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The Invisible Underclass: Interpersonal Neglect of Low-Status Individuals and Its Theoretical Explanations

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Abstract

Interpersonal neglect refers to a phenomenon in interpersonal interactions where the subject intentionally or unintentionally turns a blind eye to the interaction partner, manifesting as a lack of or minimal investment in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions; it is essentially a form of implicit interpersonal devaluation and exclusion. Interpersonal neglect bears significant relationships with social hierarchy, wherein individuals of lower social status are more vulnerable to interpersonal neglect; sociocultural mechanisms, status hypothesis, goal affordance control theory, and intersectional invisibility theory can serve as important theoretical perspectives for explaining this phenomenon. Future research should further refine the conceptual definition and measurement of interpersonal neglect, deepen theoretical investigations into interpersonal neglect experienced by lower-status individuals, explore the interactive effects of both interaction partners' social status in interpersonal neglect, address and intervene in the negative consequences resulting from interpersonal neglect, and examine potential unique effects of interpersonal neglect within the Chinese sociocultural context.

Full Text

The Invisible Disadvantaged: A Review and Theoretical Explanation of Interpersonal Invisibility Towards Low Social Hierarchy Groups

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Abstract: Interpersonal invisibility refers to the intentional or unintentional

disregard of individuals in social interactions, manifesting as cognitive, emotional, and behavioral disengagement or reduced engagement. Essentially, it represents an implicit form of interpersonal devaluation and exclusion.

Interpersonal invisibility is closely linked to social hierarchy, with individuals of lower social hierarchy being more susceptible to experiencing it. Theoretical frameworks such as sociocultural mechanisms, the status hypothesis, affordance-management theory, and intersectional invisibility theory serve as crucial perspectives for explaining this phenomenon. Future research should further refine the conceptualization and measurement of interpersonal invisibility, deepen theoretical investigations into its effects on individuals of lower social hierarchy, explore the interaction between the social hierarchy of both interactants, address and mitigate the negative consequences of interpersonal invisibility, and examine its unique effects within the context of Chinese culture.

Keywords: interpersonal invisibility, social hierarchy, theoretical explanations, social interaction

1 Introduction

“Please understand, others cannot see me simply because they are unwilling to see me.” —*Invisible Man* (Ellison, 2016)

In social interactions, even when someone is fully within our visual field, we may completely fail to notice their presence or afford them minimal interpersonal attention. For instance, at an extravagant gala, we might become engrossed in interactions with celebrities or social elites while treating service staff with an attitude of near “transparency.” Even when these service personnel are neatly dressed and standing in prominent positions, we rarely notice them or give them much attention. This phenomenon reflects a pervasive bias in interpersonal attention during social interactions: we tend to selectively focus on certain individuals while displaying interpersonal invisibility toward others. Notably, this interpersonal attention is closely tied to the social hierarchy information of the target—compared to those of advantaged social hierarchy, we exhibit marked interpersonal invisibility toward those of disadvantaged social hierarchy (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2014).

Interpersonal invisibility is considered a covert form of prejudice and stigmatization. Unlike explicit negative attention toward specific targets, it essentially reflects individuals’ implicit devaluation and exclusion of particular others in social interactions (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2014). Because this interpersonal “turning a blind eye” is easily detected and experienced by the targets (primarily low-hierarchy individuals or disadvantaged groups) and may produce negative psychological, behavioral, and social consequences for them (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019)—such as causing their rights and interests to be overlooked—scholars urgently need to conduct detailed and

in-depth examinations of interpersonal invisibility. Accordingly, this paper summarizes and delineates the concept of interpersonal invisibility, systematically reviews and integrates relevant research evidence and underlying theoretical mechanisms concerning interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals, aiming to provide psychological insights for understanding interpersonal attention and its social significance in social interactions.

2.1 Origins and Connotation of Interpersonal Invisibility

The concept of interpersonal invisibility originated from organizational research on “invisible work” performed by specific occupational groups. Specifically, “invisible work” refers to labor that is culturally and economically devalued, such as women’s domestic labor and physically, socially, or morally undesirable jobs with low social recognition (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Daniels, 1987). This “invisible work” essentially reflects that certain occupational groups are not adequately valued or recognized in terms of professional authority, potential, and achievement (Hatton, 2017; Smith et al., 2019). Later, scholars extended this concept to describe workplace neglect—interpersonal invisibility. That is, during work, specific occupational groups are intentionally or unintentionally treated as “invisible” by others, including receiving little interpersonal attention, being isolated, and lacking meaningful emotional exchange and behavioral interaction (Howard et al., 2020; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). Even when such devaluation and exclusion are covert, they are readily perceived and experienced by these workers. For example, community security guards often experience being rarely noticed by others or lacking emotional connection with them in their work.

