

Trait Judgmentalism: Contextual Moderation Failure and the Architecture of Evaluative Rigidity

Emile Boullineau

Independent Researcher, United Kingdom

emile.boullineau@gmail.com

Judgmentalism is pervasive across everyday life, yet the phenomenon has remained largely unformalised within psychological science. Existing constructs such as self-criticism, dogmatism, perfectionism, and Need for Closure capture narrow aspects of harsh evaluation but do not explain why some individuals maintain rigid, negatively biased judgments even when mitigating contextual information is available. This paper introduces Trait Judgmentalism as a stable cognitive, emotional, and behavioural disposition to evaluate oneself and others through rigid standards that resist contextual moderation. The construct is defined as a general evaluative disposition rather than a clinical diagnosis or a normative judgment about moral accountability.

A mechanistic account is proposed via Contextual Moderation Failure (CMF), defined as a specific utilisation deficit in which reflective processing fails to update initial intuitive appraisals. CMF explains how initial negative evaluations persist, expand into global character inferences, and shape downstream behaviour. A Tripartite Model is presented, linking (1) cognitive evaluative rigidity, (2) violation-contingent negative affect, and (3) a punitive orientation. Crucially, this behavioural component may be expressed overtly or through latent silent sanctioning, allowing rigid evaluations to persist without explicit interpersonal criticism.

The model distinguishes Trait Judgmentalism from adjacent constructs, including conscientiousness, humility, and Emotional Intelligence, by identifying its core feature not as simple interpersonal coldness but as a mechanistic failure to integrate context. The framework provides theoretically grounded predictions across cognitive and interpersonal domains, including reduced perspective-taking flexibility and resistance to revising impressions even when contextual explanations are acknowledged. These elements establish a coherent architecture for evaluating rigid appraisal tendencies and form the conceptual foundation for the future development of the Judgmentalism Assessment Scale. No empirical data are presented; the paper is intended as a conceptual foundation to guide subsequent measurement development and empirical testing.

Author Note (3) : This paper provides the conceptual foundation for future empirical work on the Judgmentalism Assessment Scale (JAS). All analyses and writing were conducted independently. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Emile Boullineau. Portions of the text were lightly assisted by AI tools for grammar and phrasing. All ideas and theoretical proposals are solely my own.

This version incorporates further conceptual refinements to the Trait Judgmentalism framework, including clarification of Contextual Moderation Failure as a utilisation deficit in evaluative updating, specification of a non-linear evaluative gating mechanism, and refinement of the tripartite model as a recursive maintenance system. Additional distinctions are introduced between overt and latent punitive orientation, and between expressed judgmental behaviour and internally maintained evaluative rigidity. These revisions build on earlier scholarly feedback and aim to strengthen conceptual precision and boundary clarity in advance of empirical validation.

1. Introduction

Global negative judgments of self and others appear frequently in daily life, yet they are not well integrated within existing psychological theory. Although people are often described as being “judgmental” in everyday discourse and clinical practice, there is no formal construct that captures this cross-domain pattern of evaluation. Current research conceptualises harsh evaluation in fragmented ways. Self-criticism focuses on internal harshness, dogmatism emphasises belief rigidity, Need for Closure concerns a preference for decisiveness and quick resolution, and intolerance of uncertainty addresses discomfort with ambiguity. Each captures an important aspect of evaluative style, yet none reflect a single underlying disposition that applies rigid and negatively biased standards to both the self and others.

Although beliefs and evaluations often interact, the construct introduced here concerns evaluative rigidity rather than belief rigidity. This distinction is important: individuals high in Judgmentalism may understand and even partially revise their beliefs when new evidence appears, yet their negative evaluation of the person or behaviour remains unchanged. The persistence lies in the evaluative stance, not the belief system itself. In such cases, contextual explanations may be explicitly acknowledged and even endorsed, yet still fail to attenuate the evaluative response.

Judgmentalism should also not be confused with perfectionism. Other-Oriented Perfectionism, for example, involves demanding standards for others, but Judgmentalism differs in its broad application to moral, social and competence domains and its specific reliance on blocking contextual information. The distinction lies not in the presence of high standards but in the evaluative process that unfolds after a perceived transgression of those standards.

In this framework, Contextual Moderation Failure (CMF) is the defining mechanism of Trait

Judgmentalism and is conceptualised as a utilisation deficit. Evaluative rigidity refers to the observable pattern of judgment that results from this process, whereas CMF specifies the precise point at which contextual information is cognitively available yet does not exert moderating influence on the evaluative outcome.

Boundary Conditions. Judgmentalism is not present when high standards are combined with genuine contextual openness, when rapid evaluation is adaptive, such as in safety-critical situations, or when moral conviction leads to firm but proportionate judgments that do not generalise globally. In these cases, contextual information is intentionally bracketed on principled or role-based grounds rather than failing to influence evaluation, and should not be confused with Contextual Moderation Failure.

A person may strongly disapprove of a behaviour, emphasise accountability or insist on high performance without being judgmental if they actively consider mitigating information and revise their views when warranted. For instance, a manager who sets demanding expectations can avoid global condemnation by taking context into account. These distinctions highlight that Trait Judgmentalism reflects rigidity in updating evaluations rather than the mere presence of high standards, moral seriousness or decisive action.

A Theoretical Fragmentation Problem. These scattered constructs point to a broader issue in personality and social psychology, where overlapping evaluative traits are measured without a unifying mechanism. This has resulted in a construct dispersal problem in which traits such as self-criticism, dogmatism and intolerance of uncertainty overlap conceptually but lack a shared theoretical framework.

This paper introduces Trait Judgmentalism as a construct grounded in evaluative rigidity. It focuses on the difficulty some individuals have in integrating contextual information into their judgments. Trait Judgmentalism does not simply rename negativity or perfectionism. Instead, it identifies a specific process, the tendency to hold on to an initial negative appraisal even when relevant contextual information becomes available. By articulating this construct and its proposed mechanisms, the paper aims to move beyond the fragmented nature of existing measures and provide a coherent framework that links cognitive processes, personality structure and interpersonal outcomes. Throughout, self- and other-directed judgments are treated as correlated expressions of a single evaluative mechanism rather than separate traits, a position formalised later in the discussion of directionality.

1.1 The Scientific Imperative for a New Construct

Introducing a new construct requires evidence that it captures unique psychological variance rather than relabelling an existing trait. After reviewing areas of overlap, Judgmentalism meets this requirement because it describes the specific process through which individuals form and maintain rigid negative evaluations that fail to incorporate contextual information. Broader

traits such as Agreeableness or Neuroticism describe general tendencies toward interpersonal warmth or negative affect but do not address evaluative rigidity itself. Related constructs such as self-criticism (Blatt, 2004), dogmatism (Rokeach, 1960) and the Need for Closure (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996) capture narrower facets. While these traits may share elements of rigidity (Morris and Mansell, 2018), Judgmentalism offers an integrative account of both self- and other-directed evaluation via a gating mechanism, addressing a gap in evaluative psychology noted in network approaches (Fried, 2017).

The term “Judgmentalism” is retained deliberately. It reflects the evaluative content of the construct while distinguishing it from general negativity or perfectionism. Although colloquial, the term aligns with naming conventions for similar traits such as Authoritarianism and Dogmatism. It also captures the bidirectional nature of the construct by spanning both self and other domains, consistent with composite constructs in network models (Fried, 2017).

1.2 Objectives and Scope

The primary aim of this conceptual paper is to formally define Trait Judgmentalism and clarify its theoretical boundaries. In doing so, the paper outlines the core mechanisms that distinguish the construct and situates it within the broader landscape of cognitive and personality processes. Specifically, it seeks to:

- Clarify the formal definition of Trait Judgmentalism as a stable, multidimensional disposition grounded in evaluative rigidity.
Propose a cognitive account based on Contextual Moderation Failure.
- Distinguish Judgmentalism clearly from adjacent traits, including Emotional Intelligence.
- Present theoretical propositions to guide future empirical investigation.
- Examine implications for transdiagnostic rigidity and outline considerations for future validation work.
- Clarify how evaluative rigidity may be maintained through both overt and latent punitive orientations, with implications for measurement

No empirical data are presented in this paper

2. The Mechanism: Contextual Moderation Failure

Contextual Moderation Failure is presented here as the core mechanism underlying Trait Judgmentalism. CMF refers to a failure of evaluative integration in which relevant contextual information is available and recognised, yet fails to meaningfully moderate an initial negative appraisal, a transdiagnostic utilisation deficit aligned with work on rigidity (Morris and Mansell, 2018) and with mechanism-focused network models of inflexibility (Fried, 2017). To our knowledge, CMF has not been previously formalised as a specific construct.

