Social connection enables dehumanization ☆

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ABSTRACT

Being socially connected has considerable benefits for oneself, but may have negative consequences for evaluations of others. In particular, being socially connected to close others satisfies the need for social connection, and creates disconnection from more distant others. We therefore predicted that feeling socially connected would increase the tendency to dehumanize more socially distant others. Four experiments support this prediction. Those led to feel socially connected were less likely to attribute humanlike mental states to members of various social groups (Experiments 1 and 2), particularly distant others compared to close others (Experiment 3), and were also more likely to recommend harsh treatment for dehumanized others (i.e., terrorist detainees, Experiment 4). Discussion addresses the mechanisms by which social connection enables dehumanization, and the varied behavioral implications that result.

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Among the most horrifying images of human indecency is a photograph of two Nazi doctors calmly monitoring the vital signs of a Jewish prisoner soaking up to his neck in near-freezing water. Such horrific instances may be taken as illustrations of dehumanization, of failing to represent others as human beings worthy of moral concern and treating them instead as animals or objects. The relationship that automatically captures attention in this and other instances of dehumanization is the one between aggressor and victim—between the doctor and dehumanized "patient." We suggest, however, that a full understanding of the psychological process of dehumanization requires considering the other relationship often present in such images as well—the social connection between the two doctors, or between an aggressor and other socially supportive affiliates. In particular, we suggest that feeling socially connected to others may enable people to represent more distant others as subhuman, both in extreme cases such as the Holocaust as in more mundane situations. Dehumanizing distant others may therefore be enabled, at least in part, by a sense of social connection to close others.

Unfortunately for scientific understanding, dehumanization in public discourse is commonly equated only with its behavioral consequences such as aggression (Greitemeyer & McLatchie, 2011), rather than with its defining psychological attributes. Psychologically, dehumanization represents a failure to attribute basic human qualities to others. One conceptualization suggests that dehumanization involves the denial of qualities or traits that people perceive to be uniquely human (e.g., idealistic, analytic) or central to human nature (e.g., curious, imaginative; Haslam, 2006). A second conceptualization known as *infrahumanization* suggests that people dehumanize others by denying people secondary emotions (e.g., nostalgia, humiliation; Leyens et al., 2003)—that are precisely the emotions that require higher order mental capacities such as self-reflection, retrospection, and prospection. Yet another research program has operationalized dehumanization as diminished activation in the medial prefrontal cortex (Harris & Fiske, 2006), a brain region distinctively involved in attributing mental states to others (Amodio & Frith, 2006; Mitchell, 2009). Broader characterizations describe dehumanization as a process that "divests people of human qualities or attributes bestial qualities to them [whereby] they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes, and concerns but as subhuman objects" (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996, p. 366). Although these different conceptualizations of dehumanization vary in their details, the central feature of all existing psychological accounts is a failure to attribute a mind to other humans, treating others as if they lacked the capacity for higher order reasoning or conscious awareness and experience (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007). Dehumanized others lack the capacity to think—like animals—or to feel—like objects (Haslam, 2006).

Predicting that social connection would enable such a potentially negative outcome appears inconsistent with the well-known benefits of social connection. Being socially connected to another individual or group increases self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000), happiness (Diener & Seligman, 2002), meaning (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006), and physical health (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008). Being socially disconnected, in contrast, diminishes self-control, reduces intelligent thought, and presents a health risk equivalent to smoking, obesity,

and high blood pressure (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988; see Baumeister, Brewer, Tice, & Twenge, 2007 for review).

What is good for oneself, however, may not be uniformly good for others. Feeling socially connected to one person or group may diminish the motivation to connect with a more distant person or group. The need for social connection is similar to a fundamental drive state like hunger or thirst (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). People who feel hungry look for food. People who feel socially disconnected likewise seek to satisfy this drive by attempting to connect with others (Maner, DeWall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007), even attributing humanlike traits to nonhuman agents that render them suitable agents of social connection (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008). People who are full, however, are less likely to look for food. Similarly, people who feel socially connected are less motivated to affiliate with others (Brewer, 1991; DeWall, Baumeister, & Vohs, 2008). Considering others' interests, attitudes, feelings, and preferences are critical for connecting with them. Diminishing the motivation to connect with others may diminish the motivation to recognize, think about, or consider others' mental states as well.

Being socially connected not only diminishes the motivation to connect with others, but may also diminish the perceived similarity with more distant others because social connections delineate those within one's social circle and those outside of it. Being part of a football team, a political party, a church, or a married couple identifies who is *in* one's social circle as well as who is *out* of one's circle, namely people within other teams, parties, churches, or marriages. Connecting with others brings individuals closer to each other, but moves them further from people from whom they are disconnected. People consider themselves to be exemplars of humanity, and as others become less similar to the self, they are evaluated as less humanlike as well (Harris & Fiske, 2006; Haslam, Bain, Douge, Lee, & Bastian, 2005). Social connection both diminishes the motivation to connect with other humans and increases the difference between close and distant others, and both of these processes suggest, therefore, that social connection may increase the tendency to dehumanize more distant others.

