter her.

As social creatures, humans assess who will help and who will hurt one another's goals, frequently making judgments like those above. We use the term "perceiver" to refer to those who appraise others' goal relevance (e.g., the immunocompromised man) and "target" to refer to those who are being appraised (e.g., the coughing woman). People want to know whether a boss will advocate for them to get a raise, a person on the street will be physically dangerous, or a desired person will be interested in forming a romantic relationship. In other words, for any goal, perceivers assess who affords opportunity (those who would help a perceiver to reach a goal) and threat (those who would make it harder to reach a goal). Because others' intentions and capacities are typically not perceived perfectly and directly, perceivers rely on *affordance cues* (McArthur & Baron, 1983; Neuberg et al., 2011). Affordance cues can range from a person's features that are relatively stable (height, gender) to more dynamic (emotion expression, posture, position relative to us in a social network) and can be more consistently perceptible (height, skin tone), as well as potentially concealable (sexual orientation, relationship status, religion).

How do people come to see cues as indicating particular affordances? Human minds may be prepared to learn certain cue-affordance links. For example, men, and especially outgroup men, may be readily associated with danger (e.g., Navarrete et al., 2010; Payne, 2001). In addition, groups who have historically held power, and thus often favored the ideologies and stereotypes that supported their dominance, likely have had outsized influence on the affordances that different groups across the social hierarchy are perceived to pose (Lei et al., 2023; Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Although some cues have relatively high consensus about what affordances they indicate (Bjornsdottir et al., 2022; Zebrowitz & Collins, 1997), many cues' meaning likely varies across cultures, times, and individuals, shaped by processes like personal experience and social learning. People can also readily favor the wrong cues, as, for example, straight men sometimes rely on a woman's clothing and attractiveness as cues to her sexual interest, rather than more dynamic and diagnostic cues like her nonverbal expressions (Treat et al., 2017).

Stereotypes are a potent source of information about what to expect from others and so they shape many perceived affordances (Neuberg et al., 2020; Pirlott & Cook, 2018). People may thus integrate direct personal experience (e.g., learning an angry person may afford danger) with stereotypes to give meaning to cues (Freeman & Ambady, 2011; Kawakami et al., 2017; Kunda & Thagard, 1996). The same stereotype can lead to different relevance appraisals, depending on the perceiver's goals and the relation between the target and the perceiver (Neuberg et al., 2020). For example, Mexican immigrants to the United States—a group stereotyped as hardworking and willing to accept low pay—may be viewed as an opportunity by people who want to employ laborers but viewed as a threat by others who would compete for those laborer jobs (Pick & Neuberg, 2017).

Goals Guide Social Judgment and Behavior

A large literature demonstrates that goals guide people's social judgments and behaviors (e.g., Eitam et al., 2013; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2009; Hilton & Darley, 1991; Kruglanski et al., 2002; Maner et al., 2003; Orehek & Forest, 2016). For simplicity, we use the term "goals" broadly to refer to an array of related constructs that include goals, needs, and motivations. We focus our discussion primarily on a set of goals called fundamental social motives (Kenrick et al., 2010; Neel et al., 2016; Schaller et al., 2017), but the ideas presented below can be considered in reference to any goal. This approach posits that because human motivational systems evolved to help address challenges that people can pose to one another, people are motivated to stay safe from dangerous others, avoid contagious diseases, form friendships, achieve status, form and maintain romantic or sexual relationships, and care for kin.

Goals are dynamic. Perceivers' goals change and become more or less accessible across time and contexts. Their influence on a perceiver's cognitions and behaviors thus fluctuates as well. In addition, although goals' effects on social cognition and behavior are often studied one or two goals at a time, people typically have numerous goals at one time—by some counts, at least seven (Kung & Scholer, 2021). This means that at any moment, a person may be most likely to assess another person's relevance to *multiple* goals, not just one. Below, we consider both how people