In recent years, scholars have begun to measure and operationally define interpersonal invisibility from a social cognition perspective. For instance, Brown-Iannuzzi et al. (2014) employed an inattentive blindness paradigm to examine whether unexpected yet fully visible irrelevant stimuli were ignored. In this study, participants watched a ball-passing video and counted passes made by a specific team. During the video, a conspicuous but task-irrelevant stimulus (e.g., a Black or White male) walked across the scene. After viewing, participants reported the pass count and whether they noticed a man crossing the scene. Using attention capture as an indicator, the study defined interpersonal invisibility as individuals’ difficulty detecting specific targets (i.e., Black males)—that is, inattentive blindness. Gobel et al. (2015) used eye-tracking technology to observe and compare participants’ visual attention toward targets with high versus low social hierarchy information. Using visual fixation time as an indicator, they argued that interpersonal invisibility manifests as a lack of interest in specific interaction partners, reflected by reduced allocation of cognitive resources and attention.

Ratcliff et al. (2011) adopted the standard old/new recognition paradigm used in face memory research, which includes learning, interference, and recognition phases. In the learning phase, participants memorized faces conveying high

or low social status information. After memorization, they completed unrelated tasks during the interference phase. Finally, they were presented with previously seen (old) faces and new faces, requiring old/new recognition judgments. Using face memory as an indicator, the study argued that interpersonal invisibility is manifested as a memory disadvantage for specific interaction partners—less accurate identification and recall of their faces. Neel and Lassetter (2019) proposed that interpersonal invisibility extends beyond social cognition to social emotion and behavior, such as emotional and behavioral indifference toward interaction partners. In summary, defining interpersonal invisibility requires three main characteristics: (1) it occurs in interpersonal interaction contexts; (2) it represents a state of low or reduced investment by the actor toward the target in cognition, emotion, and behavior; and (3) it can be intentional or unintentional on the actor's part, is easily detected and experienced by the target, and is essentially an implicit form of interpersonal devaluation and exclusion.

It is worth noting that related concepts exist in psychology, such as child neglect (a type of child abuse; Mennen et al., 2010) and ignoring-type ostracism (a type of social exclusion; Molden et al., 2009). These concepts share connections yet have distinctions. They all represent implicit, indirect exclusion—actors do not directly engage in explicit rejection, exclusion, or isolation but reduce cognitive, behavioral, or emotional investment to exclude individuals or groups. However, they differ fundamentally in core connotation. Interpersonal invisibility is essentially an interpersonal devaluation phenomenon where someone is viewed as lacking interpersonal value, importance, and recognition in social interactions (Smith et al., 2019). This invisibility may be intentionally or unintentionally triggered by the actor. However, in some contexts, targets may actively choose to conceal themselves to avoid negative social interactions and stigmatization (Waterwall et al., 2022). In contrast, child neglect and ignoring-type ostracism primarily emphasize the actor's behavior toward the target—the target passively suffers interpersonal exclusion. Child neglect occurs between individuals but specifically refers to unintentional neglect by parents or guardians of children's emotional and life needs (Warmingham et al., 2019). Ignoring-type ostracism is a broader concept encompassing not only intentional interpersonal rejection but also potential intergroup hostility (Cheng et al., 2011). Thus, although these concepts are interrelated in some aspects, each applies to different objects and contexts with unique scopes and connotations.

2.2 Phenomenon of Interpersonal Invisibility Toward Low Social Hierarchy Individuals

Social hierarchy refers to the implicit or explicit ranking of individuals or groups along some valued social dimension (Hu et al., 2014; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Yang et al., 2014). It is one of the most fundamental characteristics of social relationships, universally present across social groups and organizations. Common social hierarchy categories in real life include power, status, social class, race, and gender. Rucker et al. (2018) argue that these categories typically involve

differences and inequalities in resources, opportunities, social evaluation, and respect. That is, within social hierarchy categories, low-hierarchy individuals (e.g., low power, low status, low class, women, ethnic minorities) possess and can access significantly fewer economic and social resources than high-hierarchy individuals (e.g., high power, high status, high class, men, majority ethnic groups).

