



## Cogs in the machine: The prioritization of money and self-dehumanization

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### ABSTRACT

The dehumanization of other people is an unfortunately common occurrence that drives discrimination and conflict. We examined when and why the self can also be dehumanized. Across six studies, we found a reciprocal relationship between self-dehumanization and the prioritization of money. Participants who prioritized money (vs. control participants) attributed less humanness to themselves (Studies 1–4), and in turn, chose to socially distance themselves from a coworker (Study 4). Participants led to self-humanize (vs. control participants) were less likely to prioritize money over other goals (Studies 5A–6). The human nature dimension of humanness, which refers to attributes that separate humans from inanimate objects, was more sensitive to money-prioritization than was the human uniqueness dimension, which refers to attributes that separate humans from non-human animals. Alternative explanations based on affect and self-esteem were ruled out. These results suggest that the prioritization of money is at odds with our perceptions of human nature.

### 1. Introduction

“The devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things. Labor produces not only commodities; it produces itself and the worker as a commodity.” Marx (1844/1964)

In his seminal work, Marx warned that by prioritizing wealth, workers in capitalist societies would come to value themselves through those attributes that facilitate wealth creation (e.g., skill, productivity), to the exclusion of attributes that define their humanity, such as their emotions and sociality. He believed people themselves would become commodities—unfeeling cogs in the machine of wealth creation.

Despite Marx’s warning, the pursuit of wealth remains a central part of organizational and daily life (Hsee, Zhang, Cai, & Zhang, 2013; Skidelsky & Skidelsky, 2012). People are working increasingly more days and longer hours to secure more income (Layard, 2005). Organizations also recognize the value of money to employees: Organizations entice and retain the best talent with competitive salaries and bonuses, and most negotiating in the workplace is done over money (Malhotra, 2014). Marx’s conjecture therefore remains ever relevant. In the current research, we explore this idea through the lens of Haslam’s (2006) Dual Model of Dehumanization, which distinguishes between two dimensions of humanness: human nature (what separates humans from machines) and human uniqueness (what separates humans from non-human animals). We predicted that because the values and goals

associated with money-prioritization (e.g., wealth, achievement; Schwartz, 1992) are diametrically opposed to those associated with human nature (e.g., helpfulness, sociality; Bastian & Haslam, 2010; Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005), people who prioritize money will self-dehumanize by attributing less human nature to themselves—that is, they will see themselves as closer to robots or automatons. By the same values-based logic, we also predicted that self-humanization along the human nature dimension will reduce money-prioritization.

This research makes several contributions. First, we integrate insights from the largely separate literatures on dehumanization and values, extending theory in each. Given that the self is rarely the target of dehumanization research (e.g., Haslam et al., 2005; Haslam & Bain, 2007), we extend dehumanization research by identifying money-prioritization as an important antecedent of self-dehumanization. Second, we further research on the psychology of money. Research has accumulated to suggest that money can increase motivation and performance, and can undermine prosocial behavior (e.g., Benabou & Tirole, 2006; Kasser & Ryan, 1996), but has left questions of how the pursuit of money affects how people perceive *themselves* largely unexamined. Third, this research offers the first systematic investigation of whether self-humanization can shape subsequent motivations, and, relatedly, introduces self-humanization as an intervention for reducing the prioritization of money—a tendency that, when unmitigated, can be associated with harmful psychological consequences (e.g., Burroughs &

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Rindfleisch, 2002; Kasser, 2003). Understanding the ways in which the self can be (de)humanized has important implications for human motivation, behavior, and well-being. These findings also have implications for managers and policy makers interested in the structure and consequences of incentive systems.

### 1.1. (Self-)Dehumanization

Dehumanization is a consequential social-cognitive phenomenon. Targets of dehumanization are perceived to be less worthy of empathy and moral care, legitimating acts of violence toward them (Bandura, 1999). Dehumanization also renders targets less responsible for their actions, reducing perceptions of their competence and moral accountability (Waytz, Epley, & Cacioppo, 2010). To understand dehumanization, it is important to first have a clear understanding of “humanness”—what it means to be human. Haslam’s (2006) Dual Model of Dehumanization offers such a framework by suggesting that there are two distinct senses of humanness: *human nature* and *human uniqueness*.<sup>1</sup> Human nature attributes capture the boundary that separates humans from inanimate objects, such as robots (e.g., warmth, emotionality). When human nature attributes are denied to people, they are likened to objects or machines, and seen as cold, rigid, and lacking emotion. This “mechanistic” dehumanization has been evident in the dehumanization of medical patients (Haque & Waytz, 2012; Vaes & Muratone, 2013), sexualized women (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009), and members of certain occupational groups (e.g., businesspeople; Loughnan & Haslam, 2007). Human uniqueness attributes capture the boundary that separates humans from animals (e.g., refinement, self-control, intelligence). When human uniqueness attributes are denied to people, they are likened to animals, and seen as childlike, immature, or irrational. This “animalistic” dehumanization has been demonstrated in intergroup conflict and for members of stigmatized ethnic groups (e.g., Viki et al., 2006). This two-factor model of humanness has substantial empirical support (Haslam, 2006; for a review, see Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). These two dimensions are empirically distinguishable, differentially predict mechanistic and animalistic dehumanization, and are stable across cultures (Bain, Vaes, Kashima, Haslam, & Guan, 2012; Haslam et al., 2005; Loughnan & Haslam, 2007; Park, Haslam, Shimizu, Kashima, & Uchida, 2013).

