



Understanding dehumanization: The role of agency and communion

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Agency
Communion
Big two
Dehumanization
Human rights

ABSTRACT

Dehumanization is the denial of full human potential to an individual or a social group. Although it is widely seen as a grave social ill, the psychological roots of dehumanization are not yet clear. In the present research, we examined the role of agency and communion. These dimensions are pivotal to how we perceive other people, and we hypothesized that they might be crucial to viewing people as fully human. In eight experiments, we manipulated agency or communion using either videos of interacting geometric shapes, or by manipulating static images of faces showing different degrees of agency and communion. Participants rated the degree of humanness of presented targets. Across the studies and in meta-analyses ($N = 758$ for agency and $N = 776$ for communion), agency but not communion had systematic effects on the ratings of humanness. Therefore, granting agency might limit dehumanization.

Since the horrors of World War II, researchers have attempted to explain what leads people to dehumanize others (e.g., [Kelman, 1973](#); [Stoecker, 2011](#)). This is an important issue because dehumanization affects many groups and can have detrimental effects for the dehumanized targets ([Haslam, 2006](#)). In this article, we ask whether subtle cues conveying information about targets' agency or communion affect dehumanization processes. Agency refers to striving to achieve one's goals, whereas communion refers to bonding with others and creating meaningful and stable social relations ([Abele & Wojciszke, 2014](#)). We focus on agency and communion because these two dimensions are known to be crucial to social perception ([Abele & Wojciszke, 2014](#)), and therefore, also may be essential to perceiving others as fully human.

We consider this investigation important because in prior work on dehumanization, the role of agency and communion has been assumed, rather than tested directly (e.g., [Harris & Fiske, 2006](#); [Haslam, 2006](#)). Our aim here is to directly test the role of agency and communion in dehumanization. Building on previous knowledge and verifying previous theorizing is crucial to eventually deepen the understanding of dehumanization. Knowing which factors drive dehumanization is critical to identifying effective ways to address this social phenomenon.

1. The ubiquity and impact of dehumanization

Dehumanization is defined as the denial of full human potential to

an individual or a social group (for reviews see [Haslam, 2006](#); [Haslam & Loughnan, 2014](#)). The detrimental effects of dehumanization are both diverse and profound, including increased aggression ([Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975](#)), increased prejudice and discrimination ([Vaes, Paladino, Castelli, Leyens, & Giovanazzi, 2003](#)), decreased helping ([Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007](#)), and decreased support for policies in favor of dehumanized groups ([Costello & Hodson, 2011](#)). In extreme circumstances, dehumanization has been associated with mass killings ([Bar-Tal, 1990](#); [Opatow, 1990](#)), including those of Jews during the Holocaust and Tutsis during the Rwandan genocide. Another important consequence of dehumanization is that those who feel dehumanized tend to reciprocate dehumanization ([Kteily, Hodson, & Bruneau, 2016](#)). Thus, both dehumanizing others and feeling dehumanized have negative consequences and can contribute to the escalation of conflict.

The importance of dehumanization has led to a number of efforts to clarify who might be dehumanized. Several potential targets have been identified such as the homeless ([Harris & Fiske, 2006](#)), the poor, and the unemployed ([Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008](#)), women ([Bernard, Gervais, Allen, Campomizzi, & Klein, 2012](#)), individuals from lower social classes ([Loughnan, Haslam, Sutton, & Spencer, 2014](#)), the elderly ([Wiener, Gervais, Brnjic, & Nuss, 2014](#)), immigrants ([Costello & Hodson, 2011](#)), Black Americans ([Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008](#)), medical patients ([Haque & Waytz, 2012](#)), detainees in police

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operations (Bandes, 1999), and victims of mobbing and bullying at school or work (Sloan, Matyók, Schmitz, & Lester Short, 2010). This research has focused on particular instances of dehumanization defined by a particular array of historical, social, and political factors. However, the variety and number of dehumanized groups implies that a search for similarities between these groups may indicate some of the basic psychological mechanisms involved in dehumanization.

2. Toward a general account of dehumanization

In order to address dehumanization in a more general way, several theoretical accounts have been developed (for reviews see Haslam & Loughnan, 2014; Li, Leidner, & Castano, 2014). One approach features a simple context-independent, general construct of dehumanization, referred to as a blatant dehumanization (Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015), which aims to capture the continuity of how human-like people seem. It uses a one-item measure, called the Ascent of Man, which is based on pictures that represent the evolution of human beings. The scale ranges from 0 *least evolved* accompanied by the picture of an ape to 100 *most evolved* accompanied by the picture of a human. This simple scale intuitively addresses the core of dehumanization; that is, the extent to which humanness is denied to a target. Yet, using this measurement tool does not address the question of what the key psychological constructs might be that stand at the base of dehumanization.