2.1 The Dual-Process Architecture of Evaluation

Dual process theories of evaluation (Kahneman, 2011; Chaiken and Trope, 1999) propose that social judgment involves two stages of processing. System 1 generates rapid and intuitive appraisals based on limited information. This serves as a conceptual frame rather than a literal neural map. These initial appraisals are normally followed by System 2, which involves slower and more reflective reasoning that incorporates contextual details and moderates the first reaction. We adopt the System 1 and System 2 distinction as a heuristic that clarifies the flow from initial appraisal to later integration.

Trait Judgmentalism disrupts the second stage of this sequence. Importantly, reflective processing may be sufficient to represent and articulate contextual information without being sufficient to alter the evaluative output. Individuals form negative appraisals through System 1 in the typical way, but System 2 fails to revise or update these appraisals when new or relevant contextual information becomes available (Gawronski et al., 2024). As a result, evaluations remain global, rigid and resistant to contextual adaptation.

Although CMF is presented as the core mechanistic hypothesis, it should be understood as part of a broader class of context-integration disruptions. Multiple psychological forces, moral conviction, identity protection, affective load, or social-signalling motives may independently or jointly constrict contextual admission. CMF therefore serves as the *unifying architecture* that accommodates these routes rather than excluding alternative pathways to evaluative rigidity.

2.2 The Cognitive Architecture of Judgmentalism: An Evaluative Gating Model

Drawing on models such as the evaluative space model (Cacioppo et al., 2012), which distinguish between positive and negative evaluative processes, the proposed account frames evaluation as a gated flow rather than a simple one-directional chain. This highlights how individual differences in cognitive flexibility shape the transition from an initial intuitive reaction to a final judgment.

Stage 1: Sensory Input (The Trigger). A trigger is detected, for example a delayed email that violates an internal standard. This stage involves the basic registration of norm-relevant cues and requires no deliberate interpretation.

Stage 2: The Intuitive Appraisal (System 1). A rapid and automatic assignment of negative valence occurs, such as “Bad,” “Wrong,” or “Incompetent.” This baseline appraisal reflects an evolutionarily conserved pattern shaped by fast threat detection and violation monitoring. It is strongly associated with intuitive processes and may draw on amygdala reactivity to perceived social or moral deviations. Examples include an immediate thought such as “They are lazy” or, if self-directed, “I am incompetent.”

Stage 3: The Contextual Gate. This represents the critical point at which Trait Judgmentalism exerts its influence.

Low Judgmentalism (Flexible). The gate is open. Contextual information such as situational constraints, intentions or behavioural history is incorporated into the evaluative process. This integration reduces the intensity of the initial appraisal and supports a proportionate response. For example, a person may think, “They might have been in a meeting or dealing with an emergency.”

High Judgmentalism (Rigid). The gate is closed or resistant. The system shows evaluative rigidity. Mitigating information is blocked or dismissed, for instance “Excuses do not matter,” or reinterpreted in a way that reinforces the initial appraisal. This resembles confirmation-based processing, in which contextual evidence is filtered through an existing negative schema rather than used to update the evaluation. For example, the idea “They always make excuses” may persist even when there is clear evidence of a valid reason.

We propose that this rigid mode is sustained by a reduction in contextual weighting: contextual cues are acknowledged but assigned insufficient evaluative weight to moderate the initial appraisal. Contextual cues are not entirely ignored but are assigned too little evaluative weight to alter the initial appraisal in a meaningful way. This mechanism helps explain how individuals can consciously notice mitigating information yet still fail to incorporate it into their judgment.

Stage 4: Evaluative Output. Flexible output involves a moderated conclusion, such as “They were late, but the circumstances make sense.” Judgmental output involves a globalised and essentialist condemnation, such as “They are irresponsible and disrespectful.” The evaluation becomes an inference about character rather than behaviour, for example “They are unreliable people” rather than “They had a bad day.”

This model illustrates that Trait Judgmentalism reflects a disruption in information integration. The issue is not a failure to notice contextual cues but a rigid evaluative structure that prevents these cues from altering the valence of the initial appraisal. Judgmentalism therefore represents a stable tendency to preserve the first interpretation rather than update it when

new information becomes available, producing evaluations that are consistently harsh and globally negative. Although examples often emphasise evaluations of others, the same mechanism applies to self-directed appraisal, whereby contextual cues fail to soften global negative inferences about one's own worth or competence.

2.3 Theoretical Plausibility and Neural links

This mechanistic account positions Judgmentalism at the intersection of personality science and social neuroscience. We propose that evaluative rigidity is likely associated with reduced cognitive flexibility and diminished recruitment of systems involved in contextual updating. Flexibility, understood as the capacity to shift perspectives and adapt to new information, is consistently linked in behavioural and neural research to prefrontal functioning, as shown in studies summarised by Uddin (2021). Judgmentalism may also relate to lower Intellectual Humility, which concerns the willingness to revise one's beliefs in the face of disconfirming evidence and has been associated with reduced rigidity in evaluative processing (Kross and Grossmann, 2012). In addition, it may connect to self-determination theory's account of novelty need, where reduced flexibility undermines adaptive responses (González-Cutre et al., 2016). These psychological characteristics provide a theoretically grounded basis for understanding why some individuals struggle to update initial appraisals.

From a neuroscientific perspective, this framework aligns with what is known about the interaction between the prefrontal cortex and the amygdala. The amygdala responds rapidly to norm violations by assigning affective salience, which helps explain the immediate negative reaction typical of intuitive System 1 processing. The prefrontal cortex, particularly the dorsolateral and ventrolateral regions, plays an important role in cognitive control and in integrating contextual information during reappraisal (Cunningham et al., 2004). In many situations, stronger recruitment of these prefrontal areas supports a transition from an initial reaction to a more considered and context-sensitive judgment. For example, fMRI work shows increased dorsolateral prefrontal activation during successful reappraisal of negative stimuli (Ochsner et al., 2002).

Research on reappraisal difficulty indicates that individuals who struggle to regulate negative affect often exhibit lower activation in prefrontal regions or reduced functional connectivity between the prefrontal cortex and amygdala during evaluative tasks (Hutcherson and Gross, 2011). Meta-analytic findings reinforce this pattern, showing decreased amygdala-prefrontal connectivity in emotional regulation deficits (Zilverstand et al., 2021; Banks et al., 2007). These findings provide a reasonable neural basis for understanding how Contextual Moderation Failure operates within this model, especially when affective salience overwhelms the capacity for reflective updating.

We propose that Trait Judgmentalism may involve two interacting tendencies: heightened amygdala responses to perceived violations and weaker or less efficient engagement of

prefrontal systems during contextual integration. In this pattern, the individual reacts to the violation with elevated emotional intensity but does not recruit sufficient reflective processing to incorporate situational information. The result is a form of hot rigidity in which the emotional force of the initial reaction reinforces the inclination to maintain the judgment rather than revise it.

This framework connects the behavioural expression of Judgmentalism with established neural processes involved in appraisal and regulation. It is offered as a set of hypotheses that can be evaluated in future work rather than as a claim that the neural basis of Judgmentalism has already been empirically established.

These interpretations are intended as theoretically grounded analogies rather than empirical claims about the neural signature of Judgmentalism.