Early research directly examined the issue of low-hierarchy individuals experiencing interpersonal invisibility, primarily from the perspective of low-hierarchy individuals themselves, investigating the perception and experience of being ignored (Cox, 1997; Powell & Watson, 2006; Vlasses, 1997). For example, Vlasses (1997), studying American nurses in subordinate positions within healthcare relationships, revealed that nurses' contributions and value in disease treatment and care were unrecognized and unappreciated, while they frequently encountered emotional and behavioral indifference from doctors and patients, such as non-responsiveness and uncooperativeness. Powell and Watson (2006) found similar interpersonal invisibility among British hotel staff occupying lower positions in organizational hierarchies, such as experiencing cold treatment and behavioral distancing from management and guests. Similarly, research on American university cleaners with low occupational prestige found that cleaners often experienced being “invisible” at work—university faculty and students frequently failed to respond to their friendly gestures and, even when interacting with them, showed emotional detachment and distraction (Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). Notably, compared to targets with a single low-hierarchy identity (e.g., Black males), those with multiple low-hierarchy identities (e.g., Black females, simultaneously occupying low-ranking categories in both race and gender) are more susceptible to interpersonal invisibility in social interactions. For instance, research found that low-income Black women in the United States experienced greater unfair treatment when seeking medical care (Okoro et al., 2022).

Social cognition research on interpersonal invisibility has examined individuals' attentional characteristics toward low-hierarchy targets, with visual attention and memory serving as typical indicators. Studies found that in primates (e.g., rhesus monkeys), low-ranking members are more easily ignored: high-ranking monkeys receive more attention and gaze-following, while low-ranking monkeys are rarely noticed or followed by others (Shepherd et al., 2006). Building on this, Foulsham et al. (2010) further examined how target social hierarchy information influenced attention in Canadian human participants. Participants watched video clips of interactions among people of different social status and influence while eye-tracking equipment monitored their attention. Results showed that even when low-status targets occupied central positions in the video, they were more easily ignored than high-status targets, receiving fewer fixations and shorter gaze durations. Cheng et al. (2013) used similar methods to observe visual attention allocation among Canadian participants, finding that participants tended to give priority visual attention to targets with high dominance and prestige while allocating less visual attention to low-status and low-prestige targets. Additional studies have examined interpersonal attention characteris-

tics toward targets of different advantage/disadvantage status in social hierarchy categories such as gender, race, or age. These studies further confirmed that compared to higher-status males, White individuals, and younger people, lower-status females, African ethnic groups, and older adults more easily receive fewer cognitive processing resources in interpersonal interactions (Fan et al., 2022; Maner et al., 2008; Simon et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). For example, Simon et al. (2023) found that individuals exhibit a memory disadvantage for low-hierarchy individuals. Using face memory as an indicator, the study found that White, African American, Asian, and Latino American participants consistently showed better recognition and memory for relatively high-status White faces than for low-status minority faces.

In summary, early workplace-, school-, and healthcare-based research focused on low-hierarchy individuals, preliminarily revealing that interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals is a relatively common social phenomenon. These studies represent early explorations of interpersonal invisibility, indirectly and supplementarily demonstrating the relationship between social hierarchy and interpersonal invisibility. Social cognition research built upon this foundation by further comparing social processing characteristics toward targets of different social hierarchy statuses, clarifying that individuals are more likely to exhibit interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals than high-hierarchy individuals. Although these two research streams have different emphases—the former focusing on targets’ perception and experience of being ignored, the latter on actors’ behaviors of ignoring—both provide evidence that individuals’ interpersonal attention in social interactions has distinct social hierarchy characteristics: people show less interpersonal investment and attention toward low-hierarchy individuals in cognition, emotion, and behavior.

3 Theoretical Explanations of Interpersonal Invisibility Toward Low Social Hierarchy Individuals

Why are low-hierarchy individuals more likely to be interpersonally ignored? Existing researchers’ answers to this question are typically fragmented, lacking systematic summary and analysis. Based on a review and analysis of previous literature, this paper systematically examines the underlying mechanisms and theoretical explanations for interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals from four perspectives: sociocultural mechanisms, the status hypothesis, affordance-management theory, and intersectional invisibility theory.

3.1 Sociocultural Mechanisms

Sociocultural mechanisms interpret interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals as a sociocultural phenomenon rather than a simple result of individual behavior (Hatton, 2017). This perspective holds that the sociocultural environment—comprising social culture, customs, moral values, and ideologies—strongly influences individuals’ cognitive and behavioral

responses and plays a crucial role in forming interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals (de Lima et al., 2019; Hatton, 2017). Specifically, sociocultural mechanisms affect public interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals through two processes: (1) constructing social beliefs and ideologies, i.e., shaping a sociocultural environment unfavorable to low-hierarchy individuals through the construction of social culture, customs, moral values, and ideologies; and (2) internalizing social beliefs and ideologies, i.e., the public internalizes these sociocultural notions as personal beliefs that guide them to rationalize inequality-related information, making low-hierarchy individuals more vulnerable to marginalization.

