Unfulfilled habits: on the affective consequences of turning down affordances for social interaction

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Abstract

Many pragmatist and non-representational approaches to cognition, such as the enactivist, have focused on the relations between actions, affectivity, and habits from an intersubjective perspective. For those adopting such approaches, all these aspects are inextricably connected; however, many questions remain open regarding the dynamics by which they unfold and shape each other over time. This paper addresses a specific topic that has not received much attention: the impact on future behavior of not fulfilling possibilities for social interaction even though their fulfillment is desirable within a given context. Inspired by Gibson's theory of affordances and Dewey's account of habits, these situations will be characterized as events where an agent does not act upon an inviting affordance for social interaction due to a conflict which he or she experiences between given concerns, needs, and social norms. This conflict leads to a sense of unfulfillment that may eventually bring about a crisis and revision of habits. Through specific examples, this work presents the potential impact of the connection between affordances, habits, and affectivity on everyday situations. It therefore represents an exploration of the common ground between pragmatism and enactivism and an attempt to contribute to a process-based approach to social interaction.

Keywords Affectivity · Affordance · Habit · Social interaction · Cognitive dynamics

Imagine an elderly woman who wishes to express her opinion at a town meeting on an issue relevant to her. She tries several times but each and every time she is misinterpreted, corrected, or directly ignored by other younger people present at the

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meeting. After a few tries, she gives up and stops trying. The possibility for social interaction will continue to be there for the duration of the meeting and, most likely, she will continue to experience it as inviting —she has not shared what she wanted to share, after all. Eventually, however, she might start perceiving this potential interaction as increasingly out of reach, almost unattainable. She might feel that other people are not taking her seriously, which will constrain her to quit trying further. Consequently, she will prefer to remain silent rather than risk being treated in an offensive and patronizing way again. Between the two options, she decides to keep her issues to herself and retain some dignity. The concern related to her dignity as an elderly woman becomes increasingly relevant as the situation unfolds and, at the end, it constrains her not to act. The emergence of feelings of frustration, anger, and disappointment is expected. After the experience at the town meeting, she may simply decide never to attend an event of this kind again, but she might also decide to create a network for people who feel that their voice is being ignored.

The intuition underlying this paper is that when an individual does not engage in an inviting social interaction because of a conflict between relevant concerns, as in the previous example, the result is a pervading sense of unfulfillment that may have a long-lasting impact on habits. In other words, if John Dewey argued that "whether we wish it or not, whether we are aware of it or not, every act effects a modification of attitude and directs future behavior" (2016: 184), I suggest that sometimes non-actions also direct future behavior. As I see it, an analysis of the processes involved in these events will certainly contribute to advancing our knowledge of the jointly evolving dynamics through which possibilities for action, intersubjectivity, and affectivity shape and are shaped in everyday situations.

My account will integrate two main lines of research: James Gibson's theory of affordances (1982; 2015) and John Dewey's account of habits (1896; 1922). The main novelty of this article is that I will focus on two aspects of such approaches that have received little attention: (a) the potential affective consequences of not acting upon an inviting affordance and (b) the crisis and revision of habits. I intend to combine these two strands by drawing on Roberts and Krueger's analysis of emotions about absent things (2021) to characterize unfulfillment as an emergent affective quality of certain experiences that bridges the gap between affordances and habits. More specifically, the hypothesis that I will explore in this paper is that not acting upon soliciting or relevant affordances for social interaction, due to the experience of conflicting concerns, has affective, behavioral, cognitive, or even epistemic consequences for an individual. On one hand, an affordance for social interaction that offers an action possibility experienced as both inviting and unfulfillable will have a progressive impact on the affective state[1] of the agent by constraining emergent emotions and potential actions (Bruineberg & Rietveld, 2014). On the other, the repeated experiencing of this unfulfillment could have lasting behavioral effects by causing a crisis of habits and a subsequent rechanneling of habits toward new ways of doing things (Dewey,

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[1] I follow Giovanna Colombetti's notion of affectivity as broader than emotions. Affectivity as "a *lack of indifference*, and rather a *sensibility* or *interest* form one's existence. […] In this broad sense, it is not necessary to be in a specific emotion or mood to be in an affective state; one is affected when something merely strikes one as meaningful, relevant, or salient" (Colombetti, 2014: 1–2; emphasis in the original).

1922; Dreon, 2022). Methodologically, I will bring together non-representational approaches to social interaction drawn from ecological psychology and pragmatism into an enactive framework (Gallagher, 2017; Hutto & Myin, 2013; Thompson, 2007; Varela et al., 1991) for intersubjective dynamics (Gallagher, 2020) that also takes the phenomenological research on related issues into account (Baggio, 2021).

In order to address all these issues, the paper will first discuss the viability of focusing on soliciting affordances that are not acted upon. I will then present some situations potentially leading to non-action on inviting affordances. In the second section, I will offer an analysis of the short-term affective consequences of not acting upon soliciting affordances. In the third section, I will examine the long-term impact of this behavior in shaping the processes through which the crisis and revision of habits take place according to pragmatism[2]. Finally, I will draw some general conclusions and suggest possible future applications of this approach.