2.4 Relationship to Theory of Mind and Perspective-Taking

Although judgmental behaviour is often interpreted as a failure of perspective-taking, Trait Judgmentalism does not imply a deficit in basic Theory of Mind (ToM). Judgmental individuals are typically fully capable of representing others' mental states; the difficulty arises in allowing those perspectives to revise the evaluative conclusion. In CMF, contextual or perspective-based cues are recognised but assigned insufficient weight to meaningfully moderate the initial appraisal. Thus, the trait reflects restricted evaluative flexibility, not an inability to infer intentions or mental states. This distinction differentiates Judgmentalism from clinical ToM impairments and places it closer to constructs such as attributional rigidity and reduced perspective-taking flexibility.

2.5 Falsifiability and Competing Mechanisms

The Contextual Moderation Failure account is falsifiable. If individuals who score high on Judgmentalism were found to show intact or even enhanced integration of contextual information in experimental tasks that manipulate mitigating cues, yet still produced global and harsh evaluations, then CMF would not be sufficient as the primary mechanism. Likewise, if moral conviction, trait anger or general cognitive rigidity fully accounted for evaluative harshness once contextual integration was considered, the explanatory value of CMF would be limited. Evidence for CMF would instead come from findings that judgmental individuals do perceive contextual cues but fail to allow these cues to soften or adjust their evaluations, even when updating would be reasonable or in their own interest.

This distinction presupposes what we refer to as mitigating cue sensitivity, the capacity to detect and recognise exculpatory information before the gating process occurs. The issue in Judgmentalism is therefore not an inability to perceive contextual cues but a failure of admission, in which contextual information is acknowledged but assigned too little weight to influence the evaluative trajectory.

2.6 Relationship to Belief Perseverance and Cognitive Biases

Although Trait Judgmentalism shares surface similarities with cognitive biases such as confirmation bias, negativity bias, anchoring, and belief perseverance, these constructs are insufficient to explain the rigid evaluative pattern described here. Cognitive biases predominantly influence *how information is selected, interpreted, or weighted*, whereas Trait Judgmentalism concerns what occurs after the information has already been accurately perceived. In Judgmentalism, contextual cues are indeed registered but granted insufficient evaluative significance, resulting in a form of contextual under-admission. This feature differentiates the construct, here referred to as CMF, from standard cognitive bias models, which do not require the explicit acknowledgment of mitigating information.

Closely tied to this point is the distinction between beliefs and evaluations. Cognitive biases typically describe how beliefs are formed or updated; by contrast, Judgmentalism pertains to evaluative appraisals of behaviour or character that persist even when the underlying belief structure changes. In other words, an individual may revise their factual understanding yet maintain an unchanged negative evaluation. This highlights why Judgmentalism also diverges from classical cognitive dissonance: there is no attempt to reconcile inconsistency, only a stable rigidity in evaluative stance.

In summary, while standard cognitive biases shape *evidence selection and weighting*, CMF describes a failure in the evaluative updating stage that occurs *after* evidence has been cognitively processed. Crucially, CMF does not imply perceptual neglect; rather, it designates an evaluative impasse in which contextual cues, though fully registered, fail to shift the evaluative trajectory.

3. The Tripartite Theoretical Model

For measurement, Judgmentalism is divided into three dimensions: cognitive, emotional (violation-contingent negative affect), and behavioural (punitive orientation). Within this model, only cognitive evaluative rigidity and violation-contingent negative affect are necessary for Contextual Moderation Failure to occur; punitive orientation reflects downstream regulatory expression rather than a constitutive component of the core mechanism.

These components are not arranged as a linear sequence but form a recursive maintenance system that sustains Contextual Moderation Failure over time. The Tripartite Model is intended to capture the full experience of the trait, including the cognitive tendencies that give rise to evaluative rigidity and the emotional and behavioural patterns that help maintain it. Outlining these components provides a clearer internal structure for understanding Judgmentalism, supports more precise scale development and offers a foundation for future empirical work.

3.0.1 Justifying the Tripartite Model's Architecture

We describe the Tripartite Model as a recursive maintenance system rather than a simple linear chain. Although different triggers may initiate a judgment, the components operate together to sustain the CMF state. The Cognitive and Emotional dimensions form a reciprocal loop: rigid appraisals provide justification for the negative affect, and the contingent emotional response adds cognitive load that limits the person's capacity for System 2 updating. This back-and-forth interaction creates a maintenance loop in which appraisal rigidity and heightened affect reinforce one another. Over time, the loop sustains the CMF state regardless of the initial trigger, giving Judgmentalism its characteristic persistence. The result is a self-reinforcing cycle of hot rigidity that continues even when the original stimulus has passed. This maintenance loop helps explain why Judgmentalism presents as a stable trait across time and situations rather than as a series of isolated harsh reactions.

Although recursive, the components are not defined by each other; each reflects a separable, measurable process. The Cognitive dimension can be assessed independently of affective intensity; the Emotional dimension can be triggered without behavioural expression; and Behavioural output may be experimentally dissociated from internal appraisal fidelity. Their interdependence reflects empirical prediction rather than definitional circularity

3.0.2 Distinguishing Judgmentalism from Discernment, Expressive Style and Harshness

Everyday language often conflates being "judgmental" with several related but distinct tendencies: heightened discernment, willingness to express one's views, blunt or harsh interpersonal style, and cultural norms around directness. While these tendencies may intersect with judgmentalism, they are not intrinsic to the trait. A person can be highly discerning yet capable of flexible evaluative updating, or blunt in communication but still willing to revise a negative impression when contextual information is available.

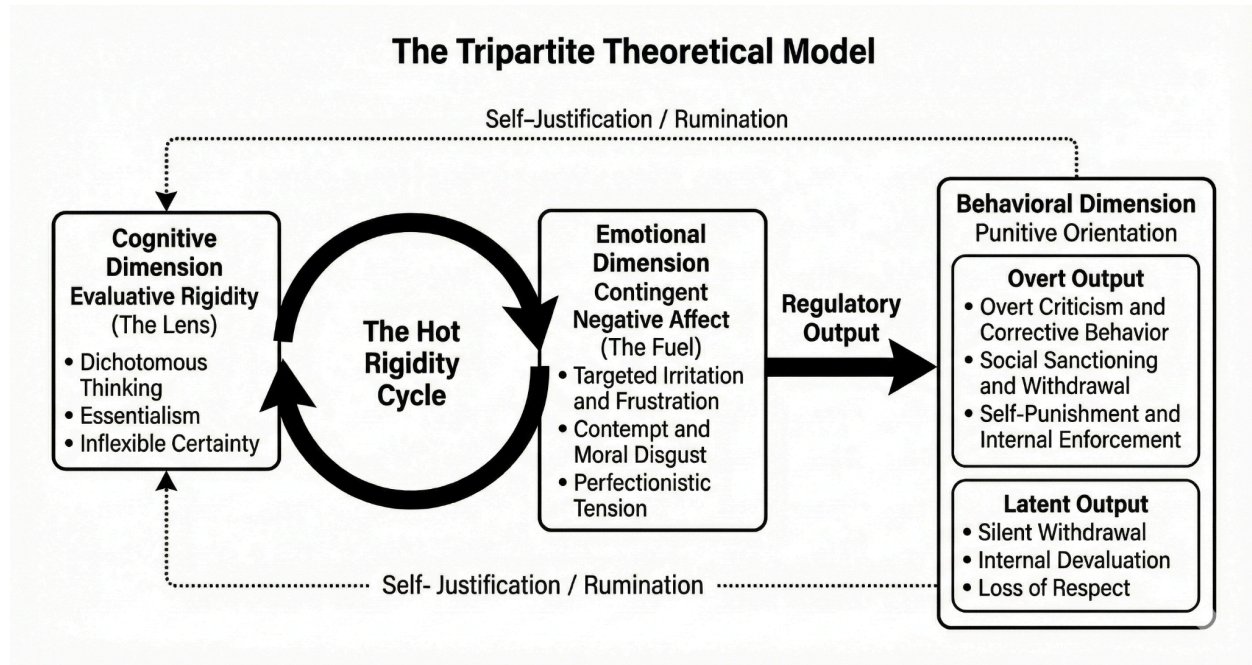
In the present framework, the defining feature of Judgmentalism is not the content or tone of the evaluation but the failure of contextual information to moderate an initial negative appraisal. Discernment refers to noticing fine-grained differences; expressive style refers to how readily and in what tone evaluations are voiced; cultural norms influence how direct or indirect communication is expected. These factors shape the *expression* of judgment but not the underlying evaluative architecture.

