

Humanness and Dehumanization

What does it mean to be human? Why do people dehumanize others (and sometimes themselves)? These questions have only recently begun to be investigated in earnest within psychology. This volume presents the latest thinking about these and related questions from research leaders in the field of humanness and dehumanization in social psychology and related disciplines. Contributions provide new insights into the history of dehumanization and its different types, and new theories are proposed for when and why dehumanization occurs. While people's views about what humanness is, and who has it, have long been known as important in understanding ethnic conflict, contributors demonstrate its relevance in other domains, including medical practice, policing, gender relations, and our relationship with the natural environment. Cultural differences and similarities in beliefs about humanness are explored, along with strategies to overcome dehumanization.

In highlighting emerging ideas and theoretical perspectives, describing current theoretical issues and controversies and ways to resolve them, and extending research to new areas, this volume will influence research on humanness and dehumanization for many years.

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Humanness and Dehumanization

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1 Advances in Understanding Humanness and Dehumanization

Paul G. Bain, Jeroen Vaes, and Jacques-Philippe Leyens

Editing a book can be an exciting and daunting process, but it is the excitement that keeps things going. We are very excited to have the opportunity to coordinate a volume showcasing new ideas and thinking in the linked fields of humanness and dehumanization. This derives from both the fascinating ideas of our contributors, and because it shows that this critical field of research is gaining broader recognition. Ideas about humanness are important in many sciences, ranging from biology to sociology, and are consequential in other fields, from religion to politics. However, the importance of beliefs about humanness is a relatively recent interest in psychology, even though it pervades many aspects of human functioning and interaction.

One of the aims of this introductory chapter is to introduce this field of research to those who might be less familiar with it, and to address a number of basic issues that might help readers understand the nature and importance of this area of research. This includes a brief exposition of its historical and theoretical background (expanded on in some chapters in this volume). We follow with a brief description of the contributions to this book, which span novel theories and approaches to understanding dehumanization, the application of dehumanization to new areas (such as crime and

policing, medicine, gender, and interpersonal relationships), and novel perspectives on what it means to be human and its consequences.

A (Very) Brief Background to Humanness and Dehumanization Research

Ideas about humanness imbue our everyday lives and the theories developed to describe our behavior. Philosophers invoke images of human nature to inform their ethical and political philosophies, such as Hobbes (1996/1651) who argued that humans feared evil but were not concerned about the common good. Within psychology, Wrightsman (1992) was one of the first to empirically examine people's general beliefs about humanness, and others have focused on specific aspects of human nature such as free will (Fahrenberg & Cheetham, 2007) or specific constructs such as values (Bain, Kashima, & Haslam, 2006). Some researchers have highlighted how conceptions of humanness are the site of ideological debate, as interested groups and individuals define humanness in ways that support their own ends. A good example is the claim that humans are rational and self-interested, which does not just reflect a simplification in economic theory but is used to justify support and opposition toward government policies and intervention (Schwartz, 1986).

A unified definition of humanness between sciences seems therefore a utopia, partly because it is an abstract, often metaphysically tinged concept and partly because we are all involved parties. Several researchers agree, however, that we can learn a lot about humanity when looking at its violations (Kaufmann, Kuch, Neuhäuser, & Webster, 2011). Focusing on processes of dehumanization often makes that which is denied concrete and almost tangible. Although dehumanization is relevant to many fields, it is perhaps most contentious (and has received most attention) when applied in intergroup contexts. Symbolically powerful and enduring examples of dehumanization are the different genocides committed in the past century. However, dehumanization has a much

longer history. For example, from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment, European intellectuals were preoccupied with stories of savages, barbarians, and exotic tales of humanoid creatures and monsters (see Jahoda, 1999). It is thus fitting that our volume begins with Jahoda's further exploration of this history, covering the period from the late-18th century to the mid-20th century ([Chapter 2](#)). Jahoda focuses on how learned philosophers and scientists of the period tried to objectively establish that some races were superior to others. By tracking racialism and the scientific and philosophical endeavors used to justify it right up to the mid-20th century, he shows how these ideas laid the groundwork and justification for Nazi racial ideology providing a context for modern ideas about humanness and psychological theories of dehumanization.