Some direct and indirect research provides reasonable evidence for sociocultural mechanisms. Social values play an important role in the development of interpersonal invisibility. For example, Italian funeral workers with low occupational prestige experience emotional and behavioral distancing because their tasks transgress moral boundaries in social value systems, leading to these workers being stigmatized with moral taint (Guidetti et al., 2021). Additionally, ideologies internalize hierarchical notions from specific social cultures as social norms, causing negative perceptions of low-hierarchy individuals. In Western societies where meritocratic beliefs represent mainstream cultural ideology, research finds that endorsement of these ideologies significantly predicts the devaluation of low-hierarchy individuals in economic and social value, resulting in interpersonal invisibility. For instance, Waldfogel et al. (2021) used a social cognition experimental method with a rapid serial visual presentation task to record visual attention to different targets in various social inequality scenarios. Results showed that mainstream ideology shapes selective interpersonal attention: low-class, female, and ethnic minority targets are more likely to experience interpersonal invisibility. These findings indicate that interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals is rooted in socioculture to some extent, representing a result and manifestation of how mainstream social culture and ideology rationalize social inequality.

3.2 Status Hypothesis

The status hypothesis (Anderson et al., 2015) posits that the pursuit of status is a fundamental human motive that guides individuals' cognitive processing and behavioral expression. Status refers to the degree of respect, admiration, and voluntary deference received from others (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). It is an intangible asset that yields numerous benefits for individuals and groups. For example, higher status typically brings greater interpersonal influence and material resources (Redhead et al., 2021), higher self-esteem (Anderson et al., 2015; Mahadevan et al., 2023), and better physical and mental health (Cundiff et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2023). Moreover, in interpersonal terms, status increases both high-status individuals' attention to others and others' attention to high-status individuals (Anderson et al., 2020; Smith & Magee, 2015; Tao et al., 2022). Specifically, in social interactions, people typically view high-status

individuals as potential opportunities to enhance their own status and consequently spontaneously give them more attention, while giving less attention to low-status individuals.

Research finds that approaching and maintaining long-term interaction with high-status individuals indeed helps maximize personal benefits, including priority access to information, resources, or group support, ultimately achieving improved personal social status (Cheng, 2020; Henrich & Gil-White, 2001). Therefore, driven by self-interest and status motives, individuals in social interactions acutely detect status cues, actively seek contact with high-status individuals, and give them extra attention (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Yu & Kilduff, 2020). In fact, people are extremely sensitive to status-related cues and can accurately identify status differences. Individuals can easily make accurate status judgments based on others' clothing, facial features, and behavioral displays (Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017; Guo & Fu, 2019; Kraus et al., 2017).

Empirical findings provide reasonable evidence for the status hypothesis. For example, Shutts et al. (2016) found that American children show great sensitivity and preference for status-related cues from early school age. Compared to befriending children with fewer wealth resources, 4- to 6-year-olds prefer to befriend children with more wealth resources, such as nicer homes, clothing, and school supplies. Additionally, direct evidence shows that people indeed gain opportunities to enhance their status by attending to and contacting high-status individuals. For instance, von Rueden et al. (2019) conducted an 8-year longitudinal study among South American indigenous populations, finding that individuals preferentially select high-status individuals as cooperation partners; over time, the higher the social status of one's cooperation partners, the more one's own social status significantly increased. These findings demonstrate that high-hierarchy individuals receive interpersonal attention in social interactions due to their potential interpersonal value and benefits, whereas low-hierarchy individuals, lacking such value, easily suffer interpersonal invisibility.

3.3 Affordance-Management Theory

Unlike the status hypothesis, which focuses primarily on potential value and benefits, affordance-management theory comprehensively explains individuals' interpersonal attention characteristics toward others from both opportunity and threat dimensions. This theory posits that individuals typically evaluate the relevance of interpersonal targets to their own goals, involving two independent dimensions of threat and opportunity (Neel & Lassetter, 2019; Pirlott & Cook, 2018). That is, when individuals perceive targets as facilitating self-goals (high opportunity and low threat), they show positive attention; when targets are seen as hindering self-goals (low opportunity and high threat), individuals tend to show explicit hostility and negative attention such as rejection; when targets are perceived as neither facilitating nor hindering self-goals (low opportunity and low threat), they encounter implicit neglect and indifference. For low-hierarchy targets, they may face two different types of negative attention in social interac-

tions. On one hand, when considered to pose tangible or intangible physical and social threats (i.e., low opportunity and high threat; e.g., Kleider-Offutt, 2019; March et al., 2021), they encounter explicit negative attention, including obvious dislike, devaluation, rejection, or discrimination in cognition, emotion, and behavior. On the other hand, because they are typically associated with lower social status and interpersonal value (i.e., low opportunity and low threat; e.g., Bjornsdottir & Rule, 2017; DeOrtentiis et al., 2022), they also suffer implicit interpersonal invisibility—indifference in cognition, emotion, and behavior.

