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Title: Effective Ways for Reducing Dehumanization: Interpersonal and Intergroup Strategies

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Abstract

Up to date, research on dehumanization has widely been explored showing the consequences of the denial of humanity to others, the groups that are affected by this refusal, or even the cognitive and neural networks that are involved when perceiving others as less human. Dehumanization is still so grounded in human nature that it is fundamental to understand how this phenomenon can be prevented. For this reason, in the current paper, built on available literature, we aimed at showing what specific strategies, that can operate and impact at the interpersonal or intergroup level, can be used to avert dehumanization and its consequences.

Introduction

People can show a myriad of different characteristics, opposite beliefs, and disparate attitudes, but they all belong to the same superordinate category, that is the human group. Unfortunately, we all tend to perceive and treat others, especially those that belong to other groups (i.e., outgroups), as if they are less than fully human (dehumanization; [1]). This phenomenon involves more than dislike, justifying the exclusion of a single person or specific groups from moral value and consideration [1, 2]. In this vein, dehumanization paves the way to the most brutal behaviours (i.e., harm, lack of help, unfair treatment, unrecognized pain) that sadly continue to characterize the history of humanity (i.e., wars, femicide). Then, it is particularly relevant to understand when and how the perception of others as a less worthy human can be reduced to prevent harmful behaviours, both at the interpersonal and intergroup levels. In this article, along

with the reviews on dehumanization reduction available in literature [e.g., 3], we explicate strategies aimed at reducing dehumanization by distinguishing those that can be implemented at a) the interpersonal level, and those that work at the intergroup level, b) toward a specific group, and c) toward multiple groups. We then illustrate the limits of present research and provide some suggestions for future studies to help further disentangle how to promote the social inclusion of every human being.

Interpersonal level strategies

Strategies aimed at reducing dehumanization at an interpersonal level are based on the tethered humanity hypothesis and the gender attribution hypothesis. Tethered humanity is the idea that in interpersonal conflictual relationships, the self-images of perpetrators and victims are bonded with each other [4]**. Thus, in episodes such as bullying, intimate partner violence, and social ostracism, both parties' efforts to restore their moral self-image (i.e., self-dehumanization) damaged by the harm inflicted or received are inextricably linked to the other party's evaluation. In this vein, self-forgiveness [5], perpetrators' apologies, and victims' forgiveness, can have positive effects. Specifically, they can be a way to self- and other- re-humanization. In this direction, a series of experiments [4]** demonstrated that both perpetrators and victims perpetrators and victims self-dehumanize in response to interpersonal harm and manage to regain a fully human status when re-humanizing the opposing party. Nevertheless, the re-humanization of both the self and the other represents a crucial step in overcoming conflicting relationships.

Recent research showed that sexual objectification (being reduced to a body or parts of the body available to satisfy the sexual needs and desires of other people [6] may also occur in close romantic relationships [7,8]. producing negative consequences in interpersonal dynamics. Research has shown that reducing women sexual objectification and self-objectification through emphasizing perceived humanization by their partners improve romantic relationships [9]. Moreover, greater perceived humanization by their partners reduced women’s depressive symptoms and body dissatisfaction, via diminished self-objectification.

Following the theorization that gender plays a role in humanization [e.g., 4**,10], a recent research [11]** showed that attributing gender (more than other social categories) to a target increased mind attribution to it and that removing gender to a target leads to seeing it as less human. According to the gender attribution hypothesis, the evaluation of others' gender may not only be the result of the recognition of their humanity, but rather an essential aspect to predict it. Therefore, more significant consideration of gender in the impression formation of an unknown person, among other characteristics, is functional in attributing humanity to him or her, paving the way to a constructive interpersonal relation [7].

Intergroup-level strategies related to a specific category

Following the division suggested by Vezzali and collaborators [3] – distinguishing outgroup-specific and -independent strategies – among interventions aimed at reducing dehumanization at the intergroup level, we distinguish tools that concern a specific group from those that can be applied to different groups, and whose re-humanization effect can even generalize to groups unrelated to the one considered. We will illustrate first strategies that apply to a specific target group, such as the sexual objectification reduction (i.e., gender), animal/human divide (i.e., ethnicity), and thinking about God (i.e., religion).

In the media and in social interactions, women are often sexually objectified with negative consequences for their well-being [e.g.,6]. Some studies have shown that reducing the relevance of sexual body parts and adding humanizing information on women, induces perceivers to recognize female bodies in a more configured way, lowering women's objectification [13].

