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Understanding tactical responses to social problems through the lens of regulatory scope

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Abstract

People might address societal problems by engaging in collective action to raise awareness of the issue or attempt to change underlying structural systems, or prosocial behaviors to help those impacted. In this Perspective, we draw on construal level theory and regulatory scope theory to understand why people might engage in various efforts to mitigate social problems. Specifically, we propose that people pursue solutions that alleviate the suffering of those affected by the problem (consequence-focused solutions) when they focus on lower-level or more psychologically proximal features and pursue solutions that address the underlying causes of the problem (cause-focused solutions) when they focus on higher-level or more psychologically distant features. Thus, people's preferences for different solutions might be explained by understanding how people view the underlying problem. This framework explains the different ways people seek to address perceived social problems, providing insights into when and why people devote their time and energy to pursuing different forms of social action.

[H1] Introduction

In the summer of 2020, sparked by the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, Black Lives Matter led one of the largest, most sustained social movements in recent United States history[1]. This movement focused on reducing racial injustice facing Black Americans[1] and people from many different racial and ethnic backgrounds participated in a variety of ways, such as attending protests, rallies, and reading clubs, donating to anti-racism organizations and families affected by police violence, and organizing or participating in social media campaigns[2]. Police violence against Black Americans is an example of a social problem—an issue generally perceived as an illegitimate, harmful social condition[3,4]. Other examples include extreme poverty throughout the world, women's rights in Iran, and climate change.

To address social problems, people might engage in collective actions to raise awareness of the issue (such as attending rallies and protests or signing petitions) and to change underlying systems[5,6] (such as restructuring local budgets) or people might engage in prosocial behaviors to help those affected by social problems, such as donating money and volunteering[7,8,9]. For decades, psychologists, political scientists, and sociologists have studied people's motivations to engage in social actions. However, how people choose among the variety of potential social actions remains elusive.

In this Perspective, we draw on regulatory scope theory[10] and construal level theory[11,12] to explain when and why people pursue different solutions to address social problems. First, we summarize research on drivers and types of social action. Next, we describe construal level theory and regulatory scope theory. Finally, we bring these literatures together and consider how different features of social problems might expand or contract scope, thereby influencing the type of solutions people pursue. Although we focus on examples of issues facing marginalized

groups, such as Black Americans or lower-income individuals, the underlying processes are likely generalizable to any issues perceived to be unjust.

[H1] What motivates social action

Social action occurs when people seek to remedy or alter a problematic situation or issue[13], such as poverty, social inequality, and the impacts of natural disasters. Research that investigates why people engage in social action often focuses on understanding engagement in collective action, defined as any action that individuals take in support of a group with the goal of social change[14,15,16,17]. Research in sociology and political science details how activists and leaders of social movements spur engagement in collective action by framing social problems to highlight who experiences injustice (that is, the victims), who proliferates the injustice (that is, the culpable agents), and the causes of injustice[13,18,19,20]. To garner support, leaders also strategically emphasize the possibility of creating change through collective action (agency frames) and define the 'we' of who can bring about change (identity frames)[19]. Thus, this literature suggests that people make strategic choices to spur action using collective action frames that highlight who is harmed and by whom, while emphasizing a common identity and the efficacy of action (for reviews see[13,21]).

Complementing these perspectives, social psychologists focus on the psychological factors motivating social action. People engage in collective action when they identify with the relevant group or moral cause[22,14,23,24,19,25], view the situation as illegitimate or unjust, have emotional responses (such as anger and moral outrage directed at responsible agents)[23,26,27], and believe in the group's ability to effectively act (group-efficacy beliefs)[22,24].

However, collective action is only one route through which people might seek to address social problems. Research on interpersonal helping and prosocial behavior identifies individual-level responses to social problems, such as bias confrontation (speaking out against perceived bias) and charitable giving[28,29,30,31,32]. This work focuses on the role of individual characteristics (such as empathy) and cost-benefit analyses in decisions to help and offer aid[28,29,30,31,32]. For example, having empathic concern for others[33] and identification with the aid recipient is associated with prosocial donations[34,35].

