

Dehumanizing

Authored by
mohammad looti

September 23, 2025

RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Dehumanizing*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=28333>

Dehumanizing

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

1. Core Definition

Dehumanizing, at its fundamental core, refers to the psychological process and subsequent social practice of denying an individual or a group of people their inherent human qualities and dignity. This process effectively strips them of their positive human experiences, which encompass fundamental aspects such as empathy, respect, autonomy, and the capacity for complex emotions and moral reasoning. By undertaking this denial, dehumanization systematically undermines an individual's unique identity and sense of self, eroding their perceived worth and violating their fundamental human rights, ultimately treating them as objects, animals, or non-entities rather than fellow human beings deserving of moral consideration.

The denial of positive human experiences extends beyond mere disrespect; it involves a systematic rejection of an individual's subjective world, their capacity for suffering, joy, and connection. When people are dehumanized, their suffering is often rationalized or dismissed, and their agency is negated. This process creates a psychological distance that enables perpetrators to inflict harm without experiencing moral distress, as the victims are no longer perceived as members of the same moral community. This psychological detachment is crucial for understanding how atrocities can be committed by otherwise "ordinary" individuals, as it removes the empathetic barriers that typically prevent violence against others.

Furthermore, dehumanization manifests in various forms, including **objectification**, where individuals are reduced to instruments or commodities; **animalization**, where they are depicted as primitive, savage, or parasitic creatures; and **demonization**, where they are portrayed as inherently evil or monstrous threats. Each of these forms serves to justify mistreatment, discrimination, and violence by categorizing the targeted group as "less than human" or "non-human," thus placing them outside the protective sphere of moral obligations typically extended to fellow humans. This conceptual reclassification is a powerful tool for social control and the perpetration of grave injustices.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "dehumanizing" is derived from the Latin prefix "de-", meaning "away from" or "down from," combined with "humanus," referring to humans. Etymologically, it signifies the act of stripping away or divesting of human qualities. While the explicit term gained prominence in academic and social discourse in the 20th century, the phenomenon it describes has a long and

tragic history, manifesting in various forms of oppression, subjugation, and violence across different civilizations and eras. From ancient slavery to colonial exploitation, the underlying principle of denying the full humanity of certain groups has been a consistent feature of human conflict and injustice.

One of the most profound and widely studied historical exemplifications of dehumanization is the **Holocaust**, during which the Nazi regime systematically targeted Jewish people, Romani people, homosexuals, disabled individuals, and political dissidents for extermination. The source content explicitly highlights the horrors of the Holocaust, citing "atrocious human experiments," "killing children via gas chambers," and "using Jewish babies for target practice" as stark examples of dehumanizing acts. These acts were not random but were the culmination of a deliberate, state-sponsored campaign to portray the targeted groups as vermin, diseases, or existential threats, thereby stripping them of their perceived right to exist and facilitating their systematic extermination.

The sociological and psychological underpinnings of such atrocities were extensively analyzed by scholars like **Herbert Kelman**, a social ethics professor. Kelman posited that **humanness is deprived when a person's sense of identity and community are removed**. This concept is vividly illustrated by the Holocaust victims, who were systematically denied their identities, possessions, and social connections, being forced into ghettos and concentration camps where their individuality was erased through forced labor, tattooing, and the systematic dismantling of their social structures. They were blamed for societal difficulties, discriminated against, and subjected to treatment typically reserved for animals, underscoring the profound link between the deprivation of identity and community and the complete erosion of their human status in the eyes of their persecutors. For further reading on Kelman's work, see [Kelman \(1973\)](#).

3. Psychological Mechanisms of Dehumanization

The process of dehumanization is underpinned by a complex interplay of psychological mechanisms that enable individuals to bypass moral restraints and commit acts that would otherwise be unthinkable. Central among these is **moral disengagement**, a concept advanced by Albert Bandura, which describes the process by which individuals disengage their moral self-sanctions from their behavior. This can occur through various strategies such as moral justification (portraying harmful acts as serving a moral purpose), euphemistic labeling (using sanitized language to obscure harm), advantageous comparison (comparing harmful acts to even worse ones), and displacement or diffusion of responsibility, all of which serve to dilute personal accountability for inhumane actions.