Of course, with the abundance of armed conflicts, dehumanization remained an important topic of research in the latter half of the 20th century. There was a continued focus on overt forms of dehumanization—the literal description or treatment of others as nonhuman. Of particular concern was how viewing others as nonhuman allowed us to morally “disengage” from them—justifying treating them as animals as undermining the legitimacy of their views and needs (Bandura, 1999; Bar-Tal, 1989; Opatow, 2001).

Yet despite this long history, our understanding of dehumanization has recently come a long way in a short period, kick-started at the turn of the century by the discovery that dehumanization is not just restricted to extreme or overt prejudice but can occur subtly and even without conscious awareness (Leyens et al., 2000). The impetus that arose from this “infracommunication” (a term chosen to distinguish this subtle denial of humanness from overt dehumanization) was shown to be a pervasive feature of intergroup perception (Leyens, Demoulin, Vaes, Gaunt, & Paladino, 2007; Leyens et al., 2001) and to have meaningful behavioral consequences (e.g., Vaes, Paladino, Castelli, Leyens, & Giovanazzi, 2003). Infracommunication is observed through the attribution or association of characteristics that are uniquely human (“human uniqueness,” or HU), such as complex emotions like embarrassment or optimism, more to an ingroup than to an outgroup. In contrast, basic emotions (e.g., fear, pleasure) are shared with animals, and

thus their attribution across groups is less relevant to dehumanization (Leyens et al., 2000). The HU sense of humanness corresponds to a distinction between humans and animals, so its denial to others is sometimes called “animalistic” dehumanization (Haslam, 2006). The burgeoning field of infrahumanization has been the subject of extensive reviews (Leyens et al., 2007; Vaes, Leyens, Paladino, & Miranda, 2012).

Haslam (2006) made an important further contribution by noting that humanness can be defined not only by what is uniquely human (as in infrahumanization), but also by what is typically human. These core human characteristics form what is called “human nature” (or HN). The denial of HN implies lacking characteristics such as emotionality, agency, warmth, and cognitive flexibility, making people resemble machines or robots, and thus has been called “mechanistic” dehumanization. People typically attribute greater HN characteristics, especially negative ones, to themselves than to other individuals (Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005; Loughnan et al., 2010) and sometimes deny HN to other groups (Bain, Park, Kwok, & Haslam, 2009).

To better understand the HU and HN conceptions of humanness and their role in dehumanization, it can also be helpful to explain what these effects are not. Some people perceived that the greater attribution of HN to the self than to others was another way to measure the “better-than-average” effect—where people attribute more favorable characteristics to themselves than to others (Alicke, 1985). However, it has been demonstrated that self-humanizing is distinct from the “better-than-average” effect (Haslam et al., 2005; Loughnan et al., 2010), and that attributions of humanness are not reducible to merely attributing more positive characteristics to the self (Haslam & Bain, 2007) or the ingroup (Bain et al., 2009). Similarly, early studies in infrahumanization were sometimes understood in terms of ingroup favoritism (assigning more positive attributes to the ingroup), but statistical analyses have shown that the two phenomena were completely different (Demoulin et al., 2009). In particular, these findings cannot be explained by the valence of the characteristics, as both positive and negative emotions are attributed more to the ingroup (Leyens et al., 2001). As

a result, we can be confident that both HN and HU forms of dehumanization are not reducible to viewing the self or ingroup positively and outgroups negatively.

Another perspective has interpreted these findings in terms of models of stereotyping, particularly the stereotype content model that posits two dimensions of stereotypes—warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Research has shown that HU and HN senses of humanness are related but conceptually distinct from these stereotype content dimensions (Haslam, Loughnan, Kashima, & Bain, 2008). Reflecting this relationship, groups lacking both warmth and competence are especially likely to be dehumanized (Harris & Fiske, 2006), and Vaes and Paladino (2010) found that more competent outgroups were dehumanized less.

Overall, the novelty and usefulness of ideas about humanness and dehumanization, along with their distinctiveness from other theoretical understandings, has led to an impressive literature—more than 140 publications. Researchers have not only used the basic concepts, but also enriched the field with their own approaches and theoretical modifications. One issue with this surge in research has been some disclarity about whether researchers are investigating similar or distinct phenomena. This is where Haslam's contribution ([Chapter 3](#)) is especially valuable. Haslam describes a three-dimensional framework that imposes a coherent structure on the multitude of approaches to dehumanization. His framework distinguishes three dimensions: the type of nonhuman comparison (animal or object), the degree to which it is held or expressed consciously (implicit or explicit), and whether it involves an absolute judgment or a relative comparison (absolute or relative). Haslam then discusses how prominent dehumanization theories and findings can be understood within this framework and considers alternative conceptualizations as goals for further research.