Positioning expressive harshness as a downstream behavioural output within the Tripartite Model ensures that Judgmentalism is conceptualised as a rigidity in evaluative updating, not as a synonym for outspokenness or interpersonal bluntness.

Figure 2. The Tripartite Model of Trait Judgmentalism: Recursive interactions between

cognitive rigidity, contingent affect, and expressive harshness.

The Cognitive and Emotional dimensions form a reciprocal maintenance loop, while the Behavioural dimension reflects downstream regulatory output rather than a defining feature of the trait.



First, the Cognitive and Emotional dimensions work together in a reciprocal maintenance loop, or what we describe as the “hot rigidity” cycle. Although the initial trigger may be either cognitive or emotional, the two processes quickly begin reinforcing one another: contingent negative affect draws on the cognitive resources needed for effective gating, and rigid appraisals, in turn, help maintain the heightened affective arousal. We describe this escalation as a Cold–Hot State Transition, marking a move from a relatively neutral, reflective evaluative stance into an emotionally charged state where contextual processing becomes much more limited. This shift helps explain why people may reason flexibly when affective intensity is low but become markedly more rigid once emotions are activated.

Second, the Behavioural dimension is conceptualised as the downstream output of the cognitive and emotional system. Expressive harshness, including criticism, sanctioning, withdrawal and self-punishment, emerges from the combined influence of rigid appraisals and intensified affect rather than functioning as an independent driver of the trait.

Finally, because the model specifies both directional and reciprocal effects, it requires validation using methods such as structural equation modelling or network analysis, which are well suited to testing dynamic psychological architectures.

Although behaviour is treated as downstream in the model, expressive harshness may in some

situations feed back into cognitive rigidity through processes such as rumination or self-justification. This remains an open question for future empirical work.

3.1 The Cognitive Dimension: Evaluative Rigidity (The Lens)

The Cognitive dimension reflects the interpretive framework that a judgmental individual brings to the world. It shapes how behaviours, intentions and mistakes are understood and evaluated. This framework does not simply bias incoming information; it organises social input in a systematic way that restricts nuance and encourages broad, global interpretations.

This dimension is defined by three recurrent processes. Together, these processes create a stable evaluative lens that guides how individuals interpret social information and increases the likelihood of rapid and global judgment.

- **Dichotomous Thinking.** This dimension reflects a tendency to place people, actions, and even one's own worth into simple binary categories such as good or bad, success or failure, or competent or incompetent. This style simplifies thinking but sacrifices nuance, and it aligns with classic accounts of rigid appraisal patterns in cognitive theory (Beck, 1979).
- **Moralised Essentialism.** Judgmentalism involves a rapid tendency to infer global character traits from single or isolated behaviours (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000). A single mistake is treated not as a momentary lapse but as revealing something essential and enduring about the person. Once this conversion occurs, contextual information becomes epistemically secondary rather than corrective. This pattern resembles the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977), but it goes further in two important ways. First, the dispositional inference becomes the *default* response across situations, rather than an occasional shortcut. Second, the inference is reliably negative and shows little movement even when new information contradicts it. In this sense, essentialist judgments within Judgmentalism function not just as explanatory biases but as a stable way of assigning worth and character.
- **Inflexible Certainty.** This dimension involves strong confidence in one's moral or competence-related judgments and a marked reluctance to revise them even when presented with contradictory information. It reflects reduced epistemic openness and difficulty tolerating ambiguity, both of which are associated with rigidity in evaluative processing (Kruglanski and Webster, 1996). This resistance to updating illustrates a form of epistemic inflexibility, in which certainty is maintained despite clear disconfirming context. In this sense, the stance functions not merely as firm conviction but as a structural barrier to evaluative revision.

This Cognitive dimension aligns directly with the CMF mechanism. The interpretive lens filters contextual cues in a way that restricts their entry into the evaluative system, limiting the individual's capacity to revise an initial assessment. As a result, the final judgment reflects the first negative impression more strongly than a contextually informed evaluation. In this sense,

the Cognitive dimension refers to the content and structure of the evaluative lens, while CMF describes the process through which this lens prevents contextual information from updating an initial negative appraisal.

We also propose that error detection vigilance is a complementary component of the cognitive system: a heightened readiness to notice deviations or shortcomings in oneself or others. This vigilance increases sensitivity to potential standard violations and raises the likelihood that intuitive negative appraisals will be triggered.

Taken together, these cognitive tendencies contribute to what we refer to as initial impression dominance. In practice, the first intuitive reaction ends up shaping the later judgment far more than it should.

3.2 The Emotional Dimension: Contingent Negative Affect (The Fuel)

Judgmentalism is not a cold cognitive style; it is closely tied to emotional reactivity. This reactivity is violation-contingent rather than diffuse, emerging specifically in response to perceived standard breaches. We propose that a central feature of this emotional profile is Standard-Violation Sensitivity: negative affect is most likely to arise when a perceived standard has been breached, rather than from a general negative mood state. This specificity separates Judgmentalism from broader negative affectivity and helps place emotional activation within the CMF mechanism. Unlike the diffuse emotional tendencies seen in traits such as Neuroticism, the affective response here is contingent, emerging specifically in reaction to a perceived violation. This contingency is foundational to distinguishing Judgmentalism from general negative mood or affective instability. Although the emotional signature of Judgmentalism is violation-contingent rather than diffusely negative, diffuse affect can still function as an amplifier of gating vulnerability. Elevated baseline arousal or mood-related cognitive load may lower the threshold for intuitive negative appraisal, without serving as a primary causal driver

Targeted Irritation and Frustration. This component refers to the immediate emotional reaction that follows the first intuitive appraisal. When either others or the self fall short of expected standards, judgmental individuals tend to feel a sharp surge of irritation or frustration. This response aligns with the fast, negative evaluations typical of intuitive processing (Cunningham et al., 2004). We propose that this contingent affect directly contributes to Gating Impairment, as the emotional arousal draws on the cognitive resources needed for System 2 contextual integration. In this way, emotional activation can momentarily “close” the contextual gate, making it less likely that new or mitigating information will soften the initial judgment.

Importantly, this negative affect also functions as a cognitive load. The physiological activation associated with irritation or contempt uses neural resources normally required for reflective gating, effectively holding the system in a more rigid state. Here, the emotion is not

simply a byproduct of the evaluation; it plays an active role in sustaining it.

This dynamic reflects a wider process we refer to as **Affective Load Interference**: increased emotional arousal absorbs the executive resources required for contextual integration, thereby strengthening the intuitive appraisal and reducing the likelihood of subsequent change of mind.

Contempt and Moral Disgust. These deeper emotional reactions often involve distancing, rejection and a sense of moral or personal superiority. Contempt is especially important because it signals a devaluation of the other person rather than simple disagreement, and it is closely linked to interpersonal toxicity (Hutcherson and Gross, 2011). Moral disgust may also arise when a perceived violation is interpreted as a fundamental flaw in character rather than a temporary lapse. These responses align with theories of moral emotion in which intuitive condemnation emerges before more reflective analysis (Haidt, 2001; Haidt, 2012). Judgmentalism therefore fits within affectively charged intuitive moral judgment while remaining distinct in its resistance to contextual moderation. When essentialist inferences combine with moralised affect they produce what we refer to as moralised essentialism, the tendency to treat a single violation as indicative of a person's underlying moral character. This fusion strengthens the rigidity of the appraisal and transforms what might otherwise be seen as a behavioural lapse into a perceived revelation of moral essence. These emotions often produce a cold, calcifying form of affect that encourages evaluative closure rather than explosive expression.

Perfectionistic Tension. This represents the vigilance and internal pressure to detect errors in oneself or others. It often manifests as physical bodily tension, a sense of urgency, or a sustained monitoring of performance or behaviour.

This emotional reactivity increases reliance on initial intuitive appraisals and reduces the likelihood that contextual information will be incorporated.

