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Sense of interpersonal security and preference for harsh actions against others: The role of dehumanization

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Feelings of interpersonal security reduced dehumanization.
- Dehumanization mediated the effect of interpersonal security on preference for harsh actions.
- We compared our findings with those from Waytz and Epley's (2012) studies.
- We discussed the significance of these findings.

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ABSTRACT

Three experiments examined the effects of interpersonal security, defined as a sense of being loved, protected, or cared for through social interactions, on individuals' inclination to dehumanize other people and their preference for harsh actions that might bring pain and suffering to others. In Experiment 1, participants who were primed with interpersonal security, compared to those in the control condition, were less prone to dehumanize a woman who had withdrawn illegal money from a malfunctioning ATM, which in turn predicted their preference for a less severe punishment for her. In Experiments 2 and 3, participants who were instructed to recall a social situation in which they felt loved and protected were less likely to support a harsh policy of forced migration of certain individuals than those who were primed with a neutral scene, through a reduction in participants' levels of dehumanization. Moreover, in Experiment 3, we directly compared our manipulation of interpersonal security with Waytz and Epley's (2012) procedure to manipulate social connection and found that only when the nurturance-related aspects of social connection were highlighted were participants less prone to dehumanize others.

Introduction

Human beings have a fundamental need to bond with others in relationships that provide mutual trust and love (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Fulfillment of this deep-seated need for social connection not only benefits oneself (e.g., Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006; Leary & Baumeister, 2000), but also promotes prosocial behavior aiming at improving others' welfare (e.g., Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005, 2007; Mikulincer, Shaver, Gillath, & Nitzberg, 2005; Westmaas & Silver, 2001). For instance, Mikulincer et al. (2005, study 1) found that when primed with names of security-enhancing attachment figures (vs. names of non-attachment figures), participants reported a greater willingness to help a distressed individual and engaged in more actual helping behavior. More importantly, individuals reminded of supportive interactions were found to perceive fewer in-group and out-group differences (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2001), and to endorse both self-transcendent values, benevolence (i.e., concern for people who are close to oneself) and universalism (i.e., concern for all humanity), to a larger extent (Mikulincer et al., 2003) than those exposed to either positive affect or neutral issues. These findings imply that the interpersonal benefits of secure and supportive social relationships can be extended to social targets with whom we do not even share any social identity. On the contrary, when people are cut off from social ties, they will reduce empathic responses and show less prosocial behavior (e.g., DeWall & Baumeister, 2006; Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007).

In fact, socially excluded individuals even attribute less humanness to themselves and to the perpetrators of social exclusion (Bastian & Haslam, 2010), as if social exclusion threatens not only our need to connect with other people, but also our ultimate sense of being a human. Haslam (2006) has differentiated two senses of humanness — those

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attributes that are uniquely associated with human beings and distinguish people from animals (e.g., civility, morality, complex emotion, and higher cognition), and those attributes that are essential or fundamental to our humanness and distinguish people from objects (e.g., emotionality, agency, and warmth). Accordingly, dehumanization can take either form: an "animalistic" form of denying uniquely human attributes to people, or a "mechanistic" form of denying human nature attributes to people. It is the human nature part of humanness that is more sensitive to social ostracism, probably because human nature attributes are more central to our qualification for being social partners (Fiske, 1991).

Compared to in-groups, individuals tend to attribute less humanness to out-groups (e.g., Leyens et al., 2000; Viki et al., 2006), and consequently exhibit more negative attitudes, and engage in fewer empathic and helping behaviors towards them (e.g., Čehajić, Brown, & González, 2009; Cuddy, Rock, & Norton, 2007; Esses, Veenvliet, Hodson, & Mihic, 2008). Historically, extreme forms of dehumanization (such as likening out-groups to animals) were indeed found to be notoriously associated with moral disengagement and moral exclusion of out-groups (e.g., Bandura, 1999). Therefore, if a sense of connecting with caring and supportive others diminishes ingroup–outgroup differences and boosts concern for the welfare of all humanity (Mikulincer et al., 2003), it should also reduce dehumanization towards out-group members. Previous findings on the relationship between social connection and dehumanization, nevertheless, seem to contradict the interpersonal benefits of attachment security reported by Mikulincer and colleagues. Specifically, across four experiments, Waytz and Epley (2012) demonstrated that individuals primed with social connection (e.g., describing "someone close to you that you interact with often", p. 71) were more inclined to dehumanize distant others than individuals in the control group, implying that social connection highlights, rather than eliminates, the boundary between in-group and out-group members. Moreover, in their Study 4, they found that dehumanization mediated the effect of social connection on endorsing harmful actions towards a distant other.