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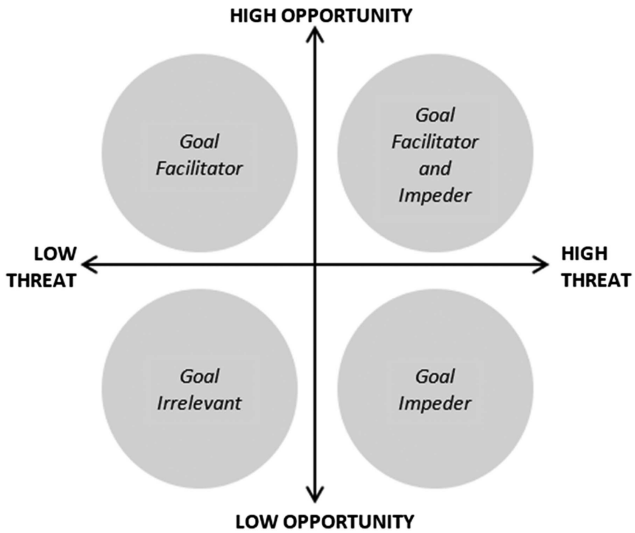
appraise others in reference to one active goal, as well as in reference to the multiple goals they may more typically hold.

The Relevance Appraisal Matrix

Relevance appraisals are two dimensional. For any goal, perceivers appraise targets on how likely they are to harm the goal and, separately, how likely they are to help the goal. These two axes of opportunity and threat are illustrated by the Relevance Appraisal Matrix (Figure 1; Lassetter et al., 2021; Neel & Lassetter, 2019).

If threat and opportunity are independent, then people can be appraised in four qualitatively distinct ways: as (a) high in opportunity and low in threat (*goal facilitators*), (b) low in opportunity and high in threat (*goal impeders*), (c) high in both opportunity and threat (*goal facilitator–impeders*), or (d) low in both opportunity and threat (*goal irrelevant*). For example, the immunocompromised man mentioned earlier may appraise the visibly sick woman as a goal impeder (harming and not helping his disease avoidance goal). He may, on the other hand, appraise a trusted doctor—someone who might help him stay healthy—as a goal facilitator (helping and not harming his goal). In addition, he may appraise some people to both facilitate *and* impede his disease avoidance, such as medical professionals exposed to contagious diseases like those working on a COVID-19 hospital floor. Finally, he may appraise a large number of people in his social environment as goal irrelevant: People whom he believes to have little association with disease or health (i.e., neither helping nor harming his goals), such as the other grocery store patrons. A single opportunity-to-threat dimension of relevance would not be able to distinguish goal facilitator–impeders from those who are goal irrelevant. The separation of threat and opportunity is thus critical for fully understanding the different ways that targets are appraised, as well as the downstream effects of those appraisals.

Figure 1
The Relevance Appraisal Matrix (Neel & Lassetter, 2019)



Relevance appraisals are dynamic *within targets* across goals: The same person will be considered a threat to perceivers with certain goals, an opportunity to others, and irrelevant to still others, and so forth. This means that a single target appears in different places on the Relevance Appraisal Matrix for different goals. For example, "a child" is rated as low on opportunity and threat for a self-protection goal (i.e., goal irrelevant), but as low opportunity and moderate threat for a disease avoidance goal (i.e., goal impeder; Lassetter et al., 2021). Relevance appraisals of targets are also dynamic *within perceivers*: As a perceiver's goals change across time and contexts, their appraisals of a single target will likewise change. A perceiver may see a child as a threat when they are worried about disease avoidance, but as irrelevant when worried about their own safety.

Threat and opportunity are distinct and vary across goals whether targets are social group exemplars (e.g., a gay man, an Asian woman; Lassetter et al., 2021), social groups (e.g., gay men, Asian women; Lassetter, 2023), social in-groups (e.g., one's own racial group; Le Forestier et al., 2023), or close others (e.g., a romantic partner or close friend; Lassetter, 2023). This distinction between threat and opportunity may apply to large-scale agents like organizations or states, or any nonsocial object that can impact one's goals, although this deserves empirical test. In turn, people likely attune their attention, emotion, and behavior to those who are perceived to be relevant (Neel & Lassetter, 2019). Because the Relevance Appraisal Matrix applies across many kinds of social targets, it can inform group-level phenomena like prejudice and stigmatization, as well as individual-level person perception and relationship processes.

Below, we explore the psychology of managing interactions and relationships with people appraised in each of these four ways. For each, we highlight examples and outline predictions from the affordance management approach, drawing primarily on work from the psychology of goal pursuit, close relationships, and stereotyping and prejudice.