1 On saying no to invitations

According to Gibson's classical definition, "the affordances of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill" (15: 119). In this paper, my focus will be on the role of affordances during human social interaction[3]. On this topic, Gibson stated that "what the other animal affords the observer is not only behavior but also social interaction. As one moves so does the other, the one sequence of action being suited to the other in a kind of behavioral loop. All social interaction is of this sort—sexual, maternal, competitive, cooperative—or it may be social grooming, play, and even human conversation" (15: 36). But what determines whether we experience these affordances as soliciting/inviting an action or not? Can we say no to this invitation? These are two interrelated questions that have yet to be fully resolved. Let me address them step by step.

1.1 On the experience of affordances for social interaction as soliciting

Withagen et al. (2012) argue that whether an affordance invites action or not depends on multiple factors. The paper presents a tentative list of four features that are likely to be relevant. The first feature is the agent's action capabilities: "if the actualization of an affordance requires great effort, it is not likely to invite the agent to act" (2012: 256). The second feature is the evolutionary perspective: "affordances that are crucial for survival and reproduction (e.g., objects or animals that afford danger, shelter, or nutrition) are likely to attract or repel the agent" (2012: 256). Third comes culture: "a chair, for example, is often perceive as an object to sit on. The fact that this affor-

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[2] See Dreon (2019) for a discussion of the contributions of Dewey's philosophy to certain enactivist issues, and some of the problems it poses.

[3] Since James Gibson coined the term and applied it to the field of ecological psychology, the notion has become widespread and is used in relation to several, very different theories across areas such as the cognitive sciences and the philosophy of mind (Chemero, 2009; Krueger & Colombetti, 2018; Heras-Escribano, 2019), but also others such as industrial design (Norman, 1988), architecture (Rietveld & Brouwers, 2017), and aesthetics (Brincker, 2015; Gallagher, 2011; Vara Sánchez, 2023).

dance stands-out is arguably a result of culture" (2012: 256). Fourth comes personal history: "members of the same culture are often attracted to different objects or are invited by the same object to do different things" (2012: 256). Arguably, depending on the type of affordance, some of these aspects will be more or less relevant. The question therefore would be: what are the particular dynamics by which affordances for social interaction are perceived as inviting or not?

It seems that the evolutionary perspective is not particularly relevant when it comes to perceiving an affordance for reciprocating behavior. Perceiving an action as relevant does not usually have consequences in terms of survival or reproduction. As regards action capabilities, physical impairment might certainly prevent one from engaging in social interaction or make it more difficult. However, the specific focus of this paper is on situations in which individuals experience narratively relevant social interaction as possible and *then* conflicting concerns strongly constrain them to not act. In my view, in this scenario, action capabilities are not particularly relevant either, since they already shape what an agent experiences as possible and narratively meaningful. This leaves us with culture and personal history as the two potentially most significant aspects. It seems uncontroversial to affirm that cultural aspects often influence our willingness to engage in an interaction with others, and our personal history can certainly influence whether we perceive others' behavior as inviting or not with respect to a given action. However, I think that we could be a little more precise on this point.

One relevant factor for social interactions lies not so much in the cultural aspects related to the affordance, as in the culturally embedded social norms at work during the engagement. Indeed, it has been suggested that most, if not all, affordances for social interaction are constrained by social norms (Heft, 2001, 2007; Reed, 1993). For example, we do not greet everyone in the same way. Moreover, we will greet the same person in different ways depending on the context, place, and people surrounding us. The reason for this is that we do not live in a sociocultural vacuum[4], but within the meshed layers of shared and contrasting practices woven by the different communities and forms of life to which we belong, to which we aspire, or which we confront[5]. Researchers speak of the role of social norms in predisposing us toward perceiving and acting upon specific affordances but, as Manuel Heras-Escribano argues, "sometimes our norms exert some pressure for not taking certain affordances given social conventions" (2019: 175).

Instead of referring to the agent's personal history, some researchers have resorted to the notions of needs and concerns. For example, Harry Heft has argued that perceived affordances depend on our present objectives and needs: "[a] lighted candle not only affords pain, if you touch its flame, but more positively it also affords illuminating a dark place as well as heating a liquid such as water. Which of these latter two dispositional qualities is realized *in experience* depends on the individual's

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[4] See Laura Candiotto's view on the socially extended mind and her "not possible without principle" (2023).

[5] In the words of Miguel Segundo-Ortín and Glenda Satne: "Social norms thus play a fundamental role both in creating and in shaping our interaction with some affordances. These social norms are seldom verbalized, but they are manifested as embodied habits of perception-action that predispose us to perceive and take advantages of certain affordances instead of others and in particular situations" (2022: 95).

behavioral goals or intentions at a particular time (1989: 16; emphasis in the original). More recently, de Haan, Rietveld, Stokhof, and Denys have suggested that "[i]n any situation there are always multiple possibilities for action, comprising a field of affordances. Depending on what is out there and what your needs and concerns are, some of these affordances will be more inviting to you than others" (2015: 18). In the same vein, Rietveld and Kiverstein argue that "[s]ome affordances the environment offers will be irrelevant to the agent because they have no bearing on the individual's concerns at the time" (2014: 341).