Empirical findings provide reasonable evidence for affordance-management theory. For example, Eberhardt et al. (2004) found that activation of goal relevance significantly altered American White male participants' attentional bias toward Black male faces. By manipulating contextual cues, the study found that compared to contexts lacking obvious cues, Black male faces elicited less attention from White male participants than White male faces; however, when briefly exposed to crime-related cues, Black male faces elicited more attention from White male participants than White faces. Additionally, Brown-Iannuzzi et al. (2014) directly manipulated self-goal relevance to observe American White female participants' attention to targets, finding that when self-goals were not explicitly activated, White women were more likely to notice a Black male stereotyped as aggressive; but when self-goals were activated (e.g., goals of finding friends or romantic partners), White women were less likely to notice Black males. These findings indicate that individuals' interpersonal attention characteristics toward low-hierarchy individuals are actually goal-driven, with goal relevance assessment being the key variable triggering different attention patterns. In other words, individuals' goal relevance assessment may moderate the process of interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals: when low-hierarchy individuals are assessed as irrelevant to current goals (providing neither opportunity nor threat), they easily suffer interpersonal invisibility.

3.4 Intersectional Invisibility Theory

Intersectional invisibility theory posits that compared to individuals with a single subordinate group identity, those with multiple subordinate identities more easily experience interpersonal invisibility in their communities and mainstream society (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Remedios & Snyder, 2018). Based on group ideology and identity prototypicality, this theory emphasizes how multiple subordinate identities and characteristics interact to affect social interactions. Specifically, in mainstream social culture, dominant ideologies such as androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and heterosexism grant hegemonic status to advantaged groups (e.g., men, Whites, heterosexuals), defining their perspectives and experiences as social standards and rendering individuals with intersecting subordinate group identities as non-prototypical members of their constituent identity groups. Compared to prototypical group members, these non-prototypical members are more likely to encounter “invisibility.” Moreover, negative stereotypes associated with multiple subordinate group identities have additive effects, ex-

acerbating individuals' risk of experiencing interpersonal invisibility (Remedios & Snyder, 2015).

In reality, low-hierarchy individuals are more likely to have multiple subordinate identities, and their non-prototypical identities and characteristics in race, gender, sexual orientation, and other dimensions interact to push them to more marginalized positions, making them more vulnerable to interpersonal invisibility. For example, Lei et al. (2020) used a rapid categorization task with American children to examine the prototypicality of low-hierarchy intersectional targets within their racial and gender groups. Results showed that participants were slower to associate Black females with the “Black” category than Black males, and slower to associate Black females with the “female” category than White females. That is, low-hierarchy Black females indeed have dual subordinate identities in both race and gender groups. Additionally, research has found memory disadvantages for low-hierarchy multiple subordinate identity targets. For instance, Sesko and Biernat (2010) found that American college students had more difficulty remembering Black women's faces and were more likely to overlook their contributions in group discussions compared to Black men, White men, and White women, who possess one or more advantaged identities. Thus, intersectional invisibility theory explains from a sociocultural perspective why low-hierarchy individuals, particularly those with multiple non-prototypical social group identities, more easily suffer interpersonal invisibility. In short, the more subordinate identities low-hierarchy individuals have, the greater their likelihood of experiencing interpersonal invisibility.

3.5 Summary

In summary, the four theories explain the underlying mechanisms of interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals from different perspectives, each with distinct characteristics and applicable scopes. This paper categorizes and organizes these theories based on their core connotations and limitations (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]). Specifically: (1) Both sociocultural mechanisms and intersectional invisibility theory start from the social level, focusing on external factors influencing interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals—namely, social culture and mainstream ideology. Sociocultural mechanisms emphasize how the sociocultural environment causes low-hierarchy individuals to experience interpersonal invisibility, highlighting the unique role of sociocultural environments in rationalizing inequality. Intersectional invisibility theory further focuses on explaining why individuals with multiple disadvantaged identities more easily experience interpersonal invisibility, addressing the interaction of multiple non-prototypical identities constructed by ideology. However, explaining the mechanisms solely from this level has limitations, as it neglects the role of individual internal factors or situational stimuli in low-hierarchy individuals' experiences of interpersonal invisibility. (2) The status hypothesis and affordance-management theory, grounded at the individual level, provide important supplementary explanations for interpersonal

invisibility, focusing on internal individual factors and situational stimuli. The status hypothesis emphasizes the motivational drive of status—individuals actively attend to and approach high-status (rather than low-status) individuals to enhance their own status—but this theory emphasizes universal status pursuit motives while neglecting the relevance of interpersonal targets to current goals across different situations. Building on this, affordance-management theory focuses from a cognitive perspective on the moderating role of goal relevance assessment: when low-hierarchy individuals are viewed as irrelevant to individuals' goals, they face greater risk of interpersonal invisibility.