3.2.1 Functional and Clinical Interpretations

Although the present framework is cognitive–affective in emphasis, the emotional profile of Judgmentalism aligns with several psychodynamic and experiential formulations. The contingent negative affect that arises following a perceived violation may function as a defensive buffer against more primary emotions, including shame, fear of inadequacy, envy, or vulnerability to interpersonal disappointment. Within Coherence Therapy or ego-state perspectives, a judgmental reaction can be understood as *a protective state that offers the individual a sense of control or moral certainty when confronted with ambiguity or threat*.

In this view, the rigidity serves a functional purpose: harsh evaluation prevents the individual from confronting the discomfort associated with a more flexible or forgiving interpretation. This functional perspective complements the CMF model by explaining *why* the contextual gate becomes resistant in the first place, not simply through cognitive overload but through

the subjective utility of maintaining evaluative dominance. Such interpretations remain consistent with the Tripartite architecture, in which emotional activation and appraisal rigidity form a self-reinforcing cycle.

3.3 The Behavioural Dimension: Punitive Orientation (Overt and Latent Output)

The Behavioural dimension reflects the point at which internal evaluations translate into observable actions in the social world. These behaviours may be subtle or overt, yet they consistently function to enforce standards, signal disapproval or manage the perceived violation. In this sense, behaviour is the stage at which the judgmental evaluative style exerts its social impact, shaping interpersonal dynamics as well as self-directed outcomes.

We propose that although expressive behaviour is downstream of cognitive and emotional processes, it may participate in a secondary reinforcement loop. Actions such as correcting, criticising or withdrawing can prompt rumination and self-justification, which may further stabilise the rigid appraisal. This feedback is not presented as a defining feature of the trait but as a potential maintenance factor that can emerge from the broader CMF architecture.

Overt Criticism and Corrective Behaviour. This includes unsolicited advice, direct criticism, or efforts to instruct others on their moral, interpersonal, or intellectual shortcomings. The judgmental individual often experiences these acts not as hostility but as a perceived obligation to correct error or uphold standards. Such corrective impulses may be justified internally as principled, necessary, or morally protective.

Social Sanctioning and Withdrawal. This category includes behaviours such as abruptly ending relationships, withdrawing communication, giving the “silent treatment,” or engaging in reputational gossip. These actions operate as outward expressions of internal devaluation, signalling that the other person has fallen below acceptable standards. Work on interpersonal conflict shows that this pattern of withdrawal and distancing is strongly associated with relationship deterioration and eventual breakdown (Gottman, 1993).

Self-Punishment and Internal Enforcement. In the self-directed domain, Judgmentalism could manifest as negative self-talk, withdrawal from activities that are considered rewarding, self-imposed restriction and limitations after mistakes, or avoidance of opportunities due to perceived unworthiness. This reflects the bidirectional nature of the trait: the same rigid standards applied to others are also applied to the self, often with equally harsh consequences.

This Behavioural dimension plays a key role in distinguishing Judgmentalism from internal traits such as Need for Closure or general cognitive rigidity. Punitive orientation is common but not required: evaluative rigidity may remain internal or be expressed primarily through withdrawal, diminished respect, or internal devaluation. Judgmentalism involves not only forming harsh evaluations but acting on them. The individual feels compelled to externalise

the evaluation through correction, sanctioning or self-penalisation. In this sense, behaviour represents the regulatory expression of the trait; it is the downstream channel through which evaluative rigidity is enacted and intensified in both interpersonal and intrapersonal outcomes.

3.4 Latent Judgmentalism (The ‘Secretly Judgmental’ Phenotype)

Latent Judgmentalism describes individuals who show high cognitive rigidity and strong violation-contingent negative affect, yet whose punitive orientation is expressed primarily through silent rather than overt sanctioning. Latent Judgmentalism is not proposed as a subtype of Trait Judgmentalism but as a phenotypic expression illustrating how Contextual Moderation Failure can remain fully operative when punitive behaviour is behaviourally constrained, socially regulated, or strategically withheld. The evaluative stance remains harsh, global, and resistant to context, but behavioural output is regulated or inhibited (Gross, 1998; Baumeister et al., 1996).

Instead of explicit criticism, punishment takes the form of withdrawal, emotional coolness, loss of respect, or private devaluation. Silence here is not the absence of evaluation but an active regulatory strategy that preserves the negative appraisal while avoiding interpersonal confrontation, consistent with research on ostracism and social exclusion as forms of norm enforcement (Williams, 2007; Leary, 2005).

This phenotype is not synonymous with introversion, which reflects differences in stimulation and expressiveness rather than moralised evaluation (McCrae & Costa, 2004). It is also distinct from forgiveness: rather than showing decay of negative valence and motivational withdrawal from retaliation, latent judgmentalism often involves retention of unresolved evaluative conclusions over time (McCullough et al., 1997; McCullough et al., 2003).

From a measurement perspective, this phenotype is critical. Instruments that rely exclusively on overt behavioural indicators will systematically miss individuals whose evaluative rigidity remains socially masked yet psychologically and relationally consequential, consistent with broader findings on the dissociation between internal evaluative states and observable behaviour (Paulhus & Vazire, 2007; Furr, 2009).

4. Differentiation and Boundaries

An essential requirement for establishing a new psychological construct is demonstrating discriminant validity. We must show that Trait Judgmentalism is not merely a relabeling of existing traits but instead fills a conceptual and empirical gap within current personality frameworks.

Operationally, Contextual Moderation Failure is characterised by a ‘yes–but’ pattern: contextual explanations are acknowledged (‘yes’) but fail to alter the evaluative conclusion (‘but’).

Table 1 summarises the distinctions between Judgmentalism and closely related constructs, highlighting how the structure and focus of the proposed Judgmentalism Assessment Scale (JAS) uniquely address limitations in existing measures.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Existing Instruments and Trait Judgmentalism

Construct	Primary Focus	Directionality	Key Limitation for Capturing Judgmentalism	Distinct Contribution of Trait Judgmentalism
Self-Criticism (e.g., SCS, FSCRS)	Internal harshness and inadequacy	Self-directed only	Focuses exclusively on self-evaluation; overlooks the link between self- and other-directed harshness.	Bidirectional evaluative rigidity across both self and others, conceptualised as expressions of one underlying disposition.
Dogmatism (e.g., Rokeach Scale)	Belief or ideological rigidity	General	Emphasises belief content (e.g., politics, religion), not interpersonal character evaluation.	Person-focused rigidity, applied to character, worth, and competence regardless of ideological content.
Need for Closure (NFCS)	Desire for decisiveness and cognitive closure	General	Captures motivation to end ambiguity, not whether the judgment is negative, punitive, or rigid.	Valence-specific evaluation, emphasising negative, rigid standards and affective responses (e.g., irritation, contempt).
Authoritarianism (RWA)	Submission, conventionalism, punitive norm enforcement	Other-directed	Restricted to sociopolitical authority structures; not relevant to everyday interpersonal judgments.	Domain-general application across personal, social, and self-evaluations without political content.
Intolerance of Uncertainty (IUS)	Anxiety in response to ambiguity	General	Measures emotional distress but not the evaluative strategy used to resolve it.	Evaluative coping mechanism, framing judgment as a rigid solution to uncertainty rather than anxiety alone.
Agreeableness (Big Five)	Prosociality, warmth, cooperation	General	Too broad; low Agreeableness indicates coldness or competitiveness but not necessary evaluative rigidity.	Mechanistic specificity, isolating cognitive rigidity and standard enforcement rather than general interpersonal warmth.
Attributional Complexity (ACS)	Preference for complex explanations of behavior	General (Social Cognition)	Measures the preference for complexity, not the valence of the outcome. High complexity can still be used to construct elaborate negative judgments (e.g., conspiracy theories).	Motivated Gating Failure. Distinguishes ability from process; Judgmentalism is not an inability to understand context, but a specific refusal to admit exculpatory information into the appraisal.
Conscientiousness (Big Five)	Self-regulation, diligence, organisation, reliability	Primarily self-directed	Conscientiousness concerns disciplined goal pursuit and orderly behaviour; it does not determine how a person evaluates others or whether contextual information updates	Judgmentalism reflects a failure of evaluative updating, not a preference for order or reliability. It explains rigid negative appraisals of both self and

			those evaluations. Conscientious people can be exacting without being rigidly negative.	others independent of self-regulatory style.
Honesty–Humility (HEXACO) / Humility	Modesty, low entitlement, willingness to revise one’s self-view	Primarily self-referential	Humility concerns attitudes toward one’s own importance. Low humility reflects self-focus, not persistent negative evaluation of others. It does not explain why negative judgments fail to soften with context.	Judgmentalism captures context-resistant appraisal, clarifying why negative evaluations of behaviour or character remain global and inflexible even when contextual information is acknowledged.

