



# Back to basics: human rights violations and dehumanization

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This article positions dehumanization within a broader framework of social inequality and specifically of human rights (HR) violations. We first introduce the link between the denial of HR and dehumanization. We then focus on the bidirectionality between HR violation and dehumanization considering dehumanization both as an antecedent and a consequence of the HR violation. We conclude with possible strategies aiming at social change based on group intentions to claim their HR.

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Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences 2023, 51:101263

This review comes from a themed issue on **Dehumanization**

Edited by **Lasana T Harris** and **Naira Delgado Rodríguez**

For complete overview of the section, please refer to the article collection, "**Dehumanization**"

Available online 10 April 2023

Received: 15 July 2022; Revised: 17 February 2023;

Accepted: 8 March 2023

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2023.101263>

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## Dehumanization, human dignity, and human rights

In social psychology, several accounts assume the existence of a socially shared representation of a human essence, which when denied is indicative of dehumanization [1,2,3]. While this approach is useful in terms of operationalizing dehumanization, in fact, there is little agreement on what human essence is both within scientific [4] and lay communities [5]. One reason for that

disagreement is that due to the diversity of human life, any list of attributes representing human essence will be subjective or arbitrary [6]. Furthermore, any set of essential humanness characteristics might be deployed in favor of political ideologies or as a justification of a dominant status of particular groups, which we will expand in the next section.

Alternatively, dehumanization can be seen as a consequence of unequal social relations violating the basic premise of human dignity and accordingly of human rights [HR], defined simply as minimal conditions allowing a dignified living [7]. The current conceptualization of HR is a derivative of Kant's philosophy and of the idea of an intrinsic value of membership in the human community based on individuals' autonomy, and on the moral obligation of preserving one's own and others' human dignity [8••,9]. Although HR violations and social exclusion can be considered equivalent [10], the latter concept has multiple definitions and meanings, therefore, we focus here on HR (for a nuanced discussion of the fuzziness of the social exclusion concept see Refs. [10,11]). Legal status of HR [12] was intended to (1) protect the people against oppressive and unequal systems and (2) give them an empowering tool to regain their dignity. The basic premise of the Universal Declaration relies on the acknowledgment of equality in dignity and rights across all members of humankind. The document further specifies what equal rights pertain to in terms of legal aspects (e.g. recognition before the law); bodily integrity (e.g. denial of torture); autonomy (e.g. freedom of speech, movement, or opinion); privacy; as well as economic (e.g. employment and equal pay); social (e.g. housing, medical care, and education opportunities); and political rights (right to assembly, voting).

Importantly, the Universal Declaration reflected sensitivity to HR in postwar Europe. Further developments in the HR perspective came, among others, from the feminist critique of the legal framework of HR [13], questioning their universality as they fail to include perspectives of marginalized groups [14]. As a response to these criticisms, current debates around HR emphasize their dynamic nature as they evolve to include perspectives that were previously excluded (e.g. women or indigenous rights [15]). In order to keep the progressive direction of HR evolution, what has to be

acknowledged is (1) sensitivity to inequality, as at the basis of HR, there is an underlying norm of justice and equality, (2) contextual universalism, which acknowledges certain universal undeniable living conditions can be achieved in a context-specific manner, and (3) open normativity, which assumes that while HR movement is guided by certain principles, it is open to change and reformulations.

Despite the hegemony of the human dignity narrative in today's world, the vast majority of the world's population is not the subject of HR, but rather the object of HR discourses [16] and HR violations are widespread. In order to properly address human dignity, it is necessary to acknowledge that some transgressions are an outcome of systemic rather than individual circumstances. Dehumanization can be seen as such a systematic outcome of unequal social relationships and the wide acceptance of HR and violations rather than a problem of a particular group being denied human essence. Accordingly, many of the groups that were dehumanized are also suffering HR violations. Historical examples of such co-occurrence include slavery in the United States and the Holocaust. In the further part of this article, we will address how research has explained this co-occurrence.

### **Bidirectional pathway between human rights violations and dehumanization**

In order to understand dehumanization in the context of HR violation, it is important to move beyond a popular perspective in social psychology automatically positioning dehumanization as an antecedent of societal violence [17••].

The argument in this line has been made for a causal link: perceiving targets as less than fully human results in negative outcomes, including HR violations. This perspective has been backed up in a number of correlational studies in which dehumanization was associated with refusing to help victims of hurricane Katrina [18], reparation policies [19], or HR for Roma [20]. There are nonetheless studies supporting the causal link. First, it was demonstrated that the experimental activation of the Black-Ape association increased the perceived legitimacy of police battering of a Black individual [21]. Also, longitudinal data showed that teachers' dehumanization of Roma in the beginning of the year determines their placing into lower track schools [22] and finally, reading a dehumanized (versus humanized) description of Muslims increased the self-proclaimed willingness to torture Muslim prisoners of war [23]. In sum, the denial of complete humanness to a group leads to its discrimination in terms of HR.

It is important to note, however, that all of the groups in the research mentioned above are already entrenched in

social inequalities. Previous research has already identified how experimentally participating in [24] and observing ostracism [25] can increase dehumanization of the victims at the interpersonal level. We do argue here that at societal level, by considering groups with historically disadvantaged positions, the activation of the dehumanizing associations might be particularly easy, as it follows the circular pathway of dehumanizing those who are already in a disadvantaged position. In this article, we advance the pathway in which dehumanization is seen as a consequence of HR violations. Specifically, we argue that existing group hierarchies are followed by an unequal granting of HR, and that this disparity in HR attribution can result in dehumanization.