Although these theories have clear distinctions, connections exist among them. Sociocultural mechanisms rationalize inequality by shaping and internalizing social beliefs and ideologies, placing disadvantaged groups from various social hierarchies in unfavorable positions. Intersectional invisibility theory further concretizes and expands sociocultural mechanisms, focusing on identity prototypicality constructed by mainstream ideology and noting that low-hierarchy individuals with multiple non-prototypical identities more easily experience interpersonal invisibility. Both emphasize the stigmatization of low-hierarchy individuals at the social level, revealing the automatic mechanisms through which culture influences cognition and how individuals unconsciously internalize these biases. The status hypothesis and affordance-management theory, focusing on the individual level, both emphasize how individuals selectively attend to or ignore others based on self-interest, demonstrating self-interested tendencies in interpersonal interactions. The status hypothesis suggests that potential interpersonal value and benefits play important roles in individuals' attention to interaction partners, while affordance-management theory further proposes that, beyond the opportunity dimension (potential interpersonal value and benefits), threat is also an important assessment dimension affecting individuals' attention to interaction partners. This theory deepens and refines the status hypothesis, more comprehensively explaining individuals' attention characteristics toward interpersonal targets across situations from a cognitive perspective, noting that low-hierarchy individuals are more likely to experience interpersonal invisibility when perceived as neither facilitating nor hindering self-goals (low opportunity and low threat). Notably, as a key factor influencing cognition and behavior, emotion is not adequately considered in these four theories. For example, Van Doesum et al. (2022) found that individuals' empathy abilities affect their attention to low-class targets. Moreover, social-level and individual-level theories are interrelated rather than isolated. The social level constitutes the macro framework for individual behavioral norms and life rules (Hatton, 2017), while the individual level not only concretizes this framework to maintain and reinforce existing social norms but may also influence social structures through personalized behaviors and choices (Pérez & Martinez, 2008). This interaction forms a dynamic process that continuously shapes and reshapes individuals' interpersonal interactions.

4 Research Prospects

Discrimination and prejudice toward low-hierarchy individuals have long attracted researchers' attention. Recent studies have revealed that people also commonly exhibit "turning a blind eye" to low-hierarchy individuals in interpersonal interactions. Although this devaluation and exclusion is covert in society, it is easily detected and experienced by low-hierarchy individuals and may produce negative psychological and social consequences for them. This paper attempts to summarize and delineate the connotation and definition of interpersonal invisibility and systematically reviews relevant research evidence and theoretical mechanisms underlying interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals. It is worth noting that this research area still has considerable room for development, with many topics warranting further refinement and deepening. Future research can proceed in the following directions.

4.1 Further Refining Conceptualization and Measurement

Currently, interpersonal invisibility lacks a clear and comprehensive definition. Existing definitions primarily examine the concept from two key angles: the actor and the target. On one hand, actors show reduced cognitive, emotional, and behavioral investment toward specific targets (especially disadvantaged groups) (e.g., Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2014). This essentially reflects actors' implicit devaluation and exclusion of specific targets in social interactions. On the other hand, specific targets (especially disadvantaged groups) readily perceive and report receiving little cognitive, emotional, and behavioral attention from interaction partners. In experiencing this neglect, they feel interpersonal devaluation, internalize negative labels and stereotypes into self-concept, and consequently exhibit negative psychological and behavioral outcomes (e.g., Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). Although both aspects reflect interpersonal invisibility phenomena, they focus on fundamentally different concerns: the former emphasizes how actors impose implicit prejudice and stigmatization on targets, while the latter focuses on targets' psychological experiences and consequences of being ignored. Therefore, future research should carefully use different terminology to define different content, facilitating differentiation and cross-study learning.

It is worth noting that although this paper attempts to clearly define three main characteristics of interpersonal invisibility, its operational definition and measurement remain core issues for future research. First, interpersonal invisibility involves multiple levels including cognition, emotion, and behavior, yet current research primarily focuses on the cognitive level (e.g., attention, memory; Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2014; Gobel et al., 2015; Ratcliff et al., 2011). How to more comprehensively incorporate emotional and behavioral operational indicators is a key direction for future research. One feasible approach is using laboratory interaction conversation recordings (e.g., Kraus & Keltner, 2009) to observe and analyze specific attention, emotional reactions, and behavioral performances of both interaction partners (Kraus & Keltner, 2009), providing more comprehensive capture of interpersonal invisibility phenomena. Second, from

a motivational perspective, intentional versus unintentional interpersonal invisibility can be further distinguished. Intentional interpersonal invisibility may be a punitive form of exclusion, reflecting actors' hostility or prejudice toward targets, leading them to deliberately avoid connection or contact (Robinson et al., 2013). Unintentional interpersonal invisibility may stem from actors' lack of sensitivity to others' needs or emotional states (Hall et al., 2009). Future research could develop corresponding scales to differentiate intentional from unintentional interpersonal invisibility, advancing the field.