Where to From Here?

In producing this volume, we were in the enviable position to ask leaders in the field their views about the most important issues for

this field, now and into the future. Of course, there were diverse responses! However, we attempt to bring these different strands of thought together in a concluding chapter ([Chapter 17](#)). Here, we outline the major areas that these scholars addressed.

Why Do We Dehumanize?

One class of contributions, which is discussed in [Part 1](#), has moved beyond showing that we dehumanize others (in both obvious and subtle ways) to understanding why subtle, implicit forms of dehumanization are so widespread. The contribution of Waytz, Schroeder, and Epley ([Chapter 4](#)) argues that it arises from the difficulty of fully understanding minds other than our own—while we are aware of the internal complexities of our own mind, when we try to understand other minds, they will always seem a bit more simplistic. This suggests that dehumanization is a default state that can only be overcome by effort. This idea has several corollaries, and they explore the implications of each.

The contribution of Lee and Harris ([Chapter 5](#)) also focuses on the problem of knowing others' minds as a default judgment, focusing on its neuropsychological correlates. Importantly, they argue that even though our basic state is to not fully recognize others' mental states, this can be easily overcome by directing people to think about the distinct mental states of another—thinking about them as individuals—and this has the effect of humanizing them. This suggests that both motivation and contextual cues (to think of others as individuals vs. category members) can temper or even reverse processes of dehumanization.

The contribution of Hodson, MacInnis, and Costello ([Chapter 6](#)) expands this rationale even further, considering cognitive and motivational bases for dehumanization. They argue that dehumanization of other groups rests in part on the division we make between humans and animals (interspecies model of prejudice). In addition, they broaden consideration of attributions of both lesser *and* greater humanity to others, which they argue varies as a function of how valued a group is and whether it is seen as a threat. This is one of the few theoretical perspectives that allows for

superhumanization of others, in particular gods and demons, potentially extending to those with comparable powers on Earth, such as kings and dictators.

Heflick and Goldenberg ([Chapter 7](#)) focus on terror management (managing awareness of one's own death) as an important function of dehumanization. Reminders of our animal nature (i.e., that we are creatures like any other and thus will die) undermines one of our defenses against this mortal terror (i.e., that we can be at least symbolically immortal through our shared human culture). Hence, when we are reminded of our animal features, we react to view ourselves and our ingroups as more uniquely human. However, they also argue that our defense against this terror can be achieved by viewing ourselves as objects (deny HN, or see ourselves and groups in machinelike ways) because, unlike animals, objects and machines do not die. Thus, just as terror management can lead to (animalistic) dehumanization of others, it can also lead to the (mechanistic) dehumanization of ourselves.

Examining Dehumanization in New Domains

The archetypal groups for examining dehumanization have been national and ethnic groups, and these have occupied the main focus of recent work on dehumanization. Research is emerging that attempts to understand the humanness of other types of groups, particularly occupational groups (Iatridis, in press; Loughnan & Haslam, 2007). In this volume, several scholars have pushed these ideas further to provide a detailed analysis of dehumanization in a wider range of contexts, and this forms the core theme of [Part 2](#).

Two chapters focus on how dehumanization can offer important insights into crime and policing. Vasiljevic and Viki ([Chapter 8](#)) focus on dehumanization of offenders and how this results in some offenders (particularly from racial minorities) being excluded from moral consideration, thus justifying harsher punishment and reduced support for rehabilitation. Importantly, given that most offenders reenter the community, they explore how this dehumanization can be ameliorated through positive interpersonal contact and learning more about offenders as individuals. Hetey and Eberhardt ([Chapter 9](#))

consider the interplay between dehumanization of criminals and police, particularly the portrayal of violent criminals as animals and police as machines. They describe how physical elements of the social context, such as police uniforms, contribute to how police themselves, as well as observers, may mechanistically dehumanize the police. They explore the functions each form of dehumanization serves in this context, such as when laypeople would actually prefer police to be more “machinelike,” and the social contexts in which these perceptions are likely to be stronger, such as in times of rising crime rates.