Goal Facilitators

When other people pose only opportunities and no threats, they are seen as *goal facilitators* or as means to achieving that goal. For example, a friend may help a person's fitness goals by exercising with them, a work supervisor may support an employee's competence goals with constructive feedback and opportunities for advancement, or a new romantic partner may fulfill a person's desires for companionship and romance. In addition, many more explicitly transactional relationships may be characterized as goal facilitating, such as when a car mechanic helps provide reliable transportation or a tutor supports a child's academic achievement.

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An affordance management approach predicts that when a perceiver appraises a target as a goal facilitator, the perceiver will pay attention to the target as needed to take advantage of that opportunity and feel positive emotions toward them (e.g., Shiota et al., 2014). When perceivers appraise another person as facilitating their goals, they likely value that target and feel closer to them (Fitzsimons & Fishbach, 2010; Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Lassetter, 2023; Orehek & Forest, 2016), and this may be especially so for targets who facilitate multiple goals (Orehek et al., 2018). People may also engage in behavior intended to take advantage of those perceived opportunities, like maintaining proximity to the person.

Prestigious targets may be especially likely to be appraised as goal facilitators. Targets are afforded prestige when they are perceived to hold valued skills and knowledge that may help others to pursue their own goals, whether that be in music, athletics, work, or another domain. When a person is prestigious, others pay attention to them, feel admiration toward them, seek to maintain proximity to them, and often engage in deferential or ingratiating behavior in order to learn and benefit from them (Cheng & Tracy, 2014; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001).

Goal Impeders

People may commonly appraise others as *goal impeders* or as hurting and not helping their goals, such as the previously mentioned coughing woman at the grocery store. Out-groups often may be appraised as goal impeders, if, for example, they are perceived to compete for resources, to hold values that conflict with one's own, or to be violent, without also being seen to offer benefits (Brandt & Crawford, 2020; Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). In contrast, although close others may be perceived to impede some goals, people are unlikely to remain close with targets who only provide threats and no opportunities across time, given that perceived interpersonal closeness and opportunity are strongly related (Fitzsimons & Shah, 2008; Lassetter, 2023).

When people appraise another person as posing a threat and no opportunities, they are likely to monitor the other person's behavior and feel negative emotions toward them (Ellsworth & Smith, 1988; Kuppens et al., 2003). Perceivers are also likely to behave in ways calibrated to manage the specific threat the target person or group is seen to pose (Schaller & Neuberg, 2012). For example, the immunocompromised man mentioned earlier may feel disgust toward the coughing woman because of the perceived threat of disease, as well as anger because she is blocking his goal of staying healthy (Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005). He may be particularly likely to keep her salient in his mind, to monitor her behavior and location, and to distance himself from her and the things she has touched to avoid contamination. Likewise, a person who perceives another person to threaten their romantic relationship may also be likely to find that the target is salient in their mind, to monitor the target's behavior, and to feel anger at the target. In addition, they may feel jealousy and take different actions to manage the perceived threat (e.g., warning the other person, guarding their mate; DeSteno et al., 2006).

Goal Facilitator–Impeders

Goal facilitator–impeders are perceived to simultaneously pose opportunities and threats. This can occur within a single goal or across multiple goals. A perceiver looking for a new romantic partner may perceive a good friend as an opportunity because they may help the perceiver to meet desirable others but also as a threat to that same goal if the friend seeks a partner and has overlapping preferences. Likewise, people may see their work supervisor as both helping them to gain status in a company by providing opportunities to achieve and develop skills, and hurting their status in the company by failing to promote them or advocate for them.

Perceivers may pay particular attention to goal facilitator–impeders and put effort into managing their relationships to those targets in order to take advantage of their opportunities while avoiding their potential threats. This may require particular attention, effort, and management to balance the two. Targets seen to pose both threats and opportunities also likely elicit subjective ambivalence—an unpleasant internal feeling of conflict (Priester & Petty, 1996) that people likely try to resolve (Kunda, 1990). In close relationships, unresolved ambivalence with goal facilitator–impeders may even harm one's health (Holt-Lunstad & Uchino, 2019).

