Recent research on dehumanization

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Dehumanization has been a lively focus of social psychology research for the past decade and a half, and novel theoretical and empirical contributions have appeared at a rapid rate. The present review updates earlier overviews by calling attention to key developments over the past two years. The review indicates that researchers have broken new ground in recognizing the range of targets of dehumanization, the diversity of factors that contribute to it, the effects that it accounts for, and the implications and consequences that it has for intergroup relations. Theorists have also enhanced our understanding of how dehumanization phenomena can be conceptualized, assessed, and evaluated. These advances highlight the central but previously unacknowledged role that denials of humanness play in intergroup phenomena.

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Introduction

Dehumanization — the act of perceiving or treating people as if they are less than fully human — has emerged as a major focus of scholarship on intergroup relations in the last fifteen years. Earlier researchers and theorists drew attention to the role this phenomenon played in war and atrocity, but it was only in the early 2000s that active programs of empirical and theoretical research arose. Beginning with Leyens and colleagues' [1] work on 'infrahumanization' — a subtle form of dehumanization in which uniquely human emotions are denied to outgroups relative to the ingroup, and which occurs even in the absence of intergroup conflict — research on the topic has gathered force internationally. It has burgeoned in part because the concept of dehumanization offers an intriguingly different perspective from established ideas of prejudice. Seeing someone as lacking human qualities is not the same as derogating them because 'human' is not

synonymous with 'good'. People can be disliked without be dehumanized, and vice versa.

The explosion of dehumanization research makes it difficult to keep abreast of developments. The present review updates an earlier comprehensive survey that encompassed research published until 2013 [2•] and an accompanying theoretical overview [3]. We therefore focus on original contributions published in the last two years. The review is organized into four sections that address the groups that are dehumanized; the factors that contribute to dehumanization; the effects that dehumanization accounts for; and the downstream implications and consequences of dehumanization. Some observations on the most novel theoretical and conceptual advances in dehumanization scholarship complete the review.

Targets of dehumanization

Haslam and Loughnan's [2•] earlier review revealed that although a wide assortment of groups may be dehumanized, most research has focused on racial and ethnic groups. This focus is maintained in the most recent research, which includes studies that examine dehumanizing perceptions of African Americans [4–6], Arabs [7••,8], Palestinians [9–11], and Roma [7••,12,13]. Powerful studies by Goff and colleagues [6••] demonstrate that an implicit association between Blacks and apes contributes to the over-estimation of Black children's age and criminal culpability. This research, which helps to account for racial disparities in police violence toward children, extends this group's work on the 'Black/ape association' [14,15] and is the first to address the dehumanization of children. An intriguing counterpoint is provided by Waytz and colleagues [16], who argue that White Americans also 'superhumanize' Black Americans, in the sense of ascribing them supernatural and mystical powers. The implications of this perception are largely unfavorable, however, as it appears to generate a diminished recognition of Black individuals' capacities to experience pain.

Recent research has extended past scholarship on dehumanization of ethnic groups with studies of immigrants and asylum seekers [13,17–19] in European and Australian contexts. This work reveals the prevalence of punitive dehumanizing judgments of border-crossing groups. Other studies have investigated similarly punitive perceptions of people who have violated social norms [20] or are suspected of law-breaking, such as terrorism suspects [21]. It is not only those who are seen as violating society's rules and standards who are at risk of being denied their humanity, however. Several investigations reveal that

people who are victimized may also be dehumanized, either by perpetrators or third party observers. These include studies that examine perceptions of victims of natural disasters [22] and objectified women [23].

The past two years have also seen a broadening of the groups investigated as possible targets of dehumanization. In the medical and human services domain, which received very little attention in earlier research, there have been innovative studies of dehumanization of medical and psychiatric patients [24,25], people with disabilities [26], homeless people [27] and doctors [28]. The first studies of dehumanization of gay men and women [29,30] and of older adults [31] have also appeared, as have the first studies of dehumanizing perception of political outgroups [32] and people treated as tradeable commodities [33]. It is interesting to observe this widening scope of dehumanization research involves increased attention to the 'mechanistic' forms of dehumanization proposed by Haslam [34], involving perceptions of others as object-like and instrumental [22,23,25,28,31,33]. This form is distinct from the more extensively studied 'animalistic' dehumanization, where people are seen as uncivilized and bestial.