Roy Dings (2018, 2021) has more thoroughly argued that concerns play a role in determining whether an affordance solicits an action. The starting point for Dings is the fact that "an affordance is a *possibility for action* which *solicits action* (i.e. calls me to act) only when I am *responsive* to act" (2018: 687; emphasis in the original). Through the notion of responsiveness, Dings intends to overcome any potential dualistic issue. According to him, concerns, are not private mental affairs, but relational dispositions between agent and environment that take the form of bodily responsiveness: "being concerned with X *coincides* with being in a state where one is responsive to X. Being responsive (i.e. being concerned) thus entails that the environment guides me through my actions by soliciting those actions" (2018: 686; emphasis in the original). Solicitation and responsiveness are intertwined from a phenomenological perspective, which means that we experience an affordance as soliciting through our own responsiveness to it. They are not independent phases of a process, but interconnected layers of the experience. Laura Candiotto has specifically focused on the affective dimensions of concerns. She argues that "the socially extended mind is necessitated by existential needs and concerns that drive our epistemic activities" (2023: 919). Candiotto makes a distinction between needs and concerns: "Existential necessity is expressed in affective concerns about what really matters to me" (2023: 924). She also emphasizes that the interpersonal —or social—dimension of needs and concerns, which becomes inescapable when the focus is placed on affectivity, should not be understood in individualistic terms.

Although there might be other aspects involved, it seems important to focus on the role that social norms, needs, and concerns play in shaping how we come to perceive certain affordances for social interaction as inviting and on how their interaction affects the possibility for us to act upon these affordances or not.

1.2 On the experience of not acting

Most frequently, we do not decide to act upon affordances. We merely engage with their invitations through pre-reflective dynamics: "[i]n backing away from the 'close talker', in stepping skillfully over the obstacle, in reaching 'automatically' for the proffered handshake, we find ourselves acting in definite ways without ever having decided to do so. In responding to the environment this way we feel ourselves giving in to its demands" (Dreyfus & Kelly, 2007: 52). Something similar happens even in certain instances of complex social interaction. Imagine a conversation among a group of friends where one of them makes a joke that another considers to be outrageous and unacceptable. Immediately, the latter will feel a burning desire to rebuke the former, not only through a verbal response, but through a whole set of gestures

and actions: shaking the head, maybe even rolling the eyes, and filling the voice with disdain while trying to verbalize this contempt as sharply and succinctly as possible. In this case, a specific behavior strongly invites an appropriate form of reciprocation from a particular individual; however, there are many situations in our daily life where we do not act upon affordances even if we experience them as inviting. And this has consequences.

Withagen, de Poel, Araújo, and Pepping claim that the invitations brought to us by affordances "are not causes. An invitation can always be declined" (2012: 257). Van Dijk and Rietveld (2018) have emphasized the nested nature of affordances over large timescales, which would imply that an agent's long-term goals shape how he or she experiences present affordances. For example, say you are strongly committed to eliminating, or at least reducing, your alcohol intake due to health issues: if you are offered a glass of wine during dinner at your parents' house, you will continue to perceive it as drinkable but, depending on your level of commitment to your distant aims, you will be more or less likely to resist the inviting character or this particular affordance, or even to stop experiencing it at all[6]. It follows from these theories that the long-term or distant goals that we set ourselves, or that we talk ourselves into, have an impact on our experience of certain present affordances. What I will contend in this section is that experiencing conflicting concerns is another situation with the capacity to lead us, or even force us, not to act on present soliciting affordances.

Let us return to the example of the conversation, but assuming this time that it takes place between work colleagues and their boss and that it is the latter who behaves in an extremely inappropriate way. If one of the coworkers is a champion of virtue, she will immediately and unreflectively embrace the 'fighting' option and rebuke her boss without any thought of the consequences. If another one is a cynic without strong moral values, he will let the remark go and maybe even laugh at it. But there is another possibility I wish to explore: one of the coworkers might feel the need to express rejection of the boss' behavior while simultaneously fearing the possible consequences of this action, leading to a non-overt reaction. In this case, we have an affordance soliciting a form of social interaction (namely, confronting what is perceived as outrageous behavior), yet no immediate reaction occurs. What is specific to this situation? It should be explainable in terms of how the solicitation was experienced, that is by looking into the dynamics between social norms, needs, and concerns.