Another type of dehumanization involves explicit animalistic-outgroup comparisons, such as historical portrayals of Blacks as 'apes' or Jews as 'vermin' [14]). Among ideologies, the belief in a stark divide between humans and (other) animals was found to predict dehumanization of some ethnic groups, such as African Americans [15]. Thus, according to the Interspecies model of prejudice [16], changing the way in which animals are perceived could reduce dehumanization of some ethnic outgroups that are associated to animals (i.e., immigrants). Since animalistic

dehumanization draws its negative effects from the fact that animals are generally perceived negatively compared to humans, increasing the perceived similarities between the two species can be considered another effective way to increase humanization of some ethnic groups [15,16].

Dehumanization is also a key feature in inter-religious conflict. Several studies across American Christians and one with Israeli Jews have investigated whether the belief in moralizing gods attenuates dehumanization of ethno-religious outgroups [17]. Results demonstrated that thinking about God's views of ethno-religious outgroups compared to one's own view of them reduces intergroup dehumanization. Overall, the attribution of universalizing moral attitudes to God promotes intergroup relations among religious believers.

Intergroup level strategies applied to different categories

The up-to-date literature has based its research on dehumanization reduction at the intergroup level on the manipulation of the same moderators that predict intergroup dehumanization [see 18 for a review]. Indeed, attachment security prime, meta-humanization, direct and indirect forms of intergroup contact, multiple and counter-stereotypic categorization are all strategies built to challenge the different factors that are at the basis of the denial of outgroup members' humanness. Therefore, these strategies can be applied to reduce dehumanization of many distinct groups. It is possible to contrast dehumanization by priming attachment security-based, through pictures or recall of personal memories. Given that having available and supportive figures affects individuals' development of a sense of security, positive working models of the self and other people and positive intergroup relationships [19], thus it should also influence outgroup dehumanization. A study by Capozza and collaborators (2022)[20]** investigated this relation showing that when a sense of protection and support was activated, adult participants tended to humanize (i.e, ascribing more uniquely human characteristics) more discriminated outgroups (i.e., homeless people, Study 1; Roma people, Study 2) compared to conditions where security was not

primed. Findings supported the efficiency of attachment security prime on dehumanization reduction of different outgroups.

Based on recent studies [21]**, mainly carried out on the WEIRD population, meta-humanization represents a further way to attenuate outgroup dehumanization. Meta-dehumanization, or the extent to which I perceive that my group is dehumanized by outgroup members, positively correlates with outgroup dehumanization, leading to a process of reciprocal dehumanization [22]. As a consequence, meta-humanization, or thinking that outgroup members do not dehumanize my group, but instead attribute it more humanness than I think may affect my own perception of the outgroup [23]. In this direction, Pavetich and Stathi (2021) [21]**, manipulating meta-humanization of Muslims and non-Muslims, demonstrated that the reciprocal perception of outgroups resulted in reducing hostility and increasing the desire for contact and friendship between groups. Extending the findings of the tethered humanity hypothesis on how the re-establishment of the humanness of the opposing party can help breaking the cycle of interpersonal harm [3]**, this preliminary evidence showed how the perceived humanization of the ingroup can help break the intergroup dehumanization cycle.

A consolidated strategy to reduce dehumanization is intergroup contact. Having positive face-to-face interaction with an outgroup member reduces not just negative attitudes toward the outgroup but also its dehumanization in different intergroup contexts, such as ethnic [e.g., 24,25], religious [26] and regional [e.g., 27], and different designs, such as cross-sectional [e.g., 24], experimental [e.g., 28] and longitudinal [e.g., 29,30]. Similarly, also indirect contact strategies (i.e., contact not involving face-to-face interactions) proved to be effective to improve group humanization. Andrighetto and colleagues (2012) [24] showed that having an in ingroup member knowing an outgroup member reduced dehumanization of the outgroup. Visintin and collaborators (2017)[25] found that mass mediated, parasocial, positive contact (i.e., reading or watching positive intergroup interactions) favored outgroup humanity. Several studies also showed that mentally simulated interactions with outgroup members (i.e., imagined contact) favored humanization of

several disadvantaged outgroups, such as homeless people [31], immigrants [32] and Roma people [33]. Outgroup empathy contributes to explain and promote the humanizing effect of intergroup contact. For instance, Soral and colleagues (2022)[34], through an empathy induced intervention adapted to online hate speech, showed that a prolonged direct contact with dehumanized individuals resulted in an increased support for hate-speech prohibition and consequently in a decreased intention to use derogatory language.