Some existing evidence supports these hypotheses. First, the clearest examples of dehumanization arise in intergroup settings in which ingroup members dehumanize outgroup members (Demoulin et al., 2009; Esses, Veenvliet, Hodson, & Mihic, 2008; Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008; Harris & Fiske, 2006; Leyens et al., 2000). No existing work, however, has identified the role of social connection in this process, per se. Second, closeness with one's ingroup often co-occurs with negative behavior toward one's outgroup. For example, in preindustrial societies, ingroup loyalty correlated with support for violence toward outgroups (Cohen, Montoya, & Insko, 2006). This is consistent with research demonstrating that in-group altruism and out-group hostility evolved jointly (Choi & Bowles, 2007). Recent studies have shown that administering the neuropeptide oxytocin – a hormone involved in social bonding – increases trust with one's ingroup members and defensive aggression toward outgroup members (De Dreu et al., 2010). Third, existing research demonstrates that groups may behave more unethically and aggressively toward others than individuals (see Wildschut, Pinter, Vevea, Insko, & Schopler, 2003). In particular, the presence of others can increase feeling deindividuated that increases aggression toward others (Zimbardo, 1969), or can diffuse responsibility for action that inhibits people's concern for another person's suffering (Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975; Darley & Latané, 1968). These experiments suggest that some of the behaviors commonly associated with dehumanization may be more likely when people are in groups than when they are alone, but again do not identify the role of social connection or dehumanization in these actions. A combination of factors including deindividuation, diffusion of responsibility, and social connection likely accounts for why antisocial behaviors occur more often when people are in groups than when they are alone.

Our work differs from existing research on dehumanization in three critical ways. First, social connection does not rely on the presence of a group (or an ingroup) but can be activated by merely thinking of one closely-connected other. Although Demoulin et al. (2009, p. 4) "propose that, in order to infra-humanize, people need to be categorized in meaningful groups," the present studies demonstrate that mere social connection absent of any meaningful group categorization can enable dehumanzation. Second, social connection operates on perceptions of the *other* whereas previously identified factors primarily operate on perceptions of the self (as morally invulnerable, or blameless). Third, social connection does not necessarily promote aggression, general immoral behavior, or active antipathy but instead promotes dehumanization in particular.

This paper examines whether social connection diminishes the attribution of mental capacities toward members of other groups (Experiment 1), whether the influence of social connection is specific to dehumanization or influences negative evaluations more generally (Experiment 2), whether the influence on dehumanization is greater for targets outside of one's immediate social circle (Experiment 3), and whether social connection increases the willingness to harm dehumanized others (e.g., terrorist detainees; Experiment 4).

Experiment 1

Experiment 1 examined whether social connection increases dehumanization of groups differing on the fundamental dimensions of social perception: warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). This included four distinct groups in the extreme corners of the social perception dimensions: disabled people (low competence, high warmth), middle-class Americans (high competence, high warmth), drug addicts (low competence, low warmth), and rich people (high competence, low warmth). We predicted that people led to feel socially connected would attribute diminished mental capacities to members of these groups compared to those in a control condition. Including groups that varied on warmth and competence allowed us to test whether the effect of social connection on dehumanization extends to all groups or only to typically dehumanized groups (e.g. drug addicts; Harris & Fiske, 2006). Because undifferentiated members of all of these groups are likely to appear relatively distant from participants' own ingroups, we did not expect to see differences in evaluations between these groups.

Method

Participants were thirty-eight individuals (15 female; $M_{age} = 22.32$, $SD = 3.35$) from the University of Chicago population. Participants entered the laboratory and sat down in individual cubicles to complete the study on a packet of paper. As an experimental manipulation, we used a task similar to studies that have asked participants to relive and write about an experience of social connection (e.g., Knowles & Gardner, 2008; Maner et al., 2007). Those assigned to the social connection condition were first asked to "write about someone close to you that you interact with often" such as a "close friend, a significant other, or a family member," to explain how they met, know, and are supported by this person, and to describe when they might contact this person for social support in the future. Nine people wrote about a friend, six about a family member (e.g., parent, sibling), and four about a significant other (e.g., boyfriend or girlfriend). Those in the control condition were asked to "write about someone who you see in your daily life, but whom you do not interact with" such as "a person you often pass on the street, someone who you see around work or school, or a total stranger." These instructions served as a control condition in the sense that participants wrote about another person, but not a person to whom they had any particular connection. These participants were asked to write about when they first saw the person, how long they have seen the person around, a time when they saw the person, how the person behaves, and a time when they might see the person again. Control condition participants wrote about a range of people, including strangers, co-workers, and neighbors.