Dings (2018) argues that due to certain characteristics of concerns, we experience affordances as having three significant features. The first is valence, which indicates whether an affordance is pleasant or unpleasant (if we adopt an experiential view of affordances), or whether it solicits approaching or avoidance (if we adopt a more behavioral approach). The second feature of affordances is force. Dings here draws upon Koffka (1935)'s Gestaltist work to contend that some affordances have a demanding character while others are merely inviting. He apparently sees these

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[6] See Brancazio and Segundo-Ortín (2020) for a complementary account that emphasizes the regulatory role of self-directed speech in attuning ourselves to distal intentions and making some affordances more salient and thereby influencing the information we are looking for in the environment during a present engagement.

two qualities as the two poles of a gradient; accordingly, the 'demand-or-invitational' strength with which an affordance solicits an action "likely depends on the 'importance' of the relevant concern. 'Survival' or 'avoiding pain' are undoubtedly examples of important concerns" (2018: 690). The third feature is the mineness of an affordance, which refers to "the extent to which an affordance is experienced as being close to 'who I am' or, more precisely, 'who I take myself to be'" (2018: 691). This characteristic is particularly significant, for it entails that the concerns and needs involved in how we experience the solicitation of an affordance can be regarded as temporally extended[7]. As we have just seen, our future goals, but also our past experiences and the stories we weave about ourselves, will shape our present experience of an affordance. I think there is nothing controversial in suggesting that these three categories can also be applied to social norms. It is possible to argue that not only the concerns and needs, but also the social norms at work in a given situation will shape the valence, strength, and mineness with which we perceive certain affordances.

Accordingly, if we apply Dings's categories to the example of the boss's behavior, it could be argued that, compared to the same situation taking place between friends, a particular affordance of the social interaction—confronting the person's conduct—offers a weaker invitation to some of the agents, who are able to decide what to do. Maybe some already existing concerns related to losing one's job or being disliked by one's coworkers undermine the strength of the invitation, making its solicitation less pressing and less demanding. But I do not think that this is the case. If we perceive something as not particularly inviting, we do not feel strongly constrained to engage with it, and there are no significant consequences when we turn our attention to another aspect of the environment. Yet we know that doing nothing in the face of unfair behavior can make us feel guilty and can even ruin our day, if the matter continues to spin around in our head the whole evening.

As I see it, in this particular situation the individual ends up not acting upon the affordance for social interaction, not because of the weakening of this affordance, but due to the experiencing of conflicting affective concerns, connected to needs and social norms, that counterbalance each other. Regarding the talk between work colleagues and their boss, we can argue that from the start there are different narrative and social concerns at work, shaping the way in which the participants pre-reflectively engage with the different affordances for social interaction. But when the outrageous behavior takes place, the scenario changes. Among all the various behavioral possibilities, the one most relevant for this paper is the scenario in which an agent experiences as simultaneously inviting the possibility of 'fighting' her boss' behavior due to her own personal beliefs *and* the possibility of 'fleeing' from the confrontation for fear of the potential outcome. I would suggest that a clash of this sort will bring to a halt the decision as to what to do as long as the concerns involved pull in opposing

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[7] I am aware that this claim could be regarded as controversial, considering the long history of the debate about personal identity and narrative self. Addressing this topic in detail exceeds the scope of this paper; however, this point of view is also shared by other researchers such as Slors and Jongepier, who contend that "the mineness of experiences may be accounted for in terms of their holistically fitting into a *background* of earlier and co-temporal experiences, thoughts, memories, proprioceptions, interoceptions, etc." (Slors & Jongepier, 2014: 201). See also Vara Sánchez (2022) for an analysis of the role of mineness in the unfolding of aesthetically relevant experiences.

directions with sufficient strength. To put it in Dings's terms, this will occur if given concerns are experienced as having opposite valences but similar levels of strength and mineness. Therefore, the choice as to whether to give in to the soliciting affordance or not becomes reflectively available; however, it seems unlikely that the two possibilities remain equally likely. For instance, in the context of a rapidly changing conversation among different people, it would be rather awkward for someone to reprehend another person for something that was said several minutes earlier in the conversation. A moment of doubt due to an underlying conflict between concerns, needs, and social norms can quickly become an insurmountable obstacle. To sum up, there are situations where an agent experiences conflicting affordances for social interaction and, as a result, the immediate reaction is halted, reflective access to different outcomes of the situation is, to a certain degree, possible, and not acting upon an inviting affordance becomes a possible way out.

Before moving on, I would like to point out one fact: in this and other similar situations, the decision not to act on an inviting affordance is often both passive and active —or, rather, it transcends this dichotomous distinction. It certainly has a passive component, for the whole event is triggered by a disruption coming from the environment which constrains the ongoing social interactions by directing them toward certain courses of action. Yet, should the agent end up acting against significant personal needs and concerns, she will most likely experience having to actively refrain from enacting what would be the right behavior for her: she will feel that she must bite her lip and refrain from doing something that she might eventually regret. I am aware that this discussion could be developed further and could potentially lead to interesting conclusions. For the goals of this paper, however, it makes no difference whether we are forced not to act upon an inviting affordance or personally decide to avoid engaging with an inviting affordance for fear of some consequence. What I am interested in is the possibility of not engaging with an affordance inviting social interaction and the consequences of this behavior.