Some work has sought to integrate prosocial behavior and collective action to identify the actions people might engage in when presented with social problems. Actions can be classified as benevolence actions that provide tangible money, goods, or services (often deemed prosocial behaviors), and activism actions that seek to challenge the existing system (such as attending rallies and signing petitions (often deemed collective actions)[8,9]. In a sample of people on mailing lists for anti-poverty nonprofit organizations, feelings of sympathy towards the disadvantaged group predicted engagement in benevolence action, whereas feelings of outrage and attributions that emphasize the culpability of governments predicted engagement in activism action[9]. Thus, different emotions and attributions of responsibility predicted engagement in benevolence versus activism actions. Moreover, a content analysis of qualitative data from people who self-identified as allies (members of advantaged groups committed to reducing a social inequality that advantages their group[5]) suggests that social actions taken by advantaged group members can be categorized as either reflecting affirmation action or informed action[5] (see also[36,37,38,39,40,41]). Affirmation actions refer to behaviors meant to provide interpersonal support and understanding, whereas informed actions involve behaviors that seek to dismantle privilege and confront bias targeting the outgroup. Although little work has assessed what factors drive

these different types of action, one study found that those who recognize privilege and have internal motivation to respond without prejudice are likely to engage in both affirmation and informed actions[5]. Taken together, scholars have introduced different frameworks for categorizing the actions people might take to address social problems. However, it remains unclear how people choose among these varying actions.

Importantly, existing frameworks primarily focus on categorizing the actions themselves rather than their underlying aims. For example, in response to police violence, people could donate directly to the family of someone who was harmed[42] or donate to organizations seeking to restructure local and state police budgets[43]. Although these examples involve taking the same action—donating money—to address the same social problem, allocating donations toward different funds might reflect different underlying aims. For example, donating to the family of someone harmed might stem from an aim to help that individual family in the present moment. By contrast, donating to organizations seeking to restructure police budgets might stem from an aim to aid the broader group of Black Americans who might be impacted by police violence by curbing opportunities for police violence to occur in future. Thus, the difference between these two responses is not the action itself (donating) but the focus and aim of the action (that is, the scope of concerns the action seeks to address).

We propose an alternative framework to understand people's engagement in social action that focuses on the aims of the action and therefore how people understand the problem that they are attempting to solve. Focusing on understanding how people view the underlying problem might clarify when and why people pursue disparate solutions to social problems. This framework integrates the social action literature with the robust literature on construal level and regulatory scope to understand the solutions people engage in to address social problems.

[H1] Construal level and regulatory scope

Construal level theory describes how people think about and orient to objects or events as a function of psychological distance (how far something is from one's direct experience)[11,12]. Psychological distance could occur in terms of physical proximity (near to far), temporal closeness (present to future), social closeness (close friend to stranger) or hypotheticality (probable to unlikely). Psychologically close objects and events are thought about more concretely, whereas psychologically distal objects and events are viewed more abstractly[11,12]. Seeing something as more concrete or abstract refers to the level of construal. At a higher-level, people perceive objects and events as more abstract and think about the superordinate big picture (seeing the forest). At a lower-level, people perceive objects and events more concretely, and consider the subordinate, idiosyncratic details (seeing the trees). As psychological distance increases, the more an object, event, or situation is mentally represented or construed at a higher-level of abstraction, and conversely, the more abstractly something is construed, the more it is perceived as psychologically distant[12,44].