When perceivers hold many goals, they should be especially likely to appraise targets as facilitator–impeders. The more goals a perceiver has, the more likely it is that targets perceived to pose opportunities to some goals will also be seen to pose threats to other goals. Appraising someone as a goal facilitator–impeder for a single goal may be rarer than doing so for *different* goals, but we expect the attention, feelings, and behaviors toward these two types of facilitator–impeders to overlap, with notable differences. For example, when a perceiver appraises a target as helping and hurting a single goal, they will likely experience subjective ambivalence. However, if the perceiver appraises the target as helping one goal and hurting another, they may experience ambivalence only when both goals are simultaneously active. How perceivers attend to, feel about, and act toward different goal facilitator–impeders deserves more research.

Goal Irrelevant

Goal irrelevance, or being seen to pose neither threats nor opportunities, may be an extremely common relevance appraisal, at least for those perceivers who encounter many people. Imagine you are in a large city and are meeting a

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friend on the other side of town. On your walk to the subway station, you pass many pedestrians. On the subway car, you sit near many other passengers. When you exit at your stop, you walk to the restaurant passing yet more people on the street, and when you get there, you scan the other customers to see if your friend has arrived. Most—if not all—of the people you encountered were irrelevant to your goal of meeting your friend and you likely paid little attention to them.

These were all strangers whom you had no expectation of seeing again. However, perceivers may also appraise familiar and close others as goal irrelevant. For example, in a brainstorming meeting at your office, you may pay attention to the contributions of those coworkers you admire and view as competent and you may ignore those who you see as unlikely to provide useful contributions to the conversation. You may also selectively ignore a family member when you are pursuing a goal for which you find them to be irrelevant, even if at other times you would perceive them as highly relevant. Because attention, emotion, and behavior are all geared toward managing others in support of one's goals, people may pay little attention to irrelevant targets beyond initial categorization and may not even consciously be aware of them (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2014; Dijksterhuis & Aarts, 2010; Eitam et al., 2013). Perceivers may feel no emotions toward irrelevant targets and behaviorally neglect them (Neel & Lassetter, 2019). People who have high power or status, or are from higher social class backgrounds, depend less on others for their goal pursuit and so may be especially likely to show this pattern (e.g., Dietze & Knowles, 2016; Dietze et al., 2022).

The Target Perspective: Being Seen to Pose Affordances to Others

Everyone appraises others *and* is appraised by others. We next turn to the target perspective to understand how people experience and manage being seen to pose affordances to others. As perceivers themselves, targets sometimes seek to know how others appraise them so that they can best manage their own goal pursuit given those appraisals (Shelton, 2000; Wout et al., 2009). Detecting and responding to perceivers' appraisals need not be conscious and controlled—in fact, targets' responses may often be automatic and shaped by nonconscious processes. To understand how targets manage their experiences of relevance (or irrelevance) to others, it is necessary to consider targets' goals and how being appraised in different ways may fit with those goals. Note that targets' goal pursuit will not always be affected by others' appraisals—for any goal that a person can achieve without other people and that others are unlikely to be able to obstruct, others' appraisals are unlikely to be a strong concern. Below, we walk through how people may experience being appraised in each of the four ways represented in Figure 1, according to how it fits with their own goals.

Being Appraised as a Goal Facilitator

There are many circumstances in which being seen as a goal facilitator advances a target's own goals: People on a team want to be seen as valued group members, people looking for romantic partners want to be seen as desirable mates, and people seeking status and power want to be seen as strong leaders. In tasks of mutual coordination and dependence in which goals are shared, being seen as a goal facilitator to others may be essential to achieving one's own goals (Fishbach & Tu, 2016; Fitzsimons et al., 2015; Orehek & Forest, 2016). In addition, being seen as a goal facilitator to others can come with material and social benefits, as when people are afforded prestige because they are able to impart valuable skills to others (Cheng & Tracy, 2014; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Being valued by others may likewise help to fulfill targets' needs for belonging and meaning (Leary, 1999; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Yet, at times, being seen to pose opportunities to others may conflict with one's own goals. People may want to be seen as sexually desirable by a romantic partner but not by those with whom one has no romantic relationship and whom they hope to be seen as relevant for other goals. For example, when a boss conveys that he sees a female employee as a sexual opportunity, she may wonder if she is valued for her work skills and accomplishments or whether any achievement and status she has attained is in fact due to being perceived as a potential sexual opportunity. This can lead her to disengage from work, have poorer mental health, and a host of other negative outcomes (Cortina & Berdahl, 2008; Gervais et al., 2016).

