



Reports

Less power = less human? Effects of power differentials on dehumanization[☆]Jason D. Gwinn^{*}, Charles M. Judd, Bernadette Park

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ In two experiments, we have pairs of participants assigned to unequal power.
- ▶ Participant pairs interact and rate each other on traits representing humanity.
- ▶ Empowered participants perceived less humanity in their low-power partner.
- ▶ Despite the above, empowered participants did not derogate their partner.

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ABSTRACT

Two experiments demonstrated that power leads to dehumanizing others, adding to our understanding of how power affects interpersonal perception. Undergraduate participants in dyads were assigned to unequal power roles before interacting cooperatively in a mock hiring-task for Experiment 1 and competitively in a game for Experiment 2. After interacting, participants rated each other on personality traits that vary in how much they are a uniquely human trait (UH; e.g. a trait that typically distinguishes humans from animals). In both experiments, high-power participants attributed fewer uniquely human traits to low-power participants than vice versa, meaning they animalistically dehumanized a fellow student from the same university. This dehumanization occurred even while high-power participants did not evaluatively derogate low-power participants. We argue that power differences can result in perceived disparities in humanity, perhaps because UH can both express and justify power.

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Introduction

Dehumanization is perceiving others or acting toward others as if they were objects, particularly animals or automata (Haslam, 2006). Dehumanization has been seen as particularly important since it is believed to prevent identification and empathy with a target, and facilitate aggression (Bandura, 2002). However, the conditions that lead to dehumanization are not well understood. Of particular importance is the possibility that power could lead to dehumanization. In the classic Stanford Prison Experiment (Haney, Banks, & Zimbardo, 1973) the empowered guards were infamously abusive and “dehumanizing” of the prisoners, in spite of their knowledge that both they and the prisoners were students at the same elite university, and that assignment to role was random.

Importantly, although the guards' behavior has been described as “dehumanizing,” the term was defined rather loosely in the Stanford Prison Experiment, and its relationship to power was observed in an uncontrolled naturalistic setting. More recently, Haslam (2006) has precisely defined and operationalized two dimensions of humanity: Uniquely human traits (UH) that distinguish humans from animals, and human nature traits (HN) that distinguish humans from automata. The former focuses on traits acquired through culture and education that animals lack, such as responsibility, maturity, enlightened morality, and refinement. Meanwhile, the latter focuses on “innate” human traits that machines lack, such as emotionality, individual agency, and depth of character. Thus, dehumanization can be animalistic or mechanistic, where another human is denied UH or HN attributes, respectively.

Using this definition of dehumanization, Lammers and Stapel (2011) suggested that power leads to dehumanization of the powerless, in part because one can use dehumanization to justify harming the powerless. For example, in their Experiment 2, the participants wrote an essay about a time when they had high or low power (high-power or low-power primed). Afterwards, the participants read about a fictitious outgroup, the Aurelians, who were being forcibly evicted from the slums “for their own good.” The high-power participants were more likely than the low-power participants both to support the eviction

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decision and to rate the Aurelians as lower in UH traits, e.g., as more irrational and less civilized. Furthermore, the effect of power on dehumanization was partially mediated by support for the eviction decision. As Lammers and Stapel (2011) argue, the powerful participants supported the eviction more, and then justified that support by perceiving the Aurelians as animal-like, and thus, as unable to appropriately make decisions for themselves. Similarly in Experiment 3, the participants imagined working as either a high-power senior surgeon or one of two low-power positions: junior surgeon or nurse. For a hypothetical patient, they chose between recommending a painful, effective treatment and a painless, less-effective treatment, and then rated the patient on HN traits like sensitive and passive (reversed). Again, the high-power participants dehumanized the patient more, in this case mechanistically, and the effect was partially mediated by an increased preference for the painful treatment. By viewing the patient as more machine-like, high-power participants could justify their preference for the more painful treatment.

However, the preference for harmful decisions only partially mediated the effects of power on dehumanization. The relationship between power and dehumanization is likely to be multi-determined, and may not be entirely motivated. For example, human traits, especially UH, can be seen as both an expression of and a justification for power, where power can affect humanity-expressing behavior and humanity can qualify one for more powerful positions. First, power disinhibits behavior (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003; Hirsh, Galinsky, & Zhong, 2011), allowing people to behave in more self-expressive, often-idiosyncratic ways (Guinote, Judd, & Brauer, 2002; Hirsh et al., 2011). Powerless people may have less opportunity to behaviorally express UH and HN traits. One must be empowered to take action before one can prove the self to be a more responsible and moral actor than an animal, or before one can express more emotion and individual agency than a machine. As a result, others may see the powerless person as less human.