Factors contributing to dehumanization

Many recent studies demonstrate factors that increase or decrease dehumanization. These factors can be classified as enduring or episodic based on whether they refer to relatively lasting rather than short-term influences. Among the enduring factors shown to promote dehumanizing perceptions are social dominance orientation (SDO) [19], right wing authoritarianism (RWA) [7••], and disgust sensitivity [35]. These ideological and personality factors are well-established predictors of dehumanization in previous research [2•], as is the belief in a stark divide between humans and (other) animals, which was again found to predict dehumanization of African Americans by Costello and colleagues [4]. Although this finding is not novel, it is interesting because these researchers found that laypeople fail to recognize human-animal divide beliefs as a contributor to the dehumanization of outgroups, preferring to explain dehumanization as an outcome of closed-mindedness, ignorance, and negative media portrayals. Another new contributor to dehumanization was recently identified by Yang and colleagues [36], who found that powerless people tend to see themselves as lacking humanness — especially 'human nature' characteristics of warmth and openness [34] — and also believe that others see them as lacking human qualities. These findings exactly mirror previous findings on the effects of social exclusion on self-perceptions and meta-perceptions [37]. Relatedly, Kteily and colleagues [38•] revealed the power of these meta-perceptions in creating reciprocal dehumanization, showing that people who believe an outgroup dehumanizes them, dehumanize this outgroup in response. This

'meta-dehumanization' promotes outgroup-focused aggression and does so independent of 'meta-prejudice' (i.e., believing that one's group is disliked).

A second class of enduring factors that has emerged in recent research involves influences that diminish dehumanization by humanizing the outgroup. These factors share an element of perceived similarity and social connection. For example, Israeli citizens humanize Palestinians more if Palestinians display similar emotional responses to contentious events [9], and if made aware that other Israelis have helped Palestinians [11], an effect not obtained when a third party helped that outgroup. Relatedly, Capozza and colleagues [29] showed that heterosexuals dehumanized gay peers less if they had more extended social contact with them through their social networks. Likewise, Miranda and colleagues [13] found that immigrant groups who pursued assimilation with their host nation dehumanized its citizens less than immigrants who pursued separatism. Thus, categorizing in inclusive rather than intergroup terms decreased dehumanization. This last study is innovative in exploring the dehumanizing perceptions that minority groups hold toward majority groups, and in revealing a tendency for assimilating immigrants to dehumanize their ethnic ingroup.

An assortment of more transient factors has also been shown to promote or inhibit dehumanizing perceptions. Turning first to language, exposure to homophobic epithets increased dehumanization of gay men in one study [30] and reading disgust-inducing stories about Roma increased dehumanizing perceptions of them [12]. The perception that others have primarily instrumental functions has similar effects. This was shown recently by highly original studies demonstrating that patients commonly view physicians as emotionless 'empty vessels' due to their functional importance to the patients' health [28], and that people mechanistically dehumanize peers when those peers are seen as having functional importance for achieving personal goals [39]. Seeing someone as essentially a means to an end appears to produce a reduction in concern for or awareness of their capacity for experience and emotion. Self-protective motives may also contribute to dehumanization, with one study showing that people dehumanize others when helping them is seen as emotionally exhausting [40•]. This motive may underlie the heightened stress symptoms experienced by nurses who do not deny human qualities to their patients [25]. However, this phenomenon is not inevitable, one study [27] finding that the levels of burnout and job dissatisfaction among workers in the homelessness sector were unrelated to their tendencies to deny uniquely human emotions to their clients. The authors speculated that exposure to the suffering of clients may boost job satisfaction by increasing workers' identification with their organization, rather than only