Regulatory scope theory[10] expands on construal level theory and describes how people act and make decisions to achieve different goals by changing the breadth or scope of their considerations. Optimal regulatory functioning requires that people can both immerse themselves in a narrow set of immediate concerns relevant to the proximal here-and-now (contract their scope) and move beyond their current experiences to consider a broader set of concerns relevant to more distant times, places, people, and possibilities (expand their scope). Expanded scope promotes pursuit of a general solution to a problem that can span time, space, and hypotheticals, whereas contracted scope promotes pursuit of a specific solution relevant to the immediate

moment. Importantly, whereas psychological distance refers to the distance between a person and a mental object, scope refers to the span and breadth of possibilities that one considers. Construal level (seeing something as more concrete or abstract) is the most well-studied 'tool' for modulating scope: Directing people to the abstract expands scope, whereas directing people to the concrete contracts scope[10]. Thus, one way to expand (vs. contract) scope is to focus on concerns that are psychologically distant (vs. near).

Another way to expand or contract scope is to direct attention toward higher- or lower-level features of the situation[10]. When people focus on the lower-level features of a situation or if the features of a situation orient people toward lower-level concerns, they contract their scope or narrow their range of concern. When scope is contracted, people focus on the immediate context, and pursue solutions that account for the details of a given problem[10]. By contrast, when people focus on higher-level features or if the features of a situation facilitate higher-level thinking, they expand their scope or orient to a broader range of possibilities. When scope is expanded, people pursue more generalized solutions that could satisfy a variety of contingencies for a given problem[10].

Research on construal level and regulatory scope has sought to understand why people pursue different solutions for individual-level problems such as diet, stress, and where to seek social support. This research[45,46] finds that people prefer to engage in actions that address the consequences (that is, byproducts or issues resulting from an underlying problem) when focusing on psychologically near concerns and scope is contracted. People prefer to engage in actions that address the causes (that is, the issues underlying a given problem) when focusing on psychologically distant concerns and scope is expanded. Causes are higher-level features of an event because they reflect the overarching central problem; consequences are lower-level

features of an event because they reflect downstream issues that are dependent on the causes. Thus, features that facilitate higher-level thinking or expanded scope should lead people toward addressing causes of a problem, whereas features that facilitate lower-level thinking or contracted scope should facilitate action to mitigate its consequences.

For example, drawing people's attention to the future (rather than the present) led people to prefer to reduce the cause of their stress (such as decreasing their workload when feeling stressed at work)[45] because considering the future expands scope, which leads to a focus on more central, higher-level features of an event, including causes. By contrast, drawing people's attention to the present (rather than the future) led them to prefer to address a byproduct of their stress (such as changing their diet to combat overeating), because considering the present contracts scope, which leads to an emphasis on peripheral, lower-level features of an event, including consequences[45]. Thus, changing people's focus from the present to the future shifted people's preferences from consequence-focused to cause-focused actions. Importantly, this relationship is bidirectional. Consequence-focused actions operate at a lower-level and therefore promote a focus on the present, whereas cause-focused actions operate at a higher-level and therefore promote a focus on the future[45].

Another study found that going to close friends for social support leads people to address a consequence of the problem (feeling exhausted), whereas going to a new acquaintance for social support leads people to address the cause of a problem (feeling overwhelmed at work which leads to exhaustion)[46]. This finding suggests that thinking about soliciting support from close others contracts scope, leading people to consider a narrower set of possibilities to solve immediate concerns. By contrast, thinking about soliciting support from distal others expands scope, directing people to consider a broader set of possibilities and concerns to solve the

overarching issue. This relationship also works bidirectionally—people seek out close others for support when they want to address the consequences of a problem, and seek support from more distant others when they want to address the root causes of a problem[46].

[H1] Solving social problems

The regulatory scope and construal level literatures have examined how people address individual-level problems (such as stress) through consequence-focused and cause-focused action. We propose that a similar process might unfold when considering social problems: People might pursue solutions that alleviate the downstream consequences (consequence-focused solutions) or address the underlying causes (cause-focused solutions) of a perceived social problem. Further, engaging in different solutions might reciprocally influence scope and thereby conceptualization of the problem.