Likewise, people who are members of marginalized groups, or are stereotyped as having lower competence or status, may sometimes feel like the object of others' benevolence goals—that is, they may wish to be respected and seen as valuable for their own merits and competencies, but are instead treated with pity or condescension, and as opportunities for others to display their benevolence (Bergsieker et al., 2010; Dupree & Fiske, 2019; Watt et al., 2021). Many subjectively positive stereotypes that perceivers may hold and that can signal perceived opportunities (e.g., hardworking, nurturing) can actually be experienced negatively by targets (Czopp et al., 2015). People from marginalized groups may thus sometimes be seen instrumentally by others *because* of their marginalized status. For example, people from marginalized groups may be seen as helping companies' goals to superficially diversify, rather than being valued for their skills and what they offer an organization (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023).

Being Appraised as a Goal Impeder

Most people do not typically want to be seen as threatening others and being appraised in this way may often hurt targets' ability to achieve their own goals. Being seen as a goal

impeder—posing only threats and no opportunities—can constitute a form of stigmatization for marginalized people and reflect not only devaluation but precede active discrimination and expulsion (e.g., Schaller & Neuberg, 2012). Especially when such an appraisal comes from valued others, devaluation can threaten targets' needs for belonging, safety, and control (e.g., Ren et al., 2018; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009). It is unclear how being seen to pose only a threat and no opportunities to others could foster desired close relationships, given the link between opportunity and closeness (Lassetter, 2023; Orehek & Forest, 2016).

However, being perceived to impede others' goals can sometimes help to facilitate one's own goals. A dominance strategy for gaining status involves threatening to impose costs on others (Cheng & Tracy, 2014), for example, by threatening their resources or safety if they do not comply with one's wishes. Being willing to impose costs on others can generate higher rank and resource access (Redhead et al., 2021), which could help one's own status goals. Further, groups in conflict sometimes display their ability to impose costs on each other in order to protect and advance their own group's interests (e.g., Struch & Schwartz, 1989). In short, being appraised as a goal impeder can sometimes be a strategic choice to attain valued resources and status.

Being Appraised as a Goal Facilitator–Impeder

Targets may sometimes seek to pose both opportunities and threats to others. Because power allows a person to affect others' outcomes either by imposing costs or bestowing benefits (Keltner et al., 2003), people who occupy or seek high-power or high-status positions may especially want to be appraised as facilitator–impeders. For example, a high-level manager may seek to be seen as a leader who can both facilitate employees' status-seeking goals (e.g., by providing them with opportunities, connecting them to high-powered networks) and impede those same goals (e.g., by firing them, withholding opportunities). Close others who are otherwise appraised as opportunities may sometimes also selectively seek to impose threats on their relationship partner, as a condition for being able to take advantage of the relationship's benefits. For example, someone who is worried about their romantic relationship ending may threaten to impose financial or reputational costs on their partner if the relationship ends (Buss & Haselton, 2005), and analogous processes may unfold in friendships (e.g., Krems et al., 2021).

Targets may also seek to avoid being seen as a facilitator–impeder. As noted, ambivalent social ties may be more detrimental to health even than purely aversive ties (Holt-Lunstad & Uchino, 2019), and these negative consequences may be felt by both members of the relationship, including the target. Furthermore, when the target views either the threat or opportunity components of the appraisal as conflicting with their need to belong, targets may experience being seen as goal facilitator–impeders as akin to stigmatization.

Being Appraised as Irrelevant

Targets likely infer that they are irrelevant when they detect that perceivers do not attend to them, express no emotions toward them, and/or treat them with indifference. In many cases, being appraised as irrelevant and consequently ignored may threaten a target's goals, including basic needs to belong and to be valued. People are exquisitely sensitive to signs that other people are excluding and ignoring them, and readily interpret being ignored as a rejection or even ostracism (Williams, 2009). We would expect that being ignored by those others whom the target sees as an opportunity for their own goals—that is, perceivers that the target values—may be particularly aversive. In other cases, people may find that they need resources or attention to advance their own goals, and so being a threat would be preferable to being ignored, consistent with adages like "there's no such thing as bad publicity."