4.2 Deepening Theoretical Research on Interpersonal Invisibility Toward Low-Hierarchy Individuals

Current research attempts to preliminarily explore the underlying mechanisms of interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals through four theoretical perspectives: sociocultural mechanisms, status hypothesis, affordance-management theory, and intersectional invisibility theory. Sociocultural mechanisms and intersectional invisibility theory focus on the social level, viewing interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals as a product of structural social inequality. In contrast, the status hypothesis and affordance-management theory start from the individual level, considering interpersonal invisibility as reflecting individuals' social interaction strategies based on goal relevance assessment. However, real-world explanations for low-hierarchy individuals' experiences of interpersonal invisibility are rarely independent, and single-perspective analyses may not fully capture its complexity. In fact, connections exist among these theories. For example, Huberman et al. (2004) found that across five countries/regions (the United States, Turkey, Germany, Finland, and Hong Kong, China), individuals' willingness to sacrifice monetary gains for status (in the form of applause) was influenced by their cultural power distance. This reveals the interaction between social-level factors (e.g., cultural power distance) and individual-level factors (e.g., status pursuit): different cultures' relative emphasis on status affects individuals' sensitivity to status signals in social interactions and their evaluation of social targets' importance. Future research should further clarify connections and conflicts among these theories, exploring each theory's independent effects and their interactions across different cultural and social contexts to construct a more comprehensive theoretical framework revealing the complex mechanisms underlying interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals.

Notably, early research actually primarily adopted the perspective of low-hierarchy individuals to reveal the social phenomenon of interpersonal invisibility, while also providing indirect evidence for interpersonal invisibility imposed by others. However, few studies have explored and organized theoretical mechanisms of perceived interpersonal invisibility from low-hierarchy individuals' perspective. Future research could further analyze and organize how individuals process experiences of being ignored through cognitive, emotional, and behavioral reactions, and how these reactions are influenced by

individual traits, sociocultural backgrounds, and specific contexts. Research could also examine how targets of interpersonal invisibility utilize social support networks, develop coping strategies, and adjust self-identity and social roles over the long term. Exploring theoretical mechanisms of perceived interpersonal invisibility can not only deepen understanding of actual interpersonal invisibility phenomena but also expand theoretical research perspectives, helping to fully reveal the complexity of interpersonal invisibility and provide theoretical foundations for developing interventions.

4.3 Exploring Interactive Effects of Both Parties' Social Hierarchy in Interpersonal Invisibility

Current research primarily reveals that people easily exhibit interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy targets, especially those with multiple subordinate identities (Brown-Iannuzzi et al., 2014; Simon et al., 2022; Okoro et al., 2022; Rabelo & Mahalingam, 2019). However, interpersonal invisibility may also be influenced by individuals' own social hierarchy information. For example, Dietze and Knowles (2016) used Google Glass to record attention patterns of different social classes in real street scenes with American participants, finding that compared to low-social-class individuals, high-social-class individuals were more “oblivious to others”—paying less attention to pedestrians and showing shorter gaze durations. This may indicate that high-hierarchy individuals are more likely to exhibit interpersonal invisibility.

In fact, both actors' and targets' social hierarchy information may jointly influence interpersonal invisibility. Because high-hierarchy individuals possess more economic and social resources, they are less dependent on others and show less motivation to attend to others (especially low-hierarchy targets with low relevance to self-goals). Conversely, because low-hierarchy individuals have limited economic and social resources, they are more dependent on others, tend to view others as relevant to their own goals and well-being, and are thus more sensitive to social interaction information (Kraus et al., 2012; Hu et al., 2014). Early research indeed found that when American participants from different socioeconomic backgrounds engaged in brief interactions, higher-status individuals not only paid less attention to lower-status individuals but also appeared more distracted during interactions, frequently fidgeting (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). Future research should expand its focus from single targets' social hierarchy to the social hierarchy of both interaction partners, examining how they jointly shape individuals' cognitive, emotional, and behavioral performances in social interactions to more profoundly understand the complex mechanisms of interpersonal invisibility.