2 The short-term affective consequences of turning down an invitation

Roberts and Krueger have argued that "some emotions are essentially about what is missing, out of reach, or nonoccurring" (2021: 186). They mention grief, yearning, homesickness, unrequited love, and nostalgia as examples, for in all of them there is a painful awareness of something absent —an object, a person, or a feature of experience. More recently, Roberts and Osler (2024) have offered an account of 'social doubt' that expands this approach. Building on Carel's account of bodily doubt (2013), they argue that someone experiences social doubt when the certainty of the continuity, transparency, and faith that usually underlie our social world breaks down[8]. These situations can eventually become sedimented and lead to a loss of

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[8] Carel draws on phenomenological and enactive philosophers to argue that bodily doubt not only changes the content of experience, but also "destroys the normal experience of continuity, transparency, and trust that characterizes this structure" (2013: 97). Continuity is disrupted and replaced by an altered awareness

relevant social affordances, an event they describe as "a move from *an experience of absent or disrupted possibilities* to *an absence of experienced possibilities*" (Roberts & Osler, 2024: 60; emphasis in the original). Similarly, Fuchs (2018) has conceptualized the specific emotion of grief as a progressive adjustment to a conflict between presence and absence, denial and acknowledgment. The experience of grief would entail a particular mode of 'as-if' intentionality which holds both dimensions simultaneously: "the negation of the illusory presence of the deceased as well the affirmation of his symbolic presence" (2018: 60). To return to Roberts and Krueger, they make the general claim that these emotions about something missing only become emotionally salient when two circumstances concur: "a pro-attitude towards some absent thing or quality, such as a desire for it" and "a complex awareness that the absent thing […] cannot easily be achieved, generated, or brought about" (2021: 187). When we undergo a multi-layered experience, we actively crave something that is not readily available even if we know it will most likely remain so; unattainable circularity lies at the root of some negative affective consequences of these emotions. In the particular case of loneliness, which is the focus of their paper, only the simultaneous experiences of a desire for interpersonal contact and the feeling that it cannot be meaningfully achieved will lead to the emergence of loneliness as a distressing emotion (2021: 198).

I believe these theories can be applied to a discussion of the short-term consequences of the situations that I am exploring in this paper—that is, those where we do not act on inviting affordances for social interaction due to an experienced conflict between relevant concerns. These episodes could be regarded as instances of social doubt where our desired flow of action is disrupted due to a loss of continuity and transparency; more precisely, it becomes affectively salient when there is a sustained desire for a social interaction that we have not acted upon as we wanted to (or at all) and an awareness of the existence of conflicting concerns, needs, and social norms that make it very difficult for us to fulfill our desire.

Ayala (2016) claims that members of socially disadvantaged groups could experience possibilities for social interaction in a different way, for they might perceive their words or actions as having less impact and soliciting less reciprocity from members of the more dominant social groups with whom they are trying to interact. Returning to the example of the elderly woman at a town meeting with which I began this paper, I believe that she will continue to perceive the affordance for social interaction for the duration of the meeting and, most likely, she will continue to experience it as inviting. However, if the way she is being treated by other younger participants—the source of the loss of continuity resulting in social doubt—increasingly prevented her from acting, the situation would fulfill Roberts and Krueger's two requisites for being a source of emotional distress: a sustained desire for a form of social interaction that has not been carried out successfully and the awareness that it will be very

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of the relation between self and environment. Critically, "[e]veryday habits become the object of explicit attention and conscious effort" (Carel, 2013: 97). In the case of loss of transparency, this means that "the body's taken-for-granted capacities become explicit achievements" (Carel, 2013: 99). Regarding the loss of faith, it implies "a disruption of one's sense of belonging to the world and the disappearance of the sense of ordinariness" that "reveals the contingency and fallibility of our normal trust in our bodies" (Carel, 2013: 101).

difficult, or even impossible, to achieve this goal. In Ayala's terms, this amounts to saying that there is a lack of reciprocity. The woman perceives the affordance for social interaction to express her opinions to other people but she gradually becomes aware that others do not perceive interacting with her as inviting. This would result in feelings of frustration, anger, and disappointment. In the example of the worker who, against her own personal values, remains silent when her boss behaves in an extremely inappropriate way, these two circumstances are also met. There is a need to publicly express the disagreement that is hindered by the acknowledgment of the potential negative consequences of this behavior for her job position. In this case, the negative feelings can take the form of indignation, discomfort, or even self-guilt, as this person does not dare to face her supervisor. Despite specific differences, I wish to suggest that these and other related situations often present the same affective quality: unfulfillment.