Cognitive biases also play a significant role. The **outgroup homogeneity effect**, for instance, leads individuals to perceive members of an outgroup as being more similar to each other than

they actually are, thus facilitating the application of broad, negative stereotypes. Coupled with **attributional biases**, where negative behaviors of outgroup members are attributed to their inherent character flaws, while similar behaviors in ingroup members are attributed to situational factors, these biases reinforce the perception of the outgroup as fundamentally different and inferior. Such cognitive shortcuts simplify the mental landscape, making it easier to categorize and dismiss entire groups without engaging with their individual complexities.

Furthermore, propaganda and pervasive stereotypical representations are instrumental in fostering and sustaining dehumanization. Media, political rhetoric, and cultural narratives can systematically depict targeted groups with animalistic traits, as disease vectors, or as existential threats, thereby activating primal fears and anxieties. This relentless stream of negative imagery and language not only shapes public perception but also creates a shared social reality where the dehumanized group's suffering is normalized, and their oppression is justified as necessary for the protection or advancement of the dominant group. The cumulative effect is a society where empathy for the dehumanized is significantly diminished, paving the way for systemic discrimination and violence.

4. Sociological Dimensions and Manifestations

Dehumanization is not merely an individual psychological phenomenon; it is deeply embedded within sociological structures and manifests through systemic discrimination, institutionalized oppression, and the perpetuation of social hierarchies. Societal power dynamics frequently exploit and reinforce dehumanizing narratives to maintain control over marginalized groups. This can be seen in historical contexts such as slavery, where enslaved people were legally classified as property, or in colonial systems, where indigenous populations were deemed "savage" or "uncivilized" to justify their subjugation and exploitation. These sociological frameworks legitimize the denial of rights and dignities, ensuring that the dehumanized status is not just a perception but a lived reality enforced by law and social custom.

Institutionalized forms of dehumanization are particularly insidious, as they are woven into the fabric of daily life through policies, practices, and cultural norms. Examples include discriminatory laws that deny certain groups access to education, healthcare, or legal protection, effectively diminishing their civic standing and participation. Beyond legal structures, societal institutions like media, education systems, and religious organizations can contribute to dehumanization by propagating stereotypes, erasing historical contributions, or promoting narratives that marginalize specific communities. Such institutional backing normalizes dehumanizing attitudes and makes them incredibly difficult to challenge, as they become accepted aspects of the social order, often unnoticed by those who benefit from them.

Contemporary manifestations of dehumanization extend to various forms of social inequality and conflict. Xenophobia and racism often rely on dehumanizing rhetoric to foster animosity towards

immigrants, refugees, or racial minorities, portraying them as burdens, criminals, or threats to national identity. Similarly, sexism and misogyny can involve the objectification of women, reducing them to their physical attributes or reproductive functions, thereby justifying gender-based violence and discrimination. In conflict zones, warring factions frequently engage in mutual dehumanization, demonizing their adversaries to mobilize support, sustain combat morale, and rationalize atrocities. These pervasive examples underscore the enduring power of dehumanization as a tool for social division and the perpetration of harm across diverse contexts.

5. Consequences and Impact

The most severe and tragic consequence of dehumanization is its direct link to violence, atrocities, and genocide. When individuals or groups are stripped of their humanity, the moral barriers to inflicting harm are removed, making it easier for perpetrators to commit acts of extreme cruelty without remorse. The historical record, replete with examples from the Holocaust to the Rwandan genocide, unequivocally demonstrates that mass violence is almost invariably preceded and enabled by extensive dehumanization campaigns. These campaigns create an environment where the victims are perceived as expendable, dangerous, or undeserving of life, thereby creating a moral vacuum in which systematic slaughter can be planned and executed.

Beyond physical violence, dehumanization inflicts profound psychological and social trauma on its victims. Individuals subjected to dehumanizing treatment often experience a deep sense of shame, worthlessness, and identity confusion, which can lead to severe mental health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety. The loss of dignity and the systematic denial of their humanity can shatter their sense of self and their ability to trust others or society. Furthermore, the trauma of dehumanization can be intergenerational, impacting entire communities for decades, eroding social cohesion, and perpetuating cycles of distrust and marginalization that hinder healing and reconciliation.