For example, people might volunteer at local food kitchens[47], which addresses a consequence of poverty—insufficient access to food. Volunteering at food kitchens (consequence-focused solution) provides immediate, potentially life-saving aid to individuals experiencing poverty, but the underlying problem (economic insecurity) remains. Alternatively, people might volunteer with organizations that seek to implement policies to help build a floor of economic security, such as by lobbying for childcare tax credits[48] (cause-focused solution). This distinction between consequence-focused and cause-focused solutions might also be useful for understanding larger scale efforts such as international aid. For example, nations might provide funding to help food insecure communities in other nations (consequence-focused solution) or might provide funding to another nation's leaders to address economic insecurity (cause-focused solution; see ref[49,50]).

However, no single solution is a panacea. For example, volunteering for an organization that seeks to implement policies that address the cause of poverty might eventually help a greater number of people affected by poverty in the long run, but not those who are currently experiencing poverty in the short term. Moreover, the likelihood of successfully reducing poverty via policy initiatives is more uncertain than the likelihood of successfully feeding a hungry family. Thus, it is understandable that people vary in the social actions they take across contexts or at different times[51].

We propose that highlighting features that are lower-level or more psychologically proximal should direct people to pursue solutions aimed at helping those in immediate need in a specific situation (consequence-focused solutions), whereas highlighting features that are higher-level or more psychologically distal should direct people towards actions aimed at addressing the broader overarching issue (cause-focused solutions). These features include: individual versus group suffering, present versus future considerations, short-term versus long-term rewards, feasibility versus desirability of creating change, and emotions directed toward the individual situation versus the system. In this section, we integrate the literatures on social change, construal level, and regulatory scope to explain why each of these features might impact whether people pursue cause-focused or consequence-focused solutions. Although this list of features is not exhaustive and additional features certainly influence the pursuit of solutions (for example, the diversity of groups affected by the issue or social familiarity), we focus on these five as initial illustrations.

[H2] Individual versus group suffering

At a lower-level of construal people focus on distinct individuals, which contracts scope, and at a higher-level of construal people focus on groups, which expands scope[52,53,54,55,56,57,58].

Specifically, concrete, lower-level construal induces contrastive processing which differentiates and individuates targets[53]. At a more abstract, higher-level of construal, people place greater weight on aggregated information and have more of a group-orientation[55]. Thus, considering who is impacted by injustice—whether a specific individual or a group—should contract or expand scope, respectively, and direct pursuit of consequence-focused or cause-focused solutions to social problems.

Research on prosocial behavior shows that people often help those directly affected by social problems (consequence-focused solutions) owing to a feeling of personal obligation to a particular person[59] or because they recognize that a specific individual needs assistance[60,61]. For instance, people are more likely to donate to help pay bills for a sick child's family (which addresses a consequence of a larger issue, such as lack of access to adequate health insurance) if the face of an individual, identifiable victim is highlighted, rather than a group of eight sick children[62] (see also[63,64,65,32]). Furthermore, people donate more when they are shown an identified child affected by food insecurity versus statistics indicating that millions of children are affected by food insecurity[65]. Although these studies typically do not include cause-focused measures (such as donations to efforts to improve health insurance coverage), this work suggests that focusing on individual victims leads people to engage in actions that address the downstream consequences (for example, the financial burden for a single family) of a larger social problem (for example, lack of adequate health insurance).

Research on collective action supports the notion that focusing on group-level suffering promotes engagement in cause-focused action. Collective actions that seek to address causes of issues (such as protesting to advocate for alleviating poverty) stem from identification with larger social groups (such as the social groups affected by poverty)[15,66,67,23,68,14]. For example,

one study found that people rated unequal distributions of resources as more unfair and exhibited more support for redistributive policies (such as wealth and inheritance taxes) if economic inequality was presented as impacting groups compared to individuals[69]. Because redistributive policies attempt to reduce economic inequality by tackling an underlying cause (for example, wealth taxes target excessive wealth), this finding suggests that the perception that larger social groups are harmed might lead to the pursuit of cause-focused solutions.