In a similar vein, Leyens ([Chapter 10](#)) focuses on dehumanization in the medical profession, identifying not just when it is dysfunctional, but also where it can be functional and important. Importantly, he extends consideration of dehumanization beyond people’s attitudes to the dehumanizing effects of physical contexts like the use of medical technology and machines. In addition to exploring how dysfunctional elements of medical dehumanization can be overcome, Leyens makes the critical point that allowing terminally ill patients to die may actually restore their humanity relative to prolonging their life using machines.

Another important extension of dehumanization research is into gender relations, particularly arising from sexual objectification. Vaes, Loughnan, and Puvia ([Chapter 11](#)) note that objectification, while related to dehumanization, has some distinctive characteristics, particularly an “approach” tendency that seems at odds from other forms of dehumanization that are mostly believed to be related to avoidance. They describe when and why objectification leads to dehumanization and explore its consequences.

The final extension covered in this section involves how dehumanization emerges in interpersonal contexts. Bastian, Jetten, and Haslam ([Chapter 12](#)) explore when immoral behavior in interpersonal contexts can lead to dehumanization of the perpetrators of harm as well as their victims. Importantly, they describe how this may lead not only to dehumanization of others, but also the dehumanization of the self, with important emotional and behavioral consequences.

Understanding Humanity

All forms of dehumanization rely on an understanding of humanity, but despite promising early psychological research in this area (Wrightsman, 1992) and some recent advances (Bain, Vaes, Kashima, Haslam, & Guan, 2012), overall there has been very little sustained investigation of what it actually means to be human and its consequences. Hence, the series of chapters in [Part 3](#) focuses on what humanity means. Some chapters apply novel ideas about humanity to dehumanization, but others move beyond a focus on dehumanization to describe the broader consequences of what it means to be human.

The chapter by Bain ([Chapter 13](#)) begins by approaching humanity from a cognitive perspective, focusing on the structure and the content of the category “human.” He proposes that the most useful conception is that human is a graded category based on prototypes (with different prototypes invoked by HU and HN dimensions of humanness). He applies this idea to infrahumanization, and in particular to help explain why some outgroups are “superhumanized” by ingroups. He also reports a cross-cultural study identifying similarities and differences in HU and HN prototypes across cultures.

The chapter by Kofta, Baran, and Tarnowska ([Chapter 14](#)), while focused on dehumanization, makes an important advance in our understanding of humanness. Noting that measures of modern forms of dehumanization are implicit, with participants largely unaware that they are dehumanizing, these authors focus on people’s conscious representations of humans in terms of their potentialities or ideal capacities—what they call a “naïve theory of humanity.” They validate a measure of this naïve theory and show that outgroups are typically seen to have lesser human potentialities than an ingroup. They suggest that this naïve theory may be more flexible and context dependent than are more implicit measures of humanness.

Another way of approaching humanness is to understand when we see someone as a “full” person in all their individual glory (and flaws), rather than relying on category memberships. This is the idea of individuation and is the focus of the contribution by Swencionis and Fiske ([Chapter 15](#)). These authors give an extensive overview of dominant theoretical approaches to individuation, the motivations for

individuating others, individual differences in who is more likely to individuate, and the contexts in which individuation is most likely to occur. They document the positive consequences of individuating both the self and others and conclude that individuation is a promising way to overcome dehumanization.

Finally, Kashima and Margetts ([Chapter 16](#)) highlight an area where humanness is an important concept beyond its links with dehumanization. They focus on conceptions of the relationship between humans and nature, specifically in the context of environmental sustainability. For instance, very different approaches to nature and sustainability can arise from viewing humans as the masters of nature, in contrast to seeing humans as at the mercy of natural forces. They review cognitive, cultural, and anthropological work, concluding that our understanding of nature has declined as humans have become more urbanized. They argue that this lack of understanding is linked to less sustainable practices and even to how we understand nature as researchers. They show that deep thinking about the human-nature relationship may be a key factor in cultures moving toward more sustainable lifestyles.

Conclusion

So on the question of where to from here, we can confidently predict that with the interest and innovation represented by the contributions in this volume, the field is in a great position to advance both our understanding of dehumanization and humanity itself, and to show critically how these concepts are important in a wide range of contexts. We hope that the ideas presented in this volume will be inspirational for years to come—at least until we all become cyborgs (Kurzweil, 2006).

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