First, we want to underline the link between hierarchies and dehumanization. Dehumanization was initially thought to be dependent on ethnocentric motives and, as such, should be a universal phenomenon present in reference toward an out-group. Indeed, initial data indicated the presence of dehumanization both in low- and high-status groups toward each other [1]. However, subsequent research clarified that high-status groups showed higher levels of dehumanization than lower-status groups [26]. In fact, HR violations occur daily and mostly from the part of higher-status groups targeting low-status groups, which also are much more affected by DH than high-status groups. Psychological research identified groups that are both dehumanized and deprived of some HR: racial and ethnic groups, such as Muslims [27], Mexican immigrants [27], Blacks [28], Palestinians [29], and Roma [26]; other society's stigmatized groups, such as the homeless [30], drug addicts [31], people with mental illness [32], and poor people [33]. Accordingly, real-life examples come from the 2021/2022 Amnesty International Report [34], which offers a detailed overview about HR violations in 154 countries. For instance, in the United States, data suggest that Black people are disproportionately impacted by police use of lethal force; and authorities continued to drastically limit access to the asylum at the USA–Mexico border, including unlawful pushbacks of refugees and migrants. In the Netherlands, law-enforcement agents continue to use racial profiling. In France, migrants are subjected to restricted access to humanitarian assistance and asylum seekers are denied the right to apply for asylum. In Australia, 26 Indigenous people were reported to have died in custody, and no one of these deaths had been accounted for. Overall, both psychological research and archival data attest that dehumanization happens predominantly in reference to those who are also subjects of HR violations.

Second, it is plausible that when recognized universal rights are violated, dehumanization is needed to justify this situation. This goes in line with the argument initially proposed by Bandura [35] of moral disengagement

as a means not only to prospective harm but also to justify past harm. In two experimental studies, participants were made aware of the in-group's responsibility in mass killing of the out-group resulting in a greater (subtle) dehumanization of the victims [36]. Committing immoral actions [37] or even imagining hurting someone [38] decreases the humanity of the victim. Dehumanization is also induced when observing suffering in the social (homeless people [30]) or medical context (patients [39]). This literature suggests that dehumanization serves an important function of preventing emotional exhaustion or reducing stress or burnout when encountering other people's misery.

Finally, the continuous HR violations and dehumanization of the same groups defines a tiered status quo [40••], which is then sustained by the well-described hierarchy-enhancing myths [41]. Consistent with this argument, research shows that an individual's endorsement of a hierarchical conception of society is both negatively related to the commitment to HR [42] and positively related to dehumanization [43]. These myths can even reduce the individual perception of the initial inequality [44], thus, the process can enter a self-reinforcing loop. One clear example of such a loop can be observed in the case of low-SES individuals: they are denied uniquely human traits because of their belonging to an inferior-status group, and this dehumanization contributes to the diminished support for welfare policies that could facilitate their greater attainment of some basic rights such as education or healthcare [45].

Last, it is worth a remark on the potential for political instrumentalization of both the dehumanization perception and the 'need' for HR violations. There are many cases throughout history when dehumanizing perceptions were instrumentally introduced in order to justify violations of HR, from the Nazi Party to the ongoing invasion of Ukraine. Further insight on the nature of the relation between HR violations and dehumanization comes from research on the Rwanda genocide. Analysis of individual accounts of the events [46•] shows the more Hutu group members were involved (and in some regions even forcibly) in killing, the more they started to dehumanize their former Tutsi neighbors. As indicated here, research points out to the bidirectional link between HR violation and dehumanization. Both pathways solidify the existing status quo either by limiting the moral restraints related to violence or by justifying harm or indifference toward others' suffering. We call for an integrated perspective on dehumanization considering both pathways working in unison as the societal consequences are damaging and require more focus specifically on including the perspective of the existing systemic inequalities.

### What social psychology can offer as intervention and improvement tools?

Some successful psychosocial interventions that simultaneously address dehumanization and HR are framed within the 'cohesion' paradigm [47••,48], which is focused mainly on the *improvement of existing intergroup perceptions*, especially on the side of the majority group members. Thus, multiple categorizations together with priming a shared human identity have led to humanization of Black persons and consequently to greater ratings of inalienability of HR to them among the Italian majority group [49]. Another potential intervention mechanism is imagined contact. Thus, British participants, after imagining contact with an animalized low-status out-group (Roma people) and with a mechanized high-status out-group (Japanese people), attributed higher levels of the type of humanness the group is typically denied (human uniqueness and human nature, respectively), and this humanization increased support for HR for these groups [20]. This technique seems to be especially useful among individuals with more intolerant viewpoints and greater resistance to social and moral inclusion. For instance, U.S. individuals expressed higher support for the rights of immigrants (Mexicans or Muslims) in the imagined positive contact condition, especially those who endorsed a conservative ideology and scored high for dehumanizing immigrants [50]. It is worthy to highlight that the cohesion paradigm seems to rely on dehumanization — consequence of causal link.

Another promising line of intervention may be based on direct contact and inspired by collective action perspective focused on social justice and the *achievement of equal rights and status between groups* [47,