The notion of unfulfillment and the impact on the subject of unfulfilled wishes or hopes is a topic with a long tradition in the fields of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis. Betz argued that hopelessness is a mental distress "often derived from unfulfillable, rather than merely unfulfilled, desires and wishes focused on impossible aims" (1968: 396). Grayson focused on the similarity between grief reactions when real objects are lost and those situations where there is an intangible loss of ideals and expectations, considering that in both cases "the patient has to come to the point that he can give up the wish and expectation that what was missed can ever be fulfilled" (Grayson, 1970: 291). Much more recently, from an enactive perspective, other researchers have also drawn on this idea. Focusing on a specific type of loneliness related to networked life, i.e., 'extended loneliness', Candiotto characterizes unfulfillment as "a strong desire for something difficult to obtain" (2022: 7). She believes that this type of loneliness does not imply a lack of connection, but that it "can arise in the presence of people whose company is considered unfulfilling" (2022: 5). About this capacity of the absent to have an affective impact, Fuchs argues that "it is the absent, the empty or unfulfilled that exerts a pull on the implicit bodily readiness to fill it" (2022).

As I see it, these characterizations point to a feature of unfulfillment that I want to emphasize: it becomes affectively salient not when we experience something as missing, but when we are in the process of losing it. Unfulfillment already becomes relevant when we are experiencing a pull toward a very specific social interaction and we are simultaneously aware of the growing difficulty of giving in to this desire. That is, unfulfillment can be regarded as an affective dynamic that progressively permeates general experience when there is a growing tension between want and can. Following Betz's suggestion, unfulfillment would become a source of affective distress not when we realize a given social interaction has been unfulfilled, but when we experience it as hardly fulfillable or unfulfillable. And this ongoing tension shapes the experience in which it takes place. According to De Haan et al.'s enactive approach to affordances, "[t]o the extent that either our concerns or the environment change, the field of relevant affordances changes too" (2013: 8). Building on their theoretical framework and on Roberts and Krueger's two requisites for emotions about missing things, I suggest that the progressive emergence of unfulfillment means that the non-acted affordance for social interaction becomes increasingly salient as the event

goes on, while simultaneously it moves out of reach and thus becomes unachievable. It is experienced by individuals as a cumulative reminder that current circumstances have heavily constrained them to renounce engaging with an affordance that strongly affects their individual narrative and that, owing to this inaction, the event is unfolding in a way that goes against some relevant concerns of theirs. Unfulfillment, therefore, is an affective dynamic that continues to grow and gain relevance for as long as the situation where the absent or unsuccessful social interaction that should have occurred endures, or the agents continue to be aware of the consequences of their inaction. This means that the feeling of unfulfillment will not necessarily emerge immediately but, once it has become affectively salient, it will most likely not disappear suddenly either. As I mentioned before, deciding not to do something when witnessing unfair behavior may leave a stain of guilt that will take time to fade away, depending on how close to your beliefs the event resonates. Similarly, being repeatedly treated in a disrespectful manner by others will not only discourage you from interacting with these particular people, but might even affect the way you see yourself. In other words, unfulfillment denotes the quality of an experience where we are aware of being at odds with the environment, which, if sustained, might eventually bring about substantial changes in the way we experience and react to similar situations in the future —that is, in our habits.

Of course, this does not mean that the consequences of undergoing an experience of unfulfillment are always bad. The key aspect is that when we have an experience of unfulfillment, we feel that we are out of depth, that for this particular situation we cannot rely on our habitual behavior. This is what I sought to convey through the expression 'being at odds with the environment'. John Dewey used these words to denote situations in which individuals feel that the forces of the environment are denying them the possibility to carry out their habits (1922: 55). Drawing upon Dewey's pragmatist view on habits and the recent work in this field, in the next section I will contend that this sense of unfulfillment may come into play when agents experience a crisis of habits and become aware of hitherto unreflective transactions between them and their environment.

3 The crisis and reconstruction of unfulfilled habits

While some key ideas can already be found in his 1896 paper on the Reflex Arc, Dewey's fully-fledged theory of habits is developed in Human Nature and Conduct (1922). In this book, he characterizes habits as: "that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired, which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued subordinate form even when not obviously dominating activity" (1922: 40–41). Compared to other approaches to habits developed by his fellow pragmatists[9], Dewey regards habits "not as elements, things, or specified processes", but as

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[9] See Caruana and Testa (2021) for a compilation of recent re-readings of pragmatist habits from different perspectives.

"ways for experience to be organized" (Steiner, 2021: 227). Dewey emphasizes the social and transactional nature of habits and presents them as functions "requiring the cooperation of organism and environment" (1922: 14). Most times these exchanges take place more or less smoothly at a pre-reflective level[10]: impulses coming from the ever-changing environment are sublimated into existing habits, renewing and reorienting them. However, on some occasions these impulses are not incorporated into the unfolding course of action and end up disrupting ongoing transactions between organisms and their environment. In this case, old habits are no longer useful for the situation and individuals feel detached from their surroundings. They no longer experience themselves as connected to their environment, but as someone who is at odds with it. They realize that something cannot be done, thought or felt as it used to. This is a habit crisis.