The broader societal and ethical implications of dehumanization are equally devastating. It erodes the fundamental principles of empathy, compassion, and universal human rights that are essential for a just and peaceful society. When dehumanization becomes normalized, it desensitizes the populace to suffering, creating a moral climate where injustice is tolerated or even actively supported. This moral erosion undermines the rule of law, breeds cynicism, and can lead to a breakdown of democratic values. Ultimately, a society that allows for the dehumanization of any group risks its own moral integrity and sets a dangerous precedent for future conflicts and human rights abuses, demonstrating that the fight against dehumanization is central to upholding the very fabric of human civilization.

6. Addressing and Countering Dehumanization

Effectively addressing and countering dehumanization requires a multifaceted approach that targets both individual attitudes and systemic structures. A critical first step involves the active recognition and explicit challenge of dehumanizing language and imagery wherever it appears, whether in political discourse, media, or everyday conversations. This demands a conscious effort to call out stereotypes, biased narratives, and any attempts to reduce individuals or groups to less than their full human complexity. By refusing to normalize such rhetoric, societies can begin to reclaim the moral ground necessary for fostering respect and empathy.

Education and empathy-building initiatives are pivotal in preventing and reversing dehumanization. Comprehensive educational curricula that highlight the history of human rights abuses, the mechanisms of prejudice, and the value of diversity can equip individuals with the critical thinking skills needed to identify and resist dehumanizing influences. Programs designed to promote intergroup contact and perspective-taking, where individuals from different backgrounds can interact and learn about each other's experiences, have been shown to significantly reduce prejudice and foster empathy. These initiatives help bridge divides by re-establishing the shared humanity that dehumanization seeks to deny, encouraging individuals to see commonalities rather than differences.

Finally, legal and policy interventions are essential for establishing robust protections against dehumanization. Strong anti-discrimination laws, hate speech legislation, and international human rights frameworks provide legal recourse for victims and deter perpetrators. Additionally, responsible media practices, ethical leadership, and sustained advocacy from civil society organizations play crucial roles in shaping public discourse and promoting a culture of inclusion and respect. By combining individual moral courage with institutional safeguards, societies can work towards creating environments where the inherent dignity and rights of all individuals are universally recognized and protected, making dehumanization an unacceptable and actively resisted phenomenon.

7. Debates and Criticisms

While the concept of dehumanization is widely accepted as a critical framework for understanding severe social harm, it is not without its nuances and scholarly debates. One area of discussion centers on the precise definition of "humanity" itself. Critics argue that defining what constitutes "humanness" can be inherently subjective and culturally biased, potentially leading to its own forms of exclusion. This raises questions about whether the concept inadvertently reinforces a hierarchical view of human traits, rather than embracing the full spectrum of human experience. Understanding these definitional complexities is crucial to applying the concept of dehumanization rigorously and equitably.

Another point of contention revolves around the intentionality and scope of dehumanization. Is

dehumanization always a deliberate act, or can it occur unintentionally through systemic biases, unconscious prejudices, or even as a coping mechanism in stressful situations? Some scholars explore the idea of "self-dehumanization," where individuals internalize negative societal views and begin to perceive themselves as less worthy, often in response to trauma or oppression. Furthermore, the debate extends to whether certain forms of objectification, particularly in consensual contexts (e.g., BDSM), can be distinguished from harmful dehumanization, prompting a deeper exploration of agency, consent, and power dynamics.

Despite these complexities, the concept of dehumanization remains indispensable for analyzing and combating extreme forms of prejudice, discrimination, and violence. Ongoing academic and public discourse aims to refine its understanding, exploring both its mechanisms and its countermeasures. The ultimate goal is to foster "rehumanization," a process of actively restoring dignity, identity, and community to those who have been marginalized, recognizing their full humanity, and rebuilding social bonds based on mutual respect and empathy. This continuous effort underscores the critical importance of the concept in human rights advocacy, conflict resolution, and the promotion of social justice globally.

Further Reading

Kelman, H. C. (1973). "Violence Without Moral Restraint: Reflections on the Dehumanization of Victims and Victimizers." *Journal of Social Issues*, 29(4), 25-61.

Castano, E., & Glick, P. (2012). *The Psychology of Dehumanization*. Routledge.

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

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. (n.d.). *The Holocaust: A Learning Site for Students*.