However, targets may actually desire irrelevance to some perceivers. This may be especially so when the target deems a perceiver irrelevant to their own goals, seeking a relation of *mutual irrelevance* with the perceiver. For example, passengers on the subway may prefer to be ignored by one another. Targets may desire irrelevance if it provides a respite from unwanted appraisals of threat and/or opportunity. When others erroneously perceive a target as a threat, they may act aggressively toward them and even threaten the target's safety (Schaller & Neuberg, 2012). Such a target may seek to convey that they pose no harm, in the hopes of being ignored. Other targets may be perceived as a mating opportunity by those they have no interest in (Schwartzman & Neel, 2023). For example, receiving sexual attention in the workplace may be a distraction, embarrassment, or danger for targets who would prefer just to be able to get their work done, without being seen as a sexual opportunity to others (Gervais et al., 2016).

Stigmatization, Prejudice, and Invisibility

One promising area of application of the Relevance Appraisal Matrix is to understand stigmatization, prejudice, and invisibility from both perceiver and target perspectives (and indeed the sections above lean heavily on literature examining these topics). Stigmatization is the experience of being devalued in a particular context, often by virtue of perceived or actual membership in certain social categories or social identities (Crocker et al., 1998). As noted above, motivation science has found that people devalue those whom they do not perceive as facilitating their goals. This suggests that people seen to pose no opportunities are stigmatized, but the Relevance Appraisal Matrix (Figure 1) suggests two

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discrete forms of stigmatization: being seen to impede goals or as goal irrelevant.

Threat-based stigmatization and irrelevance-based stigmatization are very different (Neel & Lassetter, 2019). Perceivers who see a target as a threat will attend to and monitor the target, feel negative emotions toward them, and engage in behavior aimed to mitigate the perceived threat. In contrast, perceivers who see a target as irrelevant will minimize their attention to the other person, feel no emotion toward them, and neglect them. In short, the latter target will be *interpersonally invisible* to the perceiver. Work on social attention, discrimination, dehumanization, social exclusion, and ostracism has noted parallel distinctions to what we term threat-based stigmatization and invisibility (Hodson et al., 2014; Molden et al., 2009; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Rodin, 1987; Williams, 2009). Substantial literatures have examined the origins, experience, and consequences of threat-based stigmatization (e.g., Craig et al., 2018; Neuberg et al., 2000; Stangor and Crandall, 2000; Stephan & Stephan, 1985) and of being socially invisible (e.g., Fryberg & Townsend, 2008; Goff et al., 2008; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Remedios & Snyder, 2018; Sesko & Biernat, 2010; Sue et al., 2007).

An affordance management approach can help us to unite these literatures and to better understand the origins, relationship, and consequences of these two forms of stigmatization. For example, this approach suggests that both threat-based stigmatization and invisibility are dynamic—that is, there are not certain people who are seen as a threat and others who are invisible, but rather the same target will sometimes be invisible and sometimes be a threat (and other times, valued). Which way targets are perceived varies across situations and perceivers, depending on perceivers' goals and their varying appraisals of the targets' goal relevance (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2014). Some initial data on targets' experiences also support this idea. A sample of U.S. women and men who identified as Asian, Black, or White reported how invisible they feel, not in general, but to straight people of another gender who are looking for a mate. Across racial and gender groups, participants reported that they feel least invisible to straight other-gender people from their same racial group and more invisible to straight other-gender people from the other two racial groups (Lam & Neel, 2023). This suggests that people's experiences of invisibility are dynamic, with greater feelings of invisibility to other-race people than same-race people, on average, in a mating domain. Yet, in addition to this expectation that appraisals will be dynamic across perceivers, goals, and contexts, an affordance management approach also predicts that people who are stereotyped in ways that suggest an inability to affect others' goal pursuit—such as people perceived to be low in power, status, or competence—are much more likely to be invisible to others across perceivers and contexts. For an in-depth discussion of affordance management approaches to stigmatization and prejudice, see Neel and Lassetter (2019), Pirlott and Cook (2018), and Schaller and Neuberg (2012).