4.4 Addressing and Intervening in the Negative Consequences of Interpersonal Invisibility

Currently, only scattered studies have examined the negative mental health consequences of experiencing interpersonal invisibility. For example, Rabelo and

Mahalingam (2019) conducted qualitative research with 199 university cleaners in the United States using open-ended questionnaires and interviews, finding that cleaners frequently experienced themselves and their work as invisible—being ignored by faculty and students—resulting in shame, anxiety, and sadness. In fact, the negative effects of interpersonal invisibility may extend beyond individual mental health to the societal level. For instance, Waldfogel et al. (2021) examined attention to disadvantaged groups' experiences of unfair treatment, finding that mainstream ideology plays a key role in shaping social cognition. It not only promotes interpersonal invisibility toward low-class, female, and ethnic minority groups but also causes the unfair treatment these vulnerable groups experience in group discussions and hiring processes to be ignored or receive less attention. These results indicate that interpersonal invisibility toward vulnerable groups restricts their social participation and mobility, causing damage to their rights and interests. Long-term, interpersonal invisibility may lead to social class solidification, creating an intergenerational transmission vicious cycle that exacerbates social inequality. Therefore, future research should systematically examine the broad consequences of interpersonal invisibility at individual and societal levels to provide an evidence base for reducing such invisibility.

It is worth noting that in some contexts, low-hierarchy individuals may intentionally become “invisible” in social interactions. That is, interpersonal invisibility may serve as an adaptive strategy for low-hierarchy individuals—they may deliberately avoid negative interactions to maintain positive mental health (Waterwall et al., 2022). For example, qualitative research shows that compared to working harder in public view, American teachers of color prefer to use “strategic invisibility” to manage stigmatization risk and avoid deeper emotional harm when facing severe discrimination (Settles et al., 2019). This strategy helps low-hierarchy individuals survive strategically in discriminatory environments. However, we must note that individual “strategic invisibility” only provides temporary avoidance and cannot fundamentally eliminate or improve one’s social situation. This reminds researchers and policymakers that to truly enhance low-hierarchy individuals’ well-being, the fundamental solution is creating a just, equal, and inclusive environment where low-hierarchy individuals can participate equally in social interactions, experience positive and freely chosen visibility, and receive due recognition and respect.

In fact, constructing a just, equal, and inclusive social interaction environment requires joint efforts at both societal and individual levels. Johns et al. (2008) found that equality policies and concepts promoted in society are crucial for creating an environment conducive to low-hierarchy individuals’ development. With American college students, they found that those who internalized social equality concepts automatically activated egalitarian goals when encountering specific groups (e.g., Black individuals), inhibiting negative stereotypes associated with that group. This finding highlights the potential role of social equality concepts in automatically reducing individual prejudice and promoting social inclusivity. This suggests that researchers should, on one hand, actively improve vulnerable groups’ social situations through social institutions and procedures,

protect their rights and interests, foster an equal, free, and just cultural atmosphere, eliminate negative stereotypes toward vulnerable groups, and thereby create an inclusive and equal social interaction environment (Xu et al., 2024). On the other hand, researchers should enhance individuals' justice awareness at the personal level, such as focusing on mindfulness cultivation, increasing individuals' detection of others' uncivil behaviors (Hülshager et al., 2021), and promoting more just, respectful, and inclusive interpersonal interactions.

4.5 Examining Interpersonal Invisibility in the Chinese Sociocultural Context

Current discussions of interpersonal invisibility primarily derive from Western cultural contexts, potentially overlooking the unique manifestations and effects of interpersonal invisibility under China's distinctive sociocultural background. Interpersonal invisibility is not only an interaction strategy expressing devaluation and exclusion but also reflects specific behavior patterns deeply influenced by culture. Chinese culture represents a typical "face culture," where individuals develop a self-concept involving how they perceive their position, identity, reputation, and the respect and recognition they receive in their social circles (Wang & Yang, 2005). In social interactions, individuals both desire to "gain face" and fear "losing face" (Wei et al., 2023), a motivation that prompts particular attention to external evaluations and tendencies to handle interpersonal relationships in more subtle and indirect ways to avoid direct conflict or confrontation, thereby maintaining their social image. Moreover, status is an important factor determining individual face (Wei et al., 2023), which may lead Chinese people to show stronger status pursuit motivation, thereby exacerbating interpersonal invisibility toward low-hierarchy individuals. However, the mechanisms through which individuals' motivations to maintain positive face and avoid losing face lead to interpersonal invisibility remain under-researched.

Furthermore, hierarchical concepts in Chinese culture profoundly influence people's social behaviors, causing them to display obvious class-affiliated characteristics in social interactions (Li et al., 2014). This interpersonal interaction pattern based on vertical hierarchical relationships differs essentially from the individualism and egalitarianism emphasized in Western culture, potentially causing interpersonal invisibility to show different features and causes in Chinese culture. Future research should adopt a Chinese cultural perspective to deeply explore the unique effects and underlying mechanisms of interpersonal invisibility in China's sociocultural context, thereby enriching and deepening understanding of interpersonal invisibility phenomena.

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