Furthermore, at the intergroup-level a focus on one individual group might contract scope and lead to pursuit of consequence-focused solutions, whereas a focus on the many groups affected by social problems might expand scope and lead to pursuit of cause-focused solutions. For example, asking heterosexual Asian Americans to focus on how multiple groups are similarly affected by an issue (such as discrimination) leads to support for policies that might address the causes of disadvantages facing another marginalized group (gay Americans)[70] (see also[71,72]). However, these studies did not test expanded scope as a mechanism. Thus, perceiving that many groups experience a social problem might lead to more cause-focused action, although this proposition awaits empirical testing.

Overall, focusing on the individual or individuals affected by a social issue might contract scope leading to the pursuit of consequence-focused solutions, whereas focusing on broader social groups affected by a social issue might expand scope leading to the pursuit of cause-focused solutions.

[H2] Present versus future considerations

Research on construal level shows that imagining an event that occurs in the near future (for example, tomorrow) or distant future (for example, next year) directs people toward the idiosyncratic (lower-level) or abstract (higher-level) features of an event[52,73,74,75,76]. Thus, a focus

on the present promotes lower-level construal, which should contract scope, whereas a future focus promotes higher-level construal, which should expand scope. In the context of social problems, focusing on either present or more distal future considerations should therefore guide pursuit of consequence-focused or cause-focused solutions, respectively.

Research on health and coping shows how present (vs. future) considerations influences attention towards consequences or causes as well as subsequent behavioral outcomes[77,78]. One study found that as a stressor (for example, the Bar Exam) drew closer in time, people were more likely to engage in emotion-focused coping to alleviate the negative emotions derived from the stressor (for example, seeking social support or using alcohol and/or drugs) compared to problem-focused coping that addresses the source of a stressor (for example, active planning)[79]. Thus, as temporal distance from the stressful event decreased, people engaged in strategies that alleviate the consequences of an underlying issue more than strategies that could address the underlying cause. In another study, a focus on the future (vs. the here-and-now) led people to prefer to address the cause of a given problem (stress) rather than the consequences of the problem (low energy and low productivity)[45]. Work on environmental activism also supports the notion that present versus future thinking influences social action. People who are more likely to think about future outcomes (vs. immediate outcomes) generally are more likely to endorse pro-environmental attitudes and engage in behaviors that seek to address the causes of environmental issues[80,81] (see also[82]).

Thus, a future focus is associated with engaging in cause-focused solutions to individual-level stressors and environmental problems. Similar processes might occur for other social problems, such as poverty. For example, focusing on what people experiencing poverty need in the present moment should promote volunteering at a food kitchen, whereas focusing on what

people experiencing poverty need in the future should promote volunteering for organizations lobbying for policies to address economic insecurity. Future studies are needed to test this proposition empirically.

[H2] Short-term versus long-term rewards

People often balance pursuit of short-term rewards (immediate pleasures) and long-term rewards (long-term self and community-enhancement)[83,84,85,86,87]. Construal level can help explain when people engage in self-control to prioritize delayed, long-term rewards rather than short-term rewards[88,89,90,91]. Specifically, priming lower-level construal promotes gratifying immediate-here-and-now temptations, whereas priming higher-level construal promotes pursuit of long-term goals and self-control. For example, female undergraduate students were more likely to ignore the hedonic allure of chocolate and choose a healthier apple (consistent with long-term health goals) when they were induced into states of higher-level construal versus lower-level construal[91] by answering prompts to generate superordinate category labels or exemplars, respectively. Thus, higher-level construal led to a preference for delayed rewards over immediate rewards. Higher-level construal might promote a preference for long-term rewards (and facilitate self-control) because it allows people to weigh higher-level concerns over lower-level concerns (temptations)[83]. Thus, focusing on receiving short-term versus long-term rewards should contract or expand scope and thereby guide pursuit of consequence-focused or cause-focused solutions to social problems, respectively.