Other general accounts of dehumanization have tried to address the factors that determine when humanness is granted or denied. Infra-humanization theory has focused on human essence, that is the basic underlying substance defining the identity or nature that makes people unique from other species (Leyens et al., 2000). Infra-humanization theory suggests that one's ingroup is seen as the standard of humanness and that humanness of other groups would be judged in relation to that standard. One particularly well-studied element of the human essence refers to the ascriptions of emotions (Leyens et al., 2000; Leyens, Demoulin, Vaes, Gaunt, & Paladino, 2007). Infra-humanization theory states that one way to differentiate between how people think of their own group and other groups is by investigating the type of emotions ascribed to these groups. While outgroups are mostly ascribed with basic emotions that are shared with animals, such as rage, fear, surprise, and pleasure, an ingroup is ascribed with primary as well as secondary, uniquely human emotions, such as tenderness, love, hope, guilt, and shame (Cortes, Demoulin, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, & Leyens, 2005; Demoulin et al., 2004). The ability to feel emotions is an important dimension of perceiving mental life (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007; Weisman, Dweck, & Markman, 2017). Yet, it is neither the only, nor primary, dimension, suggesting other general factors may also contribute to dehumanization processes.

Haslam's (2006) Dual Model of Dehumanization provides a theory of dehumanization that captures a larger variety of human-related attributes. Haslam divides these attributes into two dimensions: those which are central though not exclusive to humans (Human Nature-HN), and those which distinguish humans from non-human animals (Uniquely Human-UH). HN traits include emotional responsiveness, cognitive openness, depth, agency, individuality, and warmth. UH traits include moral sensibility, rationality, logic, maturity, refinement, and civility. Haslam's approach is valuable because it provides a general overview of key traits related to humanness (for review see Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Moreover, the corresponding types of dehumanization: animalistic, defined as the denial of UH and mechanistic, defined as the denial of HN, had the metaphorical leverage to instigate a lot of research on dehumanization. However, it remains unknown whether all of the hypothesized elements of HN and UH do form an assumed two-factor solution.

One study that started to examine specific elements of Haslam's model focused on the connection between morality and cognition (hypothesized to belong to the UH) to the perception of HN and UH

(Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005, Study 1). The results indicated that, contrary to the model of dehumanization (Haslam, 2006), cognition correlated positively to HN while both cognition and morality were uncorrelated to UH. Moreover, for scales based on Haslam and Bain (2007), low reliability coefficients are common (e.g., Gwinn, Judd, & Park, 2013; Lammers & Stapel, 2011 and Saguy et al., 2015). These findings suggest that those scales may include items that are not really related to the concepts of HN and UH. Therefore, more work has to be done in order to examine whether and to what extent the elements of the HN and UH do contribute to the humanness ascriptions. In the present research, we ask whether ascribing humanness to others may be linked to two other parts of Haslam's model, namely agency and communion (warmth in Haslam's nomenclature). Our motivation and rationale for focusing on these two particular components is developed in the section that follows.

3. The big two and dehumanization

Agency and communion play such an important role in social perception that they are often referred to as the Big Two (for a recent overview see Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). Agency refers to the capacity to strive to achieve one's goals, whereas communion refers to bonding with others and creating meaningful and stable social relations (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). Items used in the assessment of the Big Two include traits such as *active, dynamic, efficient, assertive, and self-confident* for agency, and traits such as *helpful, understanding, reliable, likable, empathetic, and friendly* for communion (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007, p. 758).

For over half a century, agency and communion have been understood as crucial coordinates for making sense both of self and others. These two dimensions are said to account for as much as 89% of the content of traits (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007) and 66% of cultural universals (Ybarra et al., 2008). They are also the most frequent themes in autobiographical memories (McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996), descriptions of self and others (Abele & Bruckmüller, 2011; Wojciszke, 1994), and perceptions of groups (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). Agency and communion are believed to be cross-culturally invariant (Abele, Uchrowski, Suitner, & Wojciszke, 2008; Ybarra et al., 2008). Therefore, agency and communion are often said to reflect the *dual nature of human existence* (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014; Kelman, 1973). Yet, despite their prominence in human perception, the direct connection between the Big Two and dehumanization has not been widely explored.

We know of no research documenting the relationship of agency and communion to infra-humanization. This relationship can be only indirectly inferred from previous studies. In the case of agency, some tentative evidence comes from research on status, which is closely related to agency (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). Specifically, it seems that groups high in status infra-humanize groups low in status, while the reverse is not true (Capozza, Andrighetto, di Bernardo, & Falvo, 2012; Iatridis, 2013 but see Rodriguez-Perez, Delgado-Rodriguez, Betancor-Rodriguez, Leyens, & Vaes, 2011). In the case of communion, some tentative evidence has emerged from the relationship between intergroup friendliness and infra-humanization. Participants tended to attribute more humanity to groups to whom they felt friendly (Rodriguez-Perez et al., 2011). Although this measure cannot be seen directly as an indicator of how friendly (communal) the outgroup is perceived to be, the research on infra-humanization suggests that both agency and communion might be important components of perceptions that regard others as less than human.

In terms of Haslam's Dual Model of Dehumanization, it is still unclear to what extent agency and communion specifically are associated to HN and UH. However, in studies of power, which is related to agency, participants high in power tended to attribute less humanness to low status groups and individuals (both HN and UH—Lammers & Stapel, 2011; only UH—Gwinn et al., 2013). When low-power participants took an agentic perspective and rejected the high-power

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