Target and Perceiver Strategies for Managing Unwanted Appraisals

When targets are appraised in a way that constrains their own goal pursuit, they may at times use strategies to manage these unwanted appraisals. For example, people who are devalued and stigmatized selectively respond to others' negative perceptions of them (Barreto & Ellemers, 2015; Shelton et al., 2005; Smart Richman & Leary, 2009). In parallel, perceivers may sometimes recognize that making certain appraisals of targets conflicts with their other goals, such as when making a biased assessment of a job candidate would conflict with the goal of having a fair hiring process. The affordance management approach suggests a number of points at which both perceivers and targets may intervene and change potential relevance appraisals (for a summary, see Table 1). Note that these strategies may, but need not, be employed deliberately and consciously—in fact, targets and perceivers may already use these strategies, developing them through experience, without being aware of them. Our aim is to describe the strategies that targets and perceivers may be using to manage unwanted appraisals, not to recommend particular strategies or suggest that targets are responsible for doing so.

First, targets and perceivers may focus on managing what affordance cues are available to perceivers. Targets may selectively disclose and conceal many identities and characteristics that perceivers use as affordance cues (e.g., their religion, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, political orientation, relationship status, and criminal history; Le Forestier et al., 2022; Quinn & Chaudoir, 2015; Schwartzman & Neel, 2023).

Table 1
Managing Unwanted Relevance Appraisals: Cue and Goal Strategies

	Strategy			
	Managing cues			
Perspective	Conceal cues	Add cues	Change cue meaning	Change goals
Target	Conceal certain target cues	Reveal or add new target cues	Disconfirm target cue meaning	Elicit other perceiver goals that change appraisal
Perceiver	Make certain target cues inaccessible	Seek new target cues	Disconfirm or reappraise target cue meaning	Activate other perceiver goals that change appraisal

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Targets may thus control what cues perceivers have access to in order to avoid being appraised to pose affordances that they do not want to be seen to pose (and certain environments, like being online, can make a wider set of cues and identities concealable). Perceivers who want to keep certain cues from biasing their appraisals may set up systems that preclude access to such cues (Onyeador et al., 2021). For example, to minimize bias in the audition process, many orchestras have implemented blind auditions in which the musician is only heard, and not seen. This helps to keep cues irrelevant to a person's musical ability, such as their gender, from being detected (Goldin & Rouse, 2000).

Second, both targets and perceivers may seek to *add* new affordance cues to influence the appraisal. For example, when people face the possibility of being appraised as dangerous to others based on their race, gender, and/or other identity cues, they may add cues that they do not pose a threat, such as a smiling expression (Neel et al., 2013). Perceivers may likewise seek additional information about a target's affordances, perhaps particularly when available cues do not reliably reflect affordances, and more diagnostic cues may exist but are hard to detect. In these cases, perceivers may construct situations that elicit affordance-relevant information about another person, engaging in "affordance testing" (Pick & Neuberg, 2022). For example, a student looking for a project partner may test a classmate's academic skills by asking them to solve a problem the student already knows the answer to, or a sports team may put recruits through grueling physical tests to determine their fitness and commitment (Pick & Neuberg, 2022).

Third, targets and perceivers may focus on changing the meaning that perceivers infer from target cues. Targets of prejudice may seek to provide disconfirming evidence that changes the perceiver's stereotype (Hewstone, 1989). One strategy would be to demonstrate that members of the target group actually vary widely on a stereotyped attribute. For example, a woman who is assumed to want children may seek to show that although many women do want to have children, many women do not. Here, the target attempts to break the link in the perceiver's mind between the cue of "woman" and the attribute "wants children" so that the perceiver will stop using gender as a cue to child-related affordances. Perceivers may recognize that they infer affordances from particular cues and try to learn new associations that override unwanted links in their minds (e.g., by working to change their stereotypes; Devine et al., 2012).

Fourth, targets and perceivers can try to change the perceiver's goals to ones for which the target would be appraised differently. For example, targets of prejudice may appeal to a perceiver's goal to be compassionate or reveal how the perceiver's appraisal of the target conflicts with a perceiver's goal to be moral or to treat people equitably. Perceivers and targets may both aim to "sideline bias" by changing the context to make the perceiver's ideal or unbiased goals and selves more salient and easier to act on, for example, by creating an interdependent situation in which cooperation and teamwork are required for success (Okonofua et al., 2022).

The strategies reviewed above all address the appraisal process. People also engage in strategies to manage the consequences of unwanted appraisals. For example, if changing an undesired appraisal is not possible, targets may seek to disengage from and disinvest in the relationship (Heckhausen et al., 2010) or manage their experience through cognitive reappraisal (e.g., Duker et al., 2022). Future research should explore the strategies that both targets and perceivers use to manage both the process and consequences of unwanted relevance appraisals.

