

Dehumanization

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Social Psychology, Sociology, Ethics, Political Science, Philosophy

1. Core Definition

Dehumanization constitutes a profound psychological and social process involving the systematic denial of human qualities and attributes to an individual or an entire group. This process results in the perception of the targeted entity as less than human, often reducing them to a status akin to objects, animals, or even abstract concepts that are inherently inferior or threatening. Consequently, those subjected to dehumanization are perceived as fundamentally separate, unequal, and distantly removed from the normative understanding of human beings. This perceptual shift is critical, as it fundamentally alters the moral calculus applied to the dehumanized, making it easier to justify their mistreatment or exclusion.

The agents of dehumanization can be diverse, ranging from individual actors to powerful institutions, including states, religious organizations, or even familial units. These entities actively engage in practices that strip others of their inherent dignity and worth. Furthermore, the manifestations of this demoralization are multifaceted, encompassing both tangible **physical components**, such as violence or neglect, and insidious **psychological components**, which involve emotional abuse, social ostracization, and the erosion of self-esteem. The core of dehumanization lies in its ability to dismantle the victim's sense of self and belonging, while simultaneously alleviating the perpetrator's moral qualms about inflicting harm.

The concept highlights a spectrum of psychological mechanisms, including **moral disengagement**, where individuals detach from their moral compass to perpetrate or condone harmful acts (Bandura, 1999). By portraying a group as less than human, their suffering becomes less salient, and actions that would typically be deemed immoral become permissible or even necessary in the eyes of the dehumanizer. This fundamental reclassification from 'human' to 'non-human' is the lynchpin of the process, setting the stage for various forms of oppression, discrimination, and violence.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

While the term "dehumanization" as a specific academic construct gained prominence in the 20th century, the phenomenon it describes has deep historical roots, evident in countless instances of conflict, slavery, and genocide throughout human civilization. Ancient texts and historical accounts frequently describe subjugated groups being likened to animals or objects, effectively stripping them of their moral standing and justifying their exploitation. The conceptual framework, however, began to be rigorously explored in the wake of the World Wars and the Holocaust, prompting

scholars to dissect the psychological and sociological underpinnings of extreme intergroup violence and prejudice.

Early sociological and psychological inquiries into prejudice and social identity laid foundational groundwork for understanding how groups come to be perceived as 'outsiders' or 'others.' The mid-20th century saw increased academic interest in the mechanisms by which groups are systematically stripped of their human attributes, particularly in the context of totalitarian regimes and mass atrocities. Thinkers like Hannah Arendt, in her analyses of totalitarianism, touched upon the processes by which individuals become "superfluous" and lose their "right to have rights," which are central tenets of dehumanization. This historical examination reveals that dehumanization is not a new phenomenon but rather a recurring pattern intensified by specific social, political, and cultural contexts.

Contemporary understanding of dehumanization has been significantly shaped by research in social psychology, which distinguishes between different forms, such as **animalistic dehumanization** (perceiving others as primitive, uncultured, or animal-like) and **mechanistic dehumanization** (perceiving others as cold, inert, or machine-like, lacking emotion and individuality) (Haslam, 2006). This evolution in conceptualization underscores the complexity of the phenomenon and its varied expressions across different contexts and targets. The historical trajectory thus demonstrates a shift from merely observing the phenomenon to systematically analyzing its psychological, social, and political dimensions.

3. Key Characteristics

Verbal Discourse and Animalistic Comparisons: A primary characteristic of dehumanization is the use of language to diminish the target group's humanity. This often involves likening individuals or entire groups to animals (e.g., "pigs," "rats," "dogs," "vermin") or other non-human entities that are typically viewed with disgust, fear, or contempt. Such rhetoric serves to psychologically distance the dehumanizer from the dehumanized, making it easier to perceive them as a threat or an entity unworthy of moral consideration. This verbal tactic transforms complex human beings into simplistic, undesirable caricatures, justifying aggressive actions and denying their legitimate grievances.

Physical and/or Verbal Abuse: Dehumanization frequently manifests through direct acts of abuse. Physical abuse, ranging from neglect to outright violence, treats the dehumanized body as disposable or as an object for instrumental use, rather than as the vessel of a sentient being. Verbal abuse, including slurs, derogatory labels, and incessant insults, systematically erodes the target's self-worth and reinforces their perceived inferiority in the eyes of both the perpetrator and broader society. These forms of abuse are not merely expressions of aggression but are deeply rooted in the belief that the target is less deserving of respectful treatment.