Short-term rewards might be palliative, such as feeling good after helping someone in need, and long-term rewards might include achieving long-lasting equity. This notion is supported by research on charitable giving and bystander helping, which suggest that people engage in actions to address consequences of social problems (such as donating towards natural

disaster relief efforts) to obtain short-term rewards[28,92]. For example, people report a 'warm glow' or inner sense of satisfaction[93,94,30], a sense of 'feeling good'[95], and show neural activity suggesting that affective rewards are activated[96,97] when they donate towards individuals impacted by disasters (an action that mitigates the consequences of an event). Additionally, people are more likely to help individuals if someone smiled (versus did not smile) at them[98], and researchers theorize that people help as a means to reduce guilt and discomfort[99]. According to the negative-state-reduction theory of helping[100,101], interpersonal helping reduces personal negative affect and therefore people engage in intergroup helping to satisfy selfish and hedonic desires (however, according to empathy-altruism theory helping is better characterized as selfless[102,103,104]). Regardless of motive, this work suggests that people pursue actions that address the consequences of social problems to obtain short-term rewards.

Alternatively, to create long-term social change (that is, pursue a long-term reward) people often seek to revolutionize social systems (what might be considered cause-focused solutions, see[105,7,106]). Because cause-focused solutions might involve changing fundamental elements of society, focusing on gaining long-term rewards (such as long-lasting social equity) should direct pursuit of cause-focused solutions. Similarly, addressing the cause of a problem might help people gain sought-after long-term rewards.

Classic research on self-regulation finds that people are drawn to immediate rewards and short-term outcomes over long-term interests[107,108], which might explain the greater prevalence of people participating in actions that aim to address consequences than actions that aim to address causes[8]. For example, about 90 percent of sampled members of World Vision Australia and the Global Poverty Project (anti-poverty NGOs) reported participating in actions such as donating and purchasing fair trade products to help those affected by poverty; only 10 percent

reported participating in actions such as signing petitions to try to address the causes of poverty[8]. These data are consistent with the idea that a focus on short-term rewards vs. long-term rewards might influence the solutions pursued to address social problems.

[H2] Feasibility versus desirability

Feasibility (the ease or difficulty in achieving an end state) and desirability (the extent to which an end state is valued) are not necessarily oppositional but they are often contrasted in the construal and goal literatures when distinguishing between means and ends (see[109,110,111]). These literatures posit that desirability reflects the superordinate 'why' of an action, whereas feasibility reflects the subordinate 'how' of an action. Thus, feasibility represents concrete, lower-level construal, whereas desirability reflects abstract higher-level construal[112,73,113,114]. Research on persuasion supports this distinction: people are more persuaded by arguments that highlight desirability (versus feasibility) if the arguments focus on the distant (versus near) future[112]. Furthermore, if people are told that they can buy a product this week, their product evaluations focus on how easy the product is to use (feasibility) and therefore the lower-level concerns of 'how'. However, if people are told that they can buy the product three months from now, their evaluations focus on how environmentally-friendly the product is (desirability), and therefore the higher-level concerns of 'why'. Thus, psychological distance (now versus future) influences whether one considers the 'how' or 'why' of a decision.

In the context of social problems, the consideration of feasibility and desirability should contract and expand scope, respectively, and thereby influence pursuit of consequence-focused or cause-focused solutions. For example, although reducing police violence toward Black Americans might be a highly desirable end-state, it could be perceived as unlikely that an individual actor could have a meaningful impact. By contrast, actions like giving money directly

to a victim's family might be viewed as more feasible to engage in and have a direct impact. Thus, people might prefer actions that aim to reduce the cause of the issue if they are prioritizing desirability (see[115,116]), and prefer actions that aim to help identifiable victims and the consequences of the issue if they are prioritizing feasibility.

People are often more concerned with what is practical and feasible compared with what is ideal and desirable[73,111] (also see[117,118]). This preference for feasibility might explain why more people participate in actions that address consequences (charity donations towards individual beneficiaries) than actions that address causes (lobbying governments to change systems)[8]. Although logically sensible, this notion needs to be empirically tested to fully understand how feasibility and desirability influence responses to social problems.