However, dehumanization research has primarily been in the context of the dehumanization of others. Research on the dehumanization of the self, or self-dehumanization, is much less prevalent. Investigations of self-dehumanization have, to date, examined how negatively valenced experiences, such as social exclusion and committing acts of violence or unethical behavior, can lead to self-dehumanization (Bastian & Haslam, 2010; Bastian et al., 2013; Kouchaki, Dobson, Waytz, & Kteily, 2018). For instance, one investigation of the consequences of self-dehumanization found that reading about or recalling interpersonal maltreatments was associated with self-dehumanization and, in turn, with cognitive deconstructive states, such as reduced clarity of thought, as well as feelings of anger and sadness (Bastian & Haslam, 2011). Given the detrimental psychological consequences of (self)dehumanization (Bastian & Haslam, 2011; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014), it is important to build our understanding of when and why people self-dehumanize. In the current research, we contribute to the

<sup>1</sup> Gray, Gray, and Wegner (2007) offer a parallel conceptualization of dehumanization, which focuses on the attribution or denial of two dimensions of mind perception: agency and experience (which themselves conceptually overlap with the two primary dimensions of social perception, competence and warmth, respectively, see Waytz & Norton, 2014). Here, we explore perceptions of humanness using Haslam et al. (2005) framework, while noting overlap between Human Uniqueness and Gray et al.’s “agency” dimension, which includes mental capacities such as self-control and thinking, as well as overlap between Human Nature and the “experience” dimension, which includes attributes such as personality and emotion.

nascent self-dehumanization literature by exploring how money-prioritization—a relatively commonplace and culturally valued pursuit (Lamont, 1992)—could serve as an antecedent of self-dehumanization. Furthermore, we investigate the consequences of self-dehumanization on people’s emotional reactions and their willingness to socially connect to others in a coworking context.

### 1.2. The psychology of money and money prioritization

The past two decades have seen increased empirical attention to the psychology of money, specifically to the effects of cognitive money primes. In these studies, participants are subtly exposed to money or a symbolic representation of money (e.g., a screensaver with dollar bills) and the influence of these money primes on downstream cognitions and behaviors is examined. These studies have found that, compared to control participants, participants primed with money were more persistent in tasks, but preferred a solitary activity over a group activity, were less helpful, and engaged in more unethical behavior (e.g., Boucher & Kofos, 2012; Kouchaki, Smith-Crowe, Brief, & Sousa, 2013; Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006; though see Caruso, Shapira, & Landy, 2017; Rohrer, Pashler, & Harris, 2015). In sum, money priming seems to have desirable performance effects but undesirable interpersonal effects. Explanations for money priming effects have suggested that people mentally associated money with economic and business ideals that emphasize self-interest (Kouchaki et al., 2013; Vohs, 2015), and with self-sufficiency, or independence from others and agency (Vohs et al., 2006).

In a departure from this previous work, the current investigation focuses on *money-prioritization*, which we define as the self-perception of prioritizing money and money-related goals, such as wealth accumulation, over other potential goals.<sup>2</sup> Whereas money primes operate via the enhanced accessibility of semantic constructs related to money, money prioritization operates via people’s perceptions of their own personal values. In other words, whereas a money prime might prompt people to think about the concept of money, money prioritization prompts people to think about how much they personally value money, and pursue money-related goals over other goals. Although it is the case that money-prioritization could increase the cognitive accessibility of money-related concepts and, thus, serve as a money prime, it is not necessarily the case that a money prime (such as viewing a picture of money) would prompt money prioritization, as the money prime does not imply anything about how much the perceiver values money or would be willing to prioritize money-related goals over other things. A growing literature suggests that goals imbued with personal relevance (or associated with the self) are particularly predictive of behavior (Wheeler, DeMarree, & Petty, 2005, 2007). For example, Pfeffer and DeVoe (2009) examined this idea in the context of the economic evaluation of time. Research on the economic evaluation of time has found that when people evaluate time in terms of money, they devalue uncompensated activities, such as volunteering (e.g., DeVoe & Pfeffer, 2007). These authors found that participants explicitly primed to think about their own time in terms of money were indeed less likely to volunteer, but thinking about another’s time in terms of money had no effect. When people said not just “time is money,” but “my time is my money,” they were much more likely to avoid an activity that would impede their goal of accumulating money. These results suggest the important role of the self-concept in the impact of goals on behavior.

Building upon the importance of the self in guiding action, we focus on the perception that the self prioritizes money or wealth goals over other potential goals. People construct and pursue goals that reflect what they value (Schwartz, 1992). The prioritization of any one goal

<sup>2</sup> Money-prioritization fits under the larger umbrella of extrinsic goals (e.g., financial success, image; Grouzet et al., 2005) though we confine our analyses to money-prioritization in the current paper.

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