The need to connect with other people, just like any other needs, would cease to motivate behavior when being sufficiently satisfied (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Therefore, Waytz and Epley (2012) contended that being socially connected to close others diminishes individuals' motivation to connect with distance others and enlarges the differences they perceive between close and distant others, leading to their dehumanization of the latter. Nevertheless, to fulfill the personal need for social connection should only be one of the many reasons individuals engage in social interactions. For instance, individuals may initiate social interactions simply to acquire knowledge (e.g., Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999), or to fulfill altruistic concerns (e.g., Batson, Duncan, Ackerman, Buckley, & Birch, 1981). More importantly, Batson and colleagues have provided convincing evidence that when individuals have empathy towards others, their ultimate motivation to interact with them will not be to form social bonds only. Instead, they will strive to increase the welfare of needy others (e.g., Batson & Powell, 2003; Batson et al., 1997). Secure feelings of being connected to caring and supportive figures have been found to facilitate the optimal function of a caregiving system aiming at protecting and supporting others, including distant ones (Mikulincer et al., 2005). In this regard, connections with close others should promote appreciating all human beings as fully human, rather than increasing the distance between the self and distant others and engendering denial of humanness to them.

Subtle but important differences exist in Waytz and Epley's (2012) manipulation of social connection and Mikulincer et al.'s (2005) elicitation of attachment security. Whereas Waytz and Epley emphasized specific close relationships and implicitly suggested that some relationships were more important than others, Mikulincer et al. highlighted feelings of being supported and cared in social relationships, which are more likely to induce a strong sense of interpersonal security. Probably, social connection may either increase or decrease dehumanization, depending on which aspect of it is made salient. If particular individuals or relationships are highlighted, thus driving general others even more distant, social connection in this regard may intensify dehumanization towards out-groups, as what has been observed in Waytz and Epley's studies. However, if it is the secure feelings of social connectedness being emphasized, individuals should be more inclined to appreciate others as fully human, just as the way they perceive themselves. We are not arguing that feelings of being loved and supported were not induced in Waytz and Epley's manipulation; rather, we contend that the focus of their manipulation was on the particular individuals with whom their participants felt deeply connected.

We will present here three experiments on the effect of interpersonal security, defined as a sense of being loved, protected, or cared for through social interactions, on dehumanization and its consequences. Our conceptualization of interpersonal security is similar to the notion of attachment security in that it also emphasizes feelings of security and love. However, whereas attachment security refers to the strong emotional bonding between an individual and an intimate other, interpersonal security can be temporarily experienced even in interactions with strangers. For instance, receiving offers of help from strangers when you are in need may provide you with a strong sense of being cared for at that moment. Feelings of interpersonal security imply that an individual, as a valued social partner, is safely connected to other people in mutually satisfying relationships, rather than being excluded from social relationships. We believe that it is this sense of interpersonal security that fosters our connection with all humanity and diminishes the boundary between in-groups and out-groups.

In Experiments 1 and 2, we tried to examine our basic proposition that when sense of interpersonal security was induced, individuals would be less inclined to dehumanize distant social targets. In Experiment 3, we made a direct comparison between the effects of emphasizing specific social targets (as in Waytz & Epley, 2012) versus sense of interpersonal security on dehumanization. Whereas both refer to certain aspects of social connection, we hypothesized that dehumanization would be reduced only when interpersonal security was highlighted. Moreover, in all experiments, we investigated whether dehumanization, as a function of interpersonal security, would lead to preference for harsh actions against dehumanized others. We hypothesized that individuals who felt securely connected with caring and supportive others would be less likely to dehumanize others and would treat them more leniently, as compared to those who were not primed with interpersonal security. We focused on human nature attributes because those attributes establish the basis for meaningful social interactions (Fiske, 1991), and are associated with individuals' attribution of moral patiency (i.e., deservingness of moral treatment, Bastian, Laham, Wilson, Haslam, & Koval, 2011).

Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we presented a case based on a social event that had happened in different regions of the world. That is, some people exploited ATM malfunctions (e.g., dispensing extra cash) and withdrew money that did not belong to them. We hypothesized that compared to those in the control condition, participants in the security-priming condition would be less prone to dehumanize those ill-intentioned individuals, and subsequently prefer less severe punishment for them.

Method

Participants

Sixty-three graduate and undergraduate students (37 men, 26 women) were recruited through advertisements posted on campus. The mean age of participants was 21.56 years ($SD = 3.81$). Participants were compensated with a USB memory stick for their participation in the study.

Procedure and materials

The study was ostensibly on young people's life and their opinions on social issues. We randomly assigned participants to a security-priming