Notably, the collective action literature finds that perceived group efficacy might lead to engagement in actions that aim to address the causes of social problems[119,120,22] although this relationship is not always robust (see[23] for discussion of inconsistent results). Group efficacy reflects perceptions of whether collective action will achieve its goals and is measured with items such as "I think that together we can change [the social problem]" and "to what extent do you think that this [collective action] will increase the chances of the government changing their plans?". These measures of group efficacy might tap into both perceptions that the action will lead to a desirable end-state (desirability) and perceptions of how easy it is to enact social change (feasibility). Similarly, hope reflects the cognitive appraisal that a desirable goal is possible to achieve in the future[121], which involves both desirability and feasibility (that is, that what is desired is possible). High hope and high efficacy predict intentions to engage in collective action[122] (also see[123,124]). Thus, the combination of desirability and feasibility might lead to

pursuit of cause-focused solutions, whereas considering only feasibility might lead to pursuit of consequence-focused solutions.

Little work has directly tested both desirability and feasibility in the context of social problems. Future research should directly test how focusing on desirability, feasibility, or both predicts pursuit of consequence- and cause-focused solutions.

[H2] Emotion toward individual situations or the system

Collective action and prosocial behavior are often driven by emotional reactions such as anger[22] and sympathy[8,26]. When presented with social problems, people might direct these emotions at the individuals affected or at larger social systems[23,9,125,126,127]. The theory of regulatory scope suggests that focusing on a specific event contracts scope, whereas focusing on broader events (for example, systemic issues) expands scope[10]. Thus, directing emotions towards an individual situation might contract scope, promoting consequence-focused solutions; directing emotions at the larger social system might expand scope, promoting cause-focused solutions.

For example, when seeking to address poverty, focusing on feelings of sympathy for affected individuals should contract scope and promote actions that address a consequence of this issue (for example, volunteering at a local food kitchen). By contrast, focusing on feelings of anger towards the system that allows poverty to persist should expand scope and promote actions that address a cause of the problem (for example, volunteering for organizations creating policies to support economic security). Because the link between regulatory scope and where emotions are directed has not been empirically tested, this is a novel prediction derived from our framework.

In contrast to limited research on the relationship between emotions and regulatory scope, many studies and models of social action consider the role of emotion[22,23,26,68,105,119,128,129,130,131].

For example, feelings of sympathy towards those affected by poverty predict more engagement in actions such as donations to people in poverty[9,23,132]. In these studies, the emotion (sympathy) is directed at individuals affected by the underlying problem and sympathy uniquely predicted actions to help those affected (a consequence-focused solution). People also engage in prosocial donations to help affected individuals (a consequence-focused action) when emotions are directed towards someone treated unfairly (empathic anger[104])[133,134].

By contrast, people pursue actions to address the cause of a problem when emotions are directed at authorities, powerholders, and perpetrating group members (that is, the broader system maintaining injustice). For example, feelings of moral outrage (anger at a third party or system of injustice) lead to engagement in activism (which typically seeks to address the cause of social problems)[135,136,137]. Emotions like moral outrage are enacted when the broader system is held responsible for perpetuating injustice[135], which might facilitate a focus on the underlying cause. Consistent with this notion, directing anger at a system that maintains injustice might lead to more engagement in activism that challenges the existing system[135] (that is, a cause-focused action; see also[138,139]).

These prior findings might be explained by a regulatory scope mechanism: emotions directed at those affected by a social problem might contract scope and promote pursuit of consequence-focused actions to directly help those affected, whereas emotions directed at the social system might expand scope and promote pursuit of cause-focused action to interrupt the broader system. Thus, our framework disambiguates how different targets of emotion influence preferences for solutions to address social problems, but this needs to be tested empirically.