Next Steps

We see a number of promising directions for future research in this area. Research on the Relevance Appraisal Matrix has so far relied on quantitative, Likert-scale self-report items generated to assess particular a priori affordances, applied cross-sectionally (e.g., Cottrell & Neuberg, 2005; Lassetter et al., 2021). These items are clear and direct but they provide a limited window into people's experiences and so represent only a first step in measuring perceived affordances. Qualitative approaches can help to illuminate how perceivers and targets think about, experience, and make sense of affordances in their everyday lives. For example, Schwartzman and Neel (2023) asked lesbian, gay, and bisexual people to describe an experience of concealing or revealing their sexual orientation to be invisible or visible to others. Participants provided rich information about what the situation and experience were like for them, providing context and reflection that would not have been easily accessible with only quantitative methods. In addition, longitudinal, within-person methods like experience sampling are required to answer foundational questions about the experience of affordance management within a person across time, like how often in daily life perceivers appraise others to pose opportunities and/or threats, in what contexts targets experience these different appraisals, or the extent to which appraisals are truly dynamic within a perceiver or target. Qualitative and longitudinal approaches will help detail the full picture of how people manage affordances in everyday life.

A second methodological direction for this research is to broaden the populations studied. Most of this research has so far relied on North American adult samples who are often predominantly White, educated, and/or have access to the internet (undergraduate students and online samples). This sampling of humanity is quite narrow (Henrich et al., 2010). We currently do not know to what extent the assumptions that underpin the Relevance Appraisal Matrix—that threat and opportunity appraisals are independent dimensions of social cognition, and they vary across different goals—apply across populations, cultures, and times. Although we expect this to be the case, the generalizability of these assumptions merits empirical test.

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Furthermore, even if the Relevance Appraisal Matrix applies across human populations, we expect variability in the inputs to affordance appraisals (what goals people pursue; what cues perceivers rely on to appraise relevance) and the outcomes of affordance appraisals (what perceived affordances are common; how perceivers feel and behave toward targets posing different affordances; how targets manage being seen to pose affordances). For example, ecological variables can shape perceivers' goal priorities, with population density linked to higher mate retention and kin care goals (Sng et al., 2017), and income inequality linked to higher self-protection and status goals (e.g., Daly et al., 2001; Kenrick & Gomez-Jacinto, 2013).

Our research has also relied on samples that are especially relationally mobile (Thomson et al., 2018). Greater relational mobility means that people can more easily choose which relationships to nurture and which to dissolve and can do so based on their preferences (Yuki & Schug, 2012). For more relationally mobile people, goal relevance may be more tightly linked to the management and selection of one's personal relationships. How people who are less relationally mobile appraise others' relevance, and the ways in which these appraisals shape their relationships, deserves further study.

Finally, there are two aspects of goals that deserve deeper consideration in future work. First, we have aimed to describe a framework that can characterize appraisals across any type of social relationship, from strangers to close others. But past theorizing argues that the connections between our goals and close others form a complex "web of interdependence" (Fitzsimons et al., 2015; Fitzsimons & Finkel, 2015), with close others' goals especially likely to affect our own. Conflict or correspondence of our goals with those of close others can thus shape the success of our goal pursuit. Future research should more directly examine differences and similarities in how relevance appraisals form and operate across the spectrum of interdependence.

Second, we have started with the assumption that most often, people will have goals that guide their appraisals of targets. That said, targets may sometimes themselves elicit goals in perceivers, as when seeing someone express anger can elicit a self-protection goal or seeing a child in distress can elicit a goal to caretake and express compassion. The link between targets and perceivers' goals is thus somewhat recursive and dynamic. Incorporating and explicitly modeling this relationship, including its cognitive mechanisms, will help future theories of relevance appraisal to more accurately reflect the dynamic nature of these processes.

Conclusion

We have reviewed evidence for distinguishing between appraisals of threat and opportunity and discussed implications for how people manage their social worlds as both perceivers and targets. This framework integrates and builds upon prior psychological literatures on motivation, social perception and judgment, and stereotyping and prejudice to provide more nuanced answers to existing questions and to ask novel questions with clear applications to well-being and intergroup relations. Considering how people see one another as goal relevant or irrelevant can help us understand how people navigate their complex social worlds.

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