Denial of Acknowledgment and Identity: Another critical characteristic is the refusal to acknowledge a person's individual identity or specific traits. This can occur through deliberate ignorance, misrepresentation, or the reduction of an individual to a stereotype based on group affiliation. For instance, discrimination against a different race solely because they belong to a particular ethnic group exemplifies this, where individual merit or personality is overshadowed by a generalized, often negative, group identity. The person is no longer seen as an individual but merely as a representative of a despised category, thereby denying their unique humanity.

Attribution of Negative Traits and Moral Exclusion: The process often involves attributing a host of uniformly negative traits to the dehumanized group, such as laziness, deceitfulness, aggression, or intellectual inferiority, regardless of individual variations. These negative stereotypes serve to justify the differential and often hostile treatment of the group. This mechanism is closely linked to **moral exclusion**, where certain individuals or groups are placed outside the boundary of moral consideration, rendering their needs, rights, and suffering irrelevant to the moral agent (Opotow, 1990). Once morally excluded, actions against them are no longer seen as violating universal moral principles.

Instrumentalization and Objectification: Dehumanization can also manifest as instrumentalization, where individuals or groups are treated as mere tools or means to an end, rather than as ends in themselves. This objectification denies their agency, autonomy, and inherent value. For example, in exploitative labor practices or human trafficking, individuals are reduced to commodities to be bought, sold, and utilized for profit, their personal well-being or desires completely disregarded. This characteristic underscores a utilitarian approach that prioritizes the goals of the dehumanizer above the humanity of the dehumanized.

4. Significance and Impact

The significance of dehumanization extends far beyond individual interactions, permeating societal structures and historical events with devastating consequences. It stands as a pivotal precursor and facilitator of violence, serving as a common tactic in contexts of war, civil strife, and genocide. By systematically portraying an enemy or outgroup as non-human, less intelligent, or inherently evil, the psychological barriers to committing violent acts against them are significantly lowered. This transformation of perception makes it easier for individuals to inflict severe harm, justify their actions, and gain support for domination and oppression from a broader populace who might otherwise feel moral compunction. It effectively disarms the moral mechanisms that typically prevent harm.

At a societal level, dehumanization fuels prejudice, discrimination, and systemic oppression. It underpins policies that deny basic rights, resources, and opportunities to targeted groups, leading to profound social inequalities. Whether manifested through discriminatory laws, segregation, or

targeted violence, the ideological framework of dehumanization provides a rationale for maintaining power imbalances and exploiting marginalized communities. Its impact is therefore deeply etched into the fabric of societies, contributing to cycles of intergroup conflict and hindering the development of equitable and just systems.

For the victims, the impact is profoundly damaging. Experiencing dehumanization can lead to severe psychological trauma, including anxiety, depression, a shattered sense of self-worth, and identity confusion. The constant assault on one's humanity can internalize feelings of shame and inferiority, affecting mental health and social functioning for generations. Furthermore, the denial of their human status can erode social support networks, isolate individuals, and make it exceptionally difficult to advocate for their rights or seek justice, perpetuating their vulnerable state. The psychological scars are often deep and long-lasting, influencing individual and collective well-being for decades after the direct experience.

5. Debates and Criticisms

Despite its clear importance, the concept of dehumanization is not without its debates and nuances within academic discourse. One central discussion revolves around the precise definition and scope of the term. Some scholars argue for a narrow definition, restricting it to instances where the target is explicitly likened to animals or objects, while others propose a broader interpretation that includes any process diminishing a person's perceived humanity, even subtly. This debate affects how easily different forms of prejudice and discrimination are categorized as dehumanization, impacting research and intervention strategies.

Another area of academic inquiry concerns the distinction between different forms of dehumanization. As mentioned, the differentiation between **animalistic dehumanization** (associated with disgust, primitive perceptions) and **mechanistic dehumanization** (associated with coldness, lack of emotion, treating someone as an automaton) has generated significant discussion. While both involve stripping away humanity, their psychological antecedents and behavioral consequences may differ, leading to varying forms of prejudice and violence. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for developing targeted interventions.

Furthermore, the measurement of dehumanization presents significant methodological challenges. Researchers grapple with how to accurately assess dehumanizing perceptions, whether through explicit self-report measures, which can be influenced by social desirability, or through implicit measures that capture unconscious biases. The subtlety of some dehumanizing processes also makes them difficult to detect and quantify empirically, leading to ongoing debates about the most valid and reliable ways to study the phenomenon in diverse social contexts. Critics also question whether all forms of negative outgroup perception constitute dehumanization, or if the term should be reserved for more extreme forms of moral exclusion.

Further Reading

Bandura, A. (1999). Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 3(3), 193-209.

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