[H1] Conclusions

We propose that focusing on different features contracts or expands scope, which directs pursuit of solutions to address either the consequences or causes of a problem (Figure 1). This framework introduces novel testable predictions of how regulatory scope might guide pursuit of different actions to address perceived social problems.

Although prior research provides support for some of the predictions outlined here, future research is needed to empirically test the full proposed model. For example, some paths have been examined in contexts unrelated to social change (such as dieting or stress management), whereas other paths that could be useful for understanding responses to individual-level problems (for example, whether emotions are directed at an individual situation or system) have not been tested. Testing predictions for how each of the proposed features influences pursuit of potential solutions (both individual and social problems) will help answer key questions about when and why people pursue different actions to address many different issues.

Most of the research on addressing individual-level problems posits a bidirectional relationship between features that influence scope and preferred solutions, such that features might influence desired solutions and engaging in solutions might also influence activated features. This suggests that engaging in cause-focused (vs. consequence-focused) action might expand (vs. contract) scope and shift attention to different features. For example, engaging in cause-focused (vs. consequence-focused) solutions might lead people to consider plans that require more time (vs. less time), to work in diverse coalitions (vs. work exclusively with their own social group), and to address injustices in another country (vs. locally). Thus, pursuit of cause-focused (vs. consequence-focused) solutions should direct attention toward a wider variety of considerations and higher-level aspects of a problem, potentially leading to greater breadth in the types of action pursued in response. A greater breadth of actions pursued when scope is

476 expanded might explain why a diverse variety of actions—such as collective protests, voting
477 behavior, and signing social media peitions[22]—are typically included under the umbrella of
478 collective action, whereas studies on prosocial behavior mainly include a narrower set of two
479 behaviors (donating to those affected and engaging in prosocial helping). Future research can test
480 this proposition and assess how engaging in different solutions influences scope.

481 The framework presented here has important implications for understanding efforts to
482 reduce social injustice and inequality[140]. First, understanding how people construe a social
483 problem might explain why many problems continue to persist. If people primarily pursue
484 actions that address the consequences of a problem because of the greater draw of feasibility
485 over desirability or short-term over long-term rewards, the root cause of the problem will likely
486 remain and continue to affect others. Conversely, if people primarily pursue actions that address
487 the causes of a problem, people currently suffering from the consequences will continue to do so,
488 and there are no guarantees that a cause-focused solution will be successful. Indeed, because
489 social problems by their very nature are socially constructed, people often disagree about what
490 the actual underlying problem is, which might impede action[13,141]. Given the tradeoffs between
491 helping individuals and attempting to enact broader change, it might be useful for people to
492 engage in both types of solutions.

493 Importantly, although regulatory scope is a useful lens for understanding the solutions
494 people pursue to reduce social problems, this is just one possible mechanism and engagement in
495 social actions is not exclusively guided by scope. People might be driven by other motivations or
496 identity-based concerns, which also shape how people approach social action[15,17,106,142,143,144,145].
497 For example, advantaged group members might engage in certain consequence-focused actions,

(such as dependency-oriented help[49,50]) if they are motivated to maintain the status of their own group.

Linking regulatory scope to cause-focused and consequence-focused solutions provides a generative framework to understand the actions people pursue to address perceived social problems that could be applied to many issues, such as efforts to address poverty, police violence, or climate change. Furthermore, this framework can contribute to research in political science and sociology on how leaders frame social movements to inform interventions to persuade people to engage in specific actions.

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Figure captions

Figure 1. Features that influence regulatory scope and the solutions pursued. Features (for example, present vs. future considerations) expand or contract scope, which directs engagement toward solutions that aim to reduce either the consequences or causes of a problem. Reciprocally, the type of solution pursued influences perceived features.

ToC Blurb

People address societal problems by engaging in collective action to attempt to change underlying structural systems or prosocial behaviors to help those impacted. In this Perspective, Brown and Craig draw on construal level and regulatory scope theory to understand why people engage in different forms of social action.