4.1 Distinction from Related Cognitive Traits

Constructs such as Need for Closure and Intolerance of Uncertainty overlap with aspects of Judgmentalism but do not capture evaluative rigidity. These constructs address discomfort with ambiguity or the desire for decisiveness, whereas Judgmentalism concerns negatively biased evaluations that resist contextual updating. Cognitive rigidity reflects a general difficulty in shifting mental sets (Hommel and Colzato, 2022), while Judgmentalism describes the specific tendency to treat an initial negative judgment as definitive.

4.2 Boundaries with Personality Traits

Judgmentalism is conceptually distinct from major personality traits in both scope and underlying mechanism. In this framework, Trait Judgmentalism is defined by evaluative rigidity arising from CMF, a disruption of System 2 integration during social and self-evaluation. This positions Judgmentalism as a process-level construct concerned with how evaluations are formed and maintained, rather than a stylistic disposition captured by broad personality domains.

Low Agreeableness reflects interpersonal antagonism and reduced cooperativeness, but it does not specify the evaluative processes involved and does not imply a failure of contextual updating. Individuals low in Agreeableness may still form flexible and proportionate judgments; thus, it describes interpersonal style rather than evaluative architecture. In this sense, low Agreeableness describes *how* people typically engage with others, whereas Judgmentalism describes *how their evaluative architecture updates (or fails to update) in response to contextual information*.

Neuroticism reflects diffuse negative affectivity and emotional instability, whereas the negativity observed in Judgmentalism is evaluation-specific. Affect arises in response to perceived standard violations and is anchored in the appraisal system rather than chronic mood. Judgmentalism concerns rigidity in updating evaluations, not general emotional reactivity.

Authoritarianism reflects a sociopolitical orientation that includes submission to authority, conventionalism and punitive attitudes toward outgroups. Its scope is ideological and context-dependent. In contrast, Judgmentalism is domain general. CMF can appear in self-evaluation, interpersonal judgment and broader moral or societal appraisal.

More broadly, personality traits describe patterns of behaviour and interpersonal style, whereas Judgmentalism describes a mechanistic failure of contextual integration during evaluative processing. Trait Judgmentalism reflects a stable cognitive and emotional architecture through which CMF produces recurrent rigid and globalised judgments. Proposition 7, which concerns temporal stability, therefore examines whether this architecture functions as a trait rather than a transient state or situational reaction.

Judgmentalism also differs from well-known cognitive biases such as confirmation bias, negativity bias, anchoring, and the fundamental attribution error. These biases influence how information is selected or weighted, whereas Judgmentalism concerns what happens *after* contextual information is already known. The individual does not ignore the context; rather, contextual information fails to moderate the negative appraisal. Similarly, cognitive dissonance involves attempts to reconcile conflicting beliefs, whereas in Judgmentalism the evaluative stance persists even when no such reconciliation has occurred. These distinctions highlight that Judgmentalism is an evaluative updating failure rather than a perceptual or inferential bias.

4.2.1 Distinguishing Judgmentalism from Stubbornness, Discernment, and Cognitive Ability

Judgmentalism should not be conflated with stubbornness, discernment, or low cognitive ability. Stubbornness reflects resistance to persuasion but does not inherently involve negative evaluation or a failure of contextual integration. Similarly, discernment involves making fine-grained distinctions and may enhance contextual understanding rather than restrict it. Judgmentalism is distinct because the individual may fully comprehend the contextual explanation yet find that their negative appraisal remains unchanged. This decoupling of cognitive understanding from evaluative updating is central to the construct and differentiates it from traits associated with simple inflexibility, argumentative persistence, or cognitive limitations.

4.3 The Distinction from Emotional Intelligence

Emotional Intelligence is sometimes invoked in everyday descriptions of highly judgmental behaviour, yet this association is informal and has little grounding in existing psychological theory. Established models of Emotional Intelligence conceptualise it as a set of abilities involved in recognising, understanding and regulating emotions once they have arisen (Mayer et al., 2008; Petrides et al., 2007).

In contrast, we conceptualise Judgmentalism as an evaluative disposition that operates at an

earlier point in the appraisal process. It concerns the formation of rigid and negatively biased evaluations, which precede and shape the emotional responses that individuals may later need to regulate. Discriminant validity lies in the distinction between internal appraisal and outward performance. High Emotional Intelligence may allow an individual to regulate or soften the expression of judgment to maintain social harmony, whereas Trait Judgmentalism refers to the rigidity of the internal evaluation itself. A person high in both Emotional Intelligence and Judgmentalism may outwardly appear composed while internally maintaining a fixed negative appraisal that is merely moderated in its expression.

This theoretical distinction clarifies that Judgmentalism and Emotional Intelligence pertain to different stages of the evaluative and emotional sequence. It also supports the empirical need to examine Judgmentalism alongside Emotional Intelligence in order to establish discriminant validity.

4.4 Competing Explanations

Constructs such as moral conviction, punitive ideology, performance-based perfectionism and trait anger each capture certain aspects of harsh evaluation, but none address how contextual information is treated once an appraisal has been formed. For example, moral conviction can support firm and principled disapproval while still allowing flexible and context-sensitive judgments. Performance-based perfectionism may involve demanding standards without extending those standards to global conclusions about a person's character. Trait anger reflects the intensity of negative affect rather than the structure of evaluative processing. Trait Judgmentalism, in contrast, is defined by a specific process of context-resistant appraisal updating, in which initial negative evaluations persist even when relevant contextual information is available and would ordinarily prompt revision.

Crucially, a distinction must be drawn between *Contextual Moderation Failure* (a mechanistic rigidity) and *Contextual Bracketing* (a deliberate moral stance). In the latter, an individual may fully process mitigating information but consciously deem it irrelevant to a specific absolute standard (e.g., a zero-tolerance policy). In Trait Judgmentalism, however, the resistance is characterised by a utilisation deficit: the 'contextual gate' does not function to admit the information into the weighting process in the first place. The judgmental individual does not weigh the context and reject it; they are structurally impeded from allowing the context to dilute the valence of the initial intuitive appraisal.

Not all context-resistance reflects dysfunctional gating. In domains involving principled moral convictions such as civil rights, equity advocacy, or harm-prevention—individuals may intentionally treat contextual information as normatively irrelevant because the evaluative standard is categorical rather than situational. Such cases constitute deliberate context-bracketing, not CMF. Distinguishing principled rigidity from mechanistic gating failure is therefore essential to prevent overextension of the construct.

4.4.1 Self–Other Directionality as Correlated Facets

We propose that self-directed and other-directed judgments reflect interconnected expressions of a single latent evaluative mechanism rather than separate traits, consistent with theoretical models that conceptualise self- and other-evaluation as coordinated facets of a shared critical orientation (Blatt, 2004). In this view, Judgmentalism involves one underlying appraisal architecture whose outward direction varies depending on the target.

While CMF provides the shared mechanistic architecture for rigidity, the specific target of this rigidity may be moderated by distinct motivational systems. For example, individuals with high self-enhancement motives (e.g., narcissistic traits) may selectively inhibit the gating mechanism when evaluating others while maintaining permissive flexibility toward the self. Thus, while we predict a positive correlation between self- and other-judgmentalism in the general population, specific personality profiles may introduce directional asymmetry without negating the existence of the underlying CMF capability deficit.