Habit crises are experienced as a breach in our ways of feeling, acting, or thinking; however, as Dewey clearly explains, this is not necessarily a bad thing. Rather, a habit crisis "gives an opportunity to do old things in new ways, and thus to construct new ends and means" (1922: 170). Habit crises give us the chance to think of, imagine, and reflect on aspects that normally flow seamlessly below our conscious awareness. According to Dewey, if this conscious reflection results in habits that are "more sensitively percipient, more informed with foresight, more aware of what they are about, more direct and sincere, more flexibly responsive than those now current" (1922: 128), we have come to embody more intelligent habits. These are the opposite of what Dewey calls unintelligent or routine habits, that is, habits that try to replicate the same behavior, and prevent us from evolving along with the evolving environment (1922: 103). Therefore, we should aim to turn habits into more intelligent versions of themselves, for this means bringing previously disconnected environmental impulses and elements into harmony, thereby enriching our possibilities to adapt to new situations[11].

However, Matteo Santarelli maintains that "the pattern 'pre-reflective habits; rupture; intelligence; reconstruction' seems blind to the hiccups and impediments that characterize our social lives" (2020: 286). He argues that we need to account for those situations where, after reflection, we repeat old mistakes, as if our old habits were resisting our attempts to reframe them in a more intelligent way. I agree with Santarelli. I would just add that we must also take into consideration other situations, such as the crises that lead to a reconstruction of habits aimed at avoiding sources of affective distress, such as those possibilities for social interaction that we did not engage with despite their narrative relevance because we were prevented from doing so or had conflicting concerns.

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[10] For a discussion of the pre-reflective, pre-conscious, and unconscious aspects of habits in Dewey and in pragmatism.more generally, see Santarelli (2020).

[11] It is important to note that this distinction is not always helpful. According to what temporal horizon should we judge whether a habit rebuilding process has been intelligent or unintelligent? In certain cases, there is an initial impoverishment of the possibilities of interaction between an agent and the environment that, in the long term, allows for richer habits of behavior. On other occasions, concerns about physical or psychological distress encourage us to renounce a certain behavior. Is this an unintelligent reconstruction of habits? It is necessary to develop a more nuanced terminology that leaves behind this dualistic distinction.

Imagine a kid that likes to have fun in the playground with his classmates during recess. Depending on the aspect of the situation we want to emphasize, we would argue that he participates in the social habit of playing at school or that he perceives the social affordance to play with other kids during breaks as strongly inviting and full of mineness. Now, let us suppose that this kid starts getting abused in the school yard by a group of bullies from another grade. The first few times, he might just try to avoid them; however, as the episodes of bullying at the playground become more frequent, he might eventually start making excuses with his classmates in order to remain in the safe space of the classroom during breaks. This change in the boy's behavior, I suggest, is not due to the fact that he has stopped perceiving the affordance to play with the other kids as inviting. I would argue that is not due to his experiencing this social interaction as less soliciting either. On the contrary, the boy needs play time more than ever. What has happened is that a concern opposed to this desire to play and have fun with some of his classmates is becoming stronger with every instance of bullying, and this is a particularly relevant concern, for it involves his mental and physical well-being. As a result, the kid may start experience a growing sense of anxiety about the idea of going to the playground and being bullied again. Each time he decides to remain in class during breaks, the sense of unfulfillment concerning this particular affordance will grow. If the episodes continue to occur, it is most likely that the kid will stop going to the playground altogether. In this situation, a change in the environment —being abused by some bullies— has led to a crisis of habits —his no longer feeling at ease in the playground— and a rebuilding of habits —his decision to spend breaks in class. However, this and other similar processes involving the crisis and reconstruction of habits do not occur in affective vacuum.

Building on Dewey's insights, Candiotto and Dreon (2021) have developed a view that accounts for the reciprocal scaffolding between affectivity and habits. They adopt a definition of habits as the "more or less flexible channeling of both organic energies and environmental resources" (Dreon, 2022: 94). With regard to habit crises, they argue that "a crisis in habitual transactions with one's own environment and social group for the most part gives rise to an emotion that, on the one hand, manifests the habit crisis, and on the other elicits a revision of the habit itself" (2021: 11). In other words, a habit crisis is an affectively relevant process, for it entails a temporary falling out of step with our surroundings that produces an emotion which, from the moment it starts to take form, shapes how we perceive the situation and, therefore, constrains the conscious reflection that eventually takes place during the rebuilding of habits. As Candiotto and Dreon contend, "the moment of crisis and the phase of reconstruction are charged with affective value given that the transactions at stake are not merely contemplative, but have an impact —be it big or small— on the life of the organism" (2021: 11).

In the specific case that I am discussing in this paper, the short-term affective impact which arises when we decide or are constrained to turn down a soliciting affordance for social interaction—the emergence of a sense of unfulfillment—would be the result of some impulses not following their normal or desirable functioning" (Dewey, 1922: 156), that is: of their being suppressed rather than sublimated. This, in turn, would be due to the fact that the agent cannot or chooses not to enact the habit into which the impulse is intended to flow. If the situation behind this growing

sense of unfulfillment lasts long enough, or if it repeats itself enough times to become entrenched, the level of unfulfillment could reach a threshold that triggers a crisis of habits and a subsequent attempt to reconstruct the habits involved.