Second, the human/animal distinction is particularly notable in that UH traits tend to be those that help justify the possession and exercise of power. All else being equal, one would prefer the most mature, rational, responsible, and moral (all UH traits) persons to be entrusted with leadership and decision-making power; “human” traits can lead to power. As a consequence, people may assume that powerless others have fewer UH traits because, assuming society is more functional than dysfunctional, powerless people in society may genuinely be less likely to possess UH traits than others, on average. Also, particularly since power can lose some of its desirable psychological effects if it is perceived as illegitimate (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008), if people are motivated to justify and reinforce systemic power differences (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004; Magee & Galinsky, 2008), they can do so by attributing fewer UH traits to those who already lack power. In any case, we would predict that power differences can result in the perception of low-power people having fewer human traits, even when the participant is not motivated by the particular interaction to dehumanize an offended party.

In examining further the effects of power on dehumanization, the present studies offer three notable advances over Lammers and Stapel (2011). First, we controlled for trait valence while testing power’s effect on dehumanization. The tendency to dehumanize has been uncoupled from evaluative derogation in theoretical formulations of dehumanization (e.g. Haslam & Bain, 2007; Haslam, Loughnan, Reynolds, & Wilson, 2007) and infrahumanization (e.g. Cortes, Demoulin, Rodriguez, Rodriguez, & Leyens, 2005; Leyens et al., 2001) research. However in Lammers and Stapel’s (2011) experiments, human traits were always positively valenced (e.g. civilized and sensitive) and less-human traits were negatively valenced (e.g. irrational, cold), confounding humanity with valence. In their particular experimental contexts, it may have been that power only led participants to derogate others, with dehumanization occurring incidentally. Second, our experiments operationalized power by assigning pairs of participants to high and low-power roles,

where high and low-power perceivers first interacted and then rated each other. Thus, these experiments measured dehumanization toward an actual human target with whom the perceiver had interacted. This design tests the more stringent condition of whether dehumanization occurs not just when considering a hypothetical other, but following actual interactions as well. Lastly, Experiment 1’s context was set up such that there would be little or no motivation to dehumanize the target, as the high-power perceivers could inflict no real harm on the low-power participants, allowing us to test a further boundary condition of whether dehumanization can occur as a function of power even in the absence of motivational factors.

Experiment overview

In two experiments, participants in dyads were assigned to either a high-power or a low-power role. In Experiment 1, they interacted in a cooperative, mock hiring-task, whereas in Experiment 2 they interacted in a competitive game: a delta ultimatum game (Suleiman, 1996). After interacting, they reported their impressions of their interaction partner, including trait judgments that varied on UH, valence, and HN. In both experiments, our prediction was that the high-power participants would attribute less human traits to the low-power participants than vice-versa, without necessarily derogating or negatively evaluating the low-power participants. Theoretically we predicted an effect of power on both UH and HN, although in retrospect, our two experiments may not be optimally designed to elicit mechanistic dehumanization. We return to this issue in the General Discussion, elaborating on why our experiments seemed to elicit stronger UH effects than HN effects.

Experiment 1

Participants were assigned in dyads to a high-power “manager” role and a low-power “assistant” role. In a simulated business-hiring context, managers and assistants independently read applicant résumés. Assistants were asked to give the manager a summary of the apparent strengths and weaknesses of each résumé. After reading the résumés and summary, the manager selected an applicant to hire, and informed the assistant of their selection. The participants then rated their interaction partner on traits that measured UH, valence, and HN orthogonally to each other.

Method

Participants and design

Ninety-eight participants were recruited from an Introductory Psychology subject pool. They were run in 49 dyads. Five dyads were excluded due to computer errors during data collection, running out of time in the session, knowing each other, or for earlier participating in a similar experiment. The participants were compensated with partial course credit for their participation.

Since individual participants are nested within dyads, the dyad serves as the unit for all analyses. The design of the experiment has two within-dyad conditions: high-power participant (manager) and low-power participant (assistant).

Materials

To provide a rationale for the role assignment, we used 20 Big-Five personality questions culled from the 44 found in John, Donahue, and Kentle (1991). Each question begins with the common stem “I see myself as someone who...” and ends with, for example, “is talkative” or “does a thorough job.” The participants answered each question on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = disagree strongly and 5 = agree strongly.

A power-priming essay was also prepared to strengthen the power manipulation. On a sheet with several blank lines, managers were instructed to “recall a particular incident in which you managed or supervised another individual or individuals” and write an essay about

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