Positioning directionality as an output property preserves conceptual parsimony and is consistent with the CMF framework, which assumes a shared contextual gating process.

4.5 Defending Against Construct Proliferation (The Jangle Fallacy)

Personality psychology is particularly vulnerable to the “Jangle Fallacy,” in which new constructs are introduced despite referring to the same underlying psychological process. Because Judgmentalism may superficially resemble constructs such as Dogmatism, Need for Closure or low Agreeableness, it is important to establish the conceptual distinctiveness of the trait we propose.

Our defence rests on two complementary pillars within the nomological network: mechanistic specificity and empirical necessity.

1. **Mechanistic Specificity.** We define Judgmentalism not by its outcomes (e.g., harsh or global evaluations) but by a distinct underlying mechanism: CMF refers to a disruption in the System 2 integration of contextual information during evaluative updating. None of the adjacent constructs specify an equivalent evaluative-processing failure. This positions Judgmentalism as a mechanism-level concept rather than a relabeling of existing descriptive traits.
2. **Empirical Necessity.** Proposition 5 requires that Judgmentalism account for unique variance in key outcomes, particularly psychological distress and affective polarisation, beyond broad personality descriptors such as the Big Five and Emotional Intelligence. This requirement is tested through incremental R^2 analyses. If Judgmentalism predicts variance not captured by existing constructs, it demonstrates empirical added value and meets contemporary standards for establishing a new psychological construct

Taken together, mechanistic specificity, which clarifies what Judgmentalism is, and empirical necessity, which clarifies what Judgmentalism adds, provide a strong defence against the

Jangle Fallacy. A construct defined by a novel process and supported by unique predictive power warrants conceptual separation within the personality domain and avoids the Jangle Fallacy more convincingly than proposals based solely on content similarity or taxonomic reclassification.

5. The Nomological Network: Theoretical Propositions

To situate the construct within a broader scientific framework, we outline seven theoretical propositions that describe the expected nomological network of Trait Judgmentalism. These propositions follow directly from the CMF mechanism and specify predicted associations across cognitive, intrapersonal, interpersonal and sociopolitical domains.

Table 2. Theoretical Propositions in the Nomological Network of Trait Judgmentalism

Proposition	Theoretical Claim	Rationale	Expected Evidence
1. Cognitive Mechanisms	Judgmentalism is associated with reduced cognitive flexibility and epistemic openness.	Evaluative rigidity is expected to constrain the ability to revise initial appraisals.	Lower task-switching performance; lower Intellectual Humility (Uddin, 2021; Kross & Grossmann, 2012).
2. Intrapersonal Functioning	Judgmentalism increases vulnerability to psychological distress.	Harsh standards applied inward create self-condemnation and shame.	Positive correlations with distress; negative correlations with self-compassion.
3. Societal Outcomes	Judgmentalism is hypothesised to function as a dispositional amplifier of affective polarisation.	Rigid, essentialist evaluations of outgroups reflect the same underlying appraisal style and may amplify polarisation beyond ideological content	Prediction of polarisation beyond ideology (Iyengar et al., 2019).
4. Discriminant Validity	Judgmentalism is distinct from Emotional Intelligence.	Judgmentalism reflects upstream appraisal rigidity, whereas EI reflects downstream regulation.	Separate latent factors in CFA; modest negative correlation.
5. Incremental Validity	Judgmentalism is hypothesised to predict unique variance in distress and polarisation beyond Big Five traits and EI.	Evaluative rigidity reflects a domain not captured by broad personality descriptors.	Incremental R ² beyond Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and EI.
6. Cross-Cultural	The Tripartite Model is	Although specific norms	Configural, metric, and scalar

Invariance	structurally stable across cultures.	differ, rigid context-free evaluation is expected to be universal.	invariance across cultural groups.
7. Temporal Stability	Judgmentalism functions as a trait-like disposition.	Evaluative rigidity should remain relatively stable across time, though it may show gradual attenuation consistent with the maturation principle of personality, particularly as Intellectual Humility (Proposition 1) increases with life experience.	Test–retest reliability (ICC > .70).

Together, these propositions translate the conceptual architecture of Trait Judgmentalism into a coherent empirical programme. They outline a structured research agenda that links the proposed CMF mechanism to outcomes across cognitive, intrapersonal, interpersonal and sociopolitical domains.

Behavioural Correlates and Everyday Expressions. In addition to the propositions above, Trait Judgmentalism is expected to manifest in everyday evaluative behaviours that reflect rigidity in updating. Likely behavioural indicators include a higher frequency of complaints, consistently low star ratings or critical reviews, product returns, interpersonal sanctioning, and abrupt social withdrawal following perceived norm violations. These outcomes follow directly from the combination of evaluative rigidity and contingent negative affect described in the Tripartite Model. Importantly, such behaviours do not define the trait but serve as observable expressions of the underlying evaluative architecture.

6. Directions for Future Scale Development

The development of a psychometrically robust Judgmentalism Assessment Scale (JAS) is a task for future empirical research. The points below are intended as suggestions for how the idea of Trait Judgmentalism might be examined in later studies.

A central challenge in measuring an evaluative disposition is distinguishing rigid judgment from high standards, moral concern or assertiveness. To maximise theoretical precision and linguistic nuance, item generation will follow a hybrid human and AI strategy.

Theoretical mapping. The three dimensions of Judgmentalism, cognitive, emotional and behavioural, could be mapped onto specific facets of the Contextual Moderation mechanism. This approach ensures that items reflect both the content of evaluations and the process through which evaluative rigidity is maintained.

AI augmentation. To avoid the warmth bias seen in standard personality items, item generation should focus on the rejection of context, for example, “I do not need to know the backstory to know what they did was wrong,” rather than general dislike. This strategy helps reduce researcher bias and supports greater linguistic diversity. Items can be generated for both self-directed and other-directed contexts to preserve the bidirectional nature of the construct.

Human curation. Expert reviewers can screen the initial pool for conceptual fidelity, clarity and cultural neutrality. Only items that directly capture rigidity in evaluative updating should be retained for empirical testing.

These examples demonstrate the alignment required between item content and the Tripartite Model and illustrate how the construct can be operationalised in a psychometrically coherent way.

Operationalising Contextual Moderation Failure To capture the specific mechanism of Contextual Moderation Failure (CMF), scale items must distinguish between general negativity (intensity of affect) and evaluative rigidity (refusal to update). Unlike standard personality items, JAS items incorporate a "contextual rejection" clause to test if the judgment persists despite mitigating information.

Table 3 provides illustrative examples of this item logic. These pairings demonstrate how the JAS item structure differs from standard measures by incorporating a "contextual rejection" clause:

Table 3. Operationalising CMF: Distinguishing Rigidity from Negativity

Dimension	Standard Negativity Item (Measures Intensity)	JAS Item (CMF-Based) (Measures Updating Failure)
Cognitive	"I often form negative opinions of people."	"My opinion of a person remains fixed, regardless of new information."
Emotional	"I get annoyed when people make mistakes."	"Valid excuses do not reduce my irritation with others' errors."
Behavioural	"I am critical of others."	"I feel compelled to correct others, even when it is unnecessary."

As demonstrated by these examples, the target items for the JAS must assess whether the judgment survives the introduction of context (e.g., "new information," "valid excuses"). This ensures the final scale targets the utilization deficit defined in the theoretical model rather than general negative affect.

6.1 Potential Validation Studies

In future empirical work, validation studies could be conducted to examine the structure, reliability and construct validity of the JAS. Multi-country sampling offers a promising strategy for enhancing generalisability and reducing the field's reliance on WEIRD populations.

Structural validity. Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses could be used to assess whether the Tripartite Model, comprising Cognitive, Emotional and Behavioural dimensions, provides superior fit compared with alternatives such as single-factor or bifactor models.

Nomological testing. Structural equation modelling can be used to evaluate the theoretical propositions linking Judgmentalism to cognitive flexibility, psychological distress and affective polarisation. This will test whether the CMF mechanism predicts meaningful outcomes across multiple domains.

Cross-cultural invariance. Multi-group confirmatory factor analysis could be applied to examine configural, metric and scalar invariance across cultural groups.

Temporal stability. Test-retest reliability over a four to six week interval could be used to determine whether the JAS demonstrates the degree of stability expected of an enduring disposition.

The considerations above outline one way in which the construct introduced in this article could be operationalised in future empirical research while emphasising that the present work is conceptual. The JAS should therefore be understood not as a premature measurement tool but as a potential future instrument grounded in a theoretically coherent and precisely articulated framework.

7. Discussion: Why Now?

The formalisation of Trait Judgmentalism is not simply an academic exercise; it responds to the psychological, social and technological conditions that shape evaluation in the twenty-first century. The mechanisms outlined here speak directly to contemporary environments in which rapid and decontextualised judgments have become common, psychologically consequential and socially amplified. In this sense, Judgmentalism is more than an interpersonal style; it may also operate as a vulnerability factor for digital radicalisation. The architecture of online platforms, particularly the dynamics of context collapse, can interact with dispositional tendencies toward CMF in ways that intensify polarisation

7.1 The Digital Amplification of Rigidity

We live in an information environment that structurally inhibits contextual integration. Social media platforms present decontextualised behavioural snippets, such as a tweet, a short clip or a headline, and invite instantaneous social evaluation. The algorithms that drive engagement

often prioritise moralised and high-intensity content, rewarding the most rigid and extreme interpretations of these fragments (Brady et al., 2021).

In such environments, Trait Judgmentalism may operate as a vulnerability factor, interacting with platform architecture to amplify rapid and decontextualised condemnation and accelerate polarisation. Individuals high in this trait are more likely to treat a fragment of behaviour as definitive evidence of global character flaws and less likely to pause, seek context or consider mitigating factors.

The architecture of digital platforms aligns theoretically with the mechanism of CMF. By stripping context from content, these platforms create conditions that prioritise intuitive appraisal and thereby intensify the influence of Trait Judgmentalism. This dynamic reduces the opportunity for System 2 processing and strengthens intuitive condemnation. Understanding Judgmentalism is therefore essential for explaining contemporary phenomena such as cancel culture, cycles of moral outrage and affective polarisation, all of which increasingly shape social and political life.

Clinically, the construct offers a unifying lens for understanding several patterns of psychopathology. Evaluative rigidity is likely a transdiagnostic mechanism contributing to depressive self-criticism, anxiety-related hypervigilance for errors and interpersonal difficulties associated with certain personality disorders. Conceptualising these difficulties as manifestations of a shared evaluative processing style opens new avenues for intervention.

Rather than focusing solely on the content of rigid evaluations, interventions may need to strengthen cognitive flexibility and contextual integration, training individuals to open the gate to alternative explanations and mitigating information. Beyond clinical settings, personal growth supported by exposure to diverse social contexts or the intentional cultivation of intellectual humility may naturally enhance the efficiency of the contextual gate, allowing individuals to override rigid intuitive appraisals more effectively over time. If the evaluative system is resistant to updating, conventional cognitive restructuring may be insufficient; process-level training may be required to target the underlying rigidity in appraisal.

Although this paper presents a detailed conceptual framework, it does not provide empirical tests of the proposed mechanisms or the wider nomological network. Alternative explanations, including moral conviction or performance-based perfectionism, may account for some aspects of evaluative rigidity and will need to be examined in comparative designs. These limitations underscore the need for further empirical investigation. The intention here is to provide a starting point for such work rather than a final or complete account.

From a clinical perspective, evaluative rigidity may at times reflect an underlying functional purpose. Psychodynamic and Coherence Therapy models propose that rigid negative appraisals can serve as protective strategies that shield the individual from primary emotions such as shame, vulnerability, or fear of relational disappointment. In this sense, Judgmentalism may function as a coherence-preserving mechanism: maintaining a fixed

evaluative stance prevents the activation of emotionally threatening material. This interpretation complements rather than replaces the CMF account by situating evaluative rigidity within a broader motivational and affect-regulation context.

These intervention implications depend on distinguishing CMF from related but conceptually distinct phenomena. Unlike standard cognitive biases, which primarily distort how information is selected or weighted, CMF concerns what happens once contextual information has already been accurately perceived but fails to shift the evaluative trajectory. Likewise, stubbornness is a descriptive label for resistance to persuasion, not an explanatory mechanism, and low cognitive capacity refers to difficulty understanding contextual nuance rather than difficulty using that understanding to revise judgments. High-CMF individuals often possess the ability to comprehend complex context but show a utilisation deficit at the point of evaluative updating: the machinery for context-sensitive analysis exists yet is overridden by the initial intuitive appraisal. This distinction clarifies why remediation must target the gating process itself rather than simply increasing information exposure or general reasoning skills

7.3 Developmental Trajectory

Judgmentalism may decrease moderately with age and life experience, consistent with the maturation principle in personality development. One plausible pathway is growth in Intellectual Humility and contextual reasoning, which may enhance the efficiency of the “Contextual Gate” and support greater flexibility in evaluative updating. Developmental experiences such as exposure to diverse perspectives, corrective feedback from close relationships, and parenting styles that model context-sensitive evaluation (rather than global condemnation) are likely candidates for shaping individual differences in Trait Judgmentalism. These hypotheses remain speculative but generate concrete predictions for longitudinal and intervention research.

7.4 Limitations

Judgmentalism overlaps conceptually with moral conviction and punitive ideology in high-stakes moral contexts. Future studies will need to disentangle these possibilities through competitive modelling.

A further limitation concerns the empirical status of the CMF mechanism. This paper outlines a dynamic and reciprocal process, yet future empirical work will need to prioritise psychometric validation, particularly structural validity. Although such analyses can determine whether the cognitive, emotional and behavioural dimensions co-occur as a stable trait, cross-sectional data cannot establish the directional causality of the gating failure. Experimental designs will be required to isolate the specific causal sequence underlying the appraisal–affect loop.

At the same time, what constitutes ‘context-free’ evaluation is partly culturally constructed.

Norms around honour, hierarchy, or collectivist duty may prescribe relatively rigid responses in some domains. CMF is therefore hypothesised to show structural invariance, but the situations that elicit gated evaluation—and the social meaning of rigidity—may vary across cultures.

7.5 Future Research

Future research on Trait Judgmentalism may extend beyond psychometric development to include computational modelling of gate dynamics, ecological momentary assessment of evaluative rigidity in daily life and neuroimaging methods designed to test predictions about network-level processing.

7.5.1 Operationalising the Mechanism: The Necessity of Dynamic Measurement

While self report scales such as the proposed JAS are essential for capturing the subjective experience of Judgmentalism, the mechanistic definition of Contextual Moderation Failure indicates that static measures alone cannot provide full validation. Because CMF is defined by a failure to update, the construct is most appropriately assessed through dynamic methods that quantify the evaluative change between an initial intuitive appraisal and a later judgment made after contextual information has been introduced.

Future empirical work must therefore move beyond cross sectional correlations and employ designs capable of testing whether high trait individuals show minimal evaluative adjustment even when robust mitigating evidence is provided. The distinction between the initial severity of a judgment and its elasticity in response to new information serves as the central falsification criterion for the CMF model.

8. Conclusion

Building on the formal definition introduced earlier, Trait Judgmentalism offers a unified way of understanding the cognitive, emotional and behavioural processes that lead to rigid and negatively biased evaluations of oneself and others. This paper has outlined the structure of the trait, described its underlying mechanism of Contextual Moderation Failure as a utilisation deficit in evaluative updating, and located it within the broader landscape of personality and cognitive constructs. The theoretical propositions developed here provide a foundation for future empirical work that can test the structure, correlates and consequences of Judgmentalism. The framework also establishes the conceptual basis for the development of the Judgmentalism Assessment Scale and contributes to a clearer understanding of evaluative rigidity in individual functioning, interpersonal relationships and wider social contexts.

By identifying a mechanism underlying rigid negative appraisal, including forms that may remain behaviourally regulated rather than overtly expressed, Trait Judgmentalism addresses

longstanding fragmentation in evaluative science and offers a coherent foundation for integrating cognitive, clinical and sociopolitical research on evaluative rigidity.

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