Crucially, the whole process of reflective assessment of the situation and the ensuing rebuilding will be constrained by this quality of unfulfillment that pervades the experience. Therefore, one of the many possible outcomes is that the individual will rechannel meaningful habits intuitively in order to avoid what they experience as a source of affective distress, namely the inviting possibility of social interaction they did not properly engage with or were forced to forego: playing with other kids at the playground, presenting an opinion to others at a town meeting, or reprehending a superior. Accordingly, the results of these reflective assessments that take place during habit crises and the reconstruction of habits could lead to decisions such as remaining in the classroom during breaks, not asking others for help, or not attending social events with the ill-mannered boss. In the long term, any of these situations could result in different habits that, following Dewey's terminology and for lack of a better word, could be considered as more or less intelligent. For example, the woman who renounces to participate in town meetings can either limit herself to doing things on her own or decide to look for other elderly people who find themselves in similar circumstances to create an association defending their rights.

The relevant thing is that, in all these cases, the affective quality which derives from not engaging with an inviting affordance for social interaction has a specific impact on the process of habit revision triggered by the impossibility of incorporating new impulses into old patterns of behavior. As a result, returning to Dewey's initial statement about the fact that every action effects a modification of attitude and directs future behavior, being prevented or refraining from carrying out a particular social interaction may also have a meaningful impact on our bundle of habits, thereby shaping our future behavior.

4 Concluding remarks and future direction

In this paper, I have focused on a set of interconnected cognitive processes by which affordances for social interaction that are not acted upon can impact habits through affectively charged dynamics. I have identified three relevant milestones: (1) the possibility of not acting upon inviting affordances for social interaction because a conflict is experienced between relevant concerns and social norms; (2) the emergence of a distressful sense of unfulfillment deriving from the enduring circumstance of not being able to engage in a form of social interaction that we simultaneously experience as desirable and as extremely difficult or impossible to achieve; (3) the impact of this emotionally salient quality of unfulfillment during the crisis and reconstruction of habits, whereby the agent is constrained to avoid the source of distress, that is, the affordance for social interaction that he or she could not or decided not to engage with. My conclusion is that an individual who successively undergoes these three situations will end up having certain habits shaped by the affective consequences deriving from the fact of either being prevented or refraining from interacting with an inviting affordance for social interaction.

As I have tried to convey through some examples, I believe that each of these processes and the three of them together are relevant in daily life situations and that, in the future, this conceptual framework might allow us to further our understanding of other relevant social phenomena such as bullying. However, in this paper, I have limited myself to studying the experience of an individual who undergoes a disturbance coming from the environment that affects his intentions, needs, and desires in terms of social interactions. This approach should be complemented with an analysis that takes into account the dynamics on the side of those who cause the events by blocking the affordances. Additionally, there is plenty of room to develop more fine-grained discussions about the specific dynamics that occur between unfulfillment and more active affects, such as desire, during habit crises and revision. Moreover, the social consequences of experiencing certain affordances as ones that cannot be acted upon can be explored, not only in terms of the relation between individuals, but between different social groups or individuals and institutions. This would further make it possible to apply the ideas I have presented in this paper to other disciplines studying human behavior, such as anthropology, sociology, and politics. Another issue that, as already pointed out, needs to be addressed in greater detail is Dewey's distinction between intelligent and unintelligent habits. We certainly need a new and more accurate taxonomy.

Nonetheless, I think that the conclusions reached in this paper can be useful in themselves. It would certainly be ideal to be able to prevent any case of bullying, mobbing, or any other form of social abuse and marginalization from happening; sadly, however, this is impossible. Therefore, we need to continue developing and refining protocols designed to identify and prevent such situations. While much more work is needed in this regard, I believe that some of the results presented in this paper could be helpful.

Conceptually, the hypothesis that I have explored in these pages constitutes an attempt to further develop some of the existing connections between enactivism, other non-representational approaches to cognition such as ecological psychology, and pragmatism. Specifically, I have focused on connecting two understudied aspects within the vast literature devoted to affordances and habits: on one hand, what happens when we experience an affordance as inviting but have yet to act upon it; on the other, the situated and embodied processes that shape our experience of the crisis and reconstruction of habits. From my point of view, despite the inevitable conceptual tensions, the study of the connections between affordances and habits is a field full of promise. As I see it, these two concepts complement each other. Habits risk being blind without affordances; affordances risk being clumsy without habits.

Author contributions I confirm the sole responsibility for conception and manuscript preparation.

Data availability Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethical approval The manuscript has not be submitted to other journals for simultaneous consideration. The submitted work is original and have not been published elsewhere in any form or language (partially or in full). No data, text, or theories by others has been presented as if they were my own ('plagiarism'). Proper acknowledgements to other works has be given, quotation marks are used for verbatim copying of material, and permissions secured for material that is copyrighted.

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