Further strategies demonstrated a generalized dehumanization reduction by enlarging the humanness attribution to distinct outgroups. Specifically, thinking about the numerous groups an outgroup member can belong to (i.e., an immigrant, father, religious, chef, animal lover) attenuate dehumanization of the target [see 20,35], independently of whether the groups considered are shared or unshared between participants and the target. Moreover, the humanizing effect goes beyond judgments [i.e., attribution of uniquely human emotions or traits; 36] by supporting the human rights of outgroup members [37] and fostering prosocial behaviours toward them [38]. Not only increasing the number (i.e., multiple categorization), but also the inconsistency of the memberships (i.e., counter-stereotypic categorization) attributed to outgroup members provides a tool for tackling dehumanization. Priming or asking participants to think about a person who belongs to two rarely associated groups (i.e., female mechanic; Muslim gay) enhances the humanization of the target. Interestingly, exposure to counter-stereotypic examples, stimulating cognitive flexibility, increases a generalized re-humanization of different outgroups [[i.e., asylum seekers, physically disabled people;20] unrelated to the target. In other words, experiencing diversity through counter-stereotypic targets, extends the reduced reliance on stereotypes not only of the targets considered but also of other outgroup members increasing their individualization. In further support of the effective role of individualization, Parker et al. (2018) [39] showed that presenting a person with developmental disabilities in either humanizing or individuating ways reduced dehumanization compared to control condition.

Current limits and future directions

The evidence reviewed points to some unresolved issues. First, we still need to examine the extent to which the effects obtained are long-lasting. Research has shown the long-term effect of intergroup contact on prejudice reduction [40], suggesting that this may also extend to dehumanization. Multiple categorization enhances human identification of adolescents over time [20]**, implying that this strategy can promote in the long-term individuals' awareness of the large variety of social groups with whom they share humanity. Nevertheless, more research is needed to support this evidence. Moreover, up to now, very few studies have examined actual behaviours derived from humanization strategies, and there is no field study to test their effectiveness "outside the laboratory" [but see, 40]. For instance, interventions to improve social inclusion in schools and workplaces, as well as trainings of job selectors and judges to respectively reduce dehumanization of candidates or accused people in court could be implemented. Furthermore, research suggests that we may all engage dehumanized perceptions encouraged by social contexts or personal goals, implying an individual difference in dehumanization propensity. Recent research has validated the Humanity Inventory, a self-report measure of individual differences in the propensity to engage dehumanization [41]. However, whether the illustrated humanization strategies may attenuate this individual tendency still needs to be tested. Finally, research has shown the variety of strategies that can be applied to specific or many different groups. However, we still do not know which strategy works better in which conditions. Thus, future research should consider the effect sizes of each strategy to assess their effectiveness providing crucial information for their application in specific real-world interventions.

Conclusions

Scientists and policy makers may devote attention to the variety of illustrated strategies to implement interventions attenuating dehumanization at different levels. Strategies to reduce dehumanization at the interpersonal level provide crucial tools to improve intimate relationships focusing especially on reduction of women objectification as one of the most heinous issues of modern societies. Strategies to reduce dehumanization at the intergroup level encourage the

implementation of different practises to attenuate dehumanization of disadvantaged groups and thus improving social inclusivity of current societies. Overall, dehumanization reduction at all levels by enlarging the circle of human concern helps not just to build more egalitarian societies, but also to improve people well-being, avoiding health issues related this extreme form of social discrimination.

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   This article provides an integrative framework in which the self-image of perpetrators and victims in conflictual interpersonal relationships becomes tethered to each other. The goal of

these studies is to test the tethered humanity hypothesis, which ascertains that perpetrators or victims can reclaim their full human status by re-establishing the humanness of the opposing party. Results show that perpetrators or victims self-dehumanize in response to interpersonal harm and regain - in most cases - a fully human status when re-humanizing the opposing party.

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This set of studies is the first that experimentally tests how gender categorization is a critical feature of perceiving humanness, showing that it is more central to conceptions of humanness than other social categories. Specifically, ten studies show that gender is the most strongly ascribed social category and the one that uniquely predicts humanization. The authors also demonstrate that removing gender from different groups and individuals leads them to be seen as less human. Finally, they show downstream consequences of stripping a target of gender: Perceivers consider them less relatable and more socially distant.

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    This paper shows that the activation of attachment security favors outgroup humanization. This effect was supported by two studies using different priming techniques, different outgroups, and different measures of dehumanization. In Study 1, attachment security was primed by showing pictures of attachment figures, and the outcome was the attribution of human emotions to homeless people. In Study 2, attachment security was primed by inviting participants to relive a recent warm and safe interaction. Outgroup humanization was measured by the attribution human nature traits to Roma people. Moreover, empathy mediated this humanizing effect of attachment security.

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Meta-dehumanization, the perception your group has been given less than human qualities, contributes to an increase of intergroup threat and consequent outgroup dehumanization. Thus, meta-humanization, or perceiving your group has been given dignified qualities should reduce outgroup dehumanization. Seven studies conducted in Canada and the United Kingdom, considering majority and minority groups and focusing on Muslim – non-Muslim relations, provide empirical evidence to imply that meta-humanization can reduce outgroup dehumanization and this in turn attenuates outgroup prejudice. Moreover, perceived high intergroup threat moderates the indirect effect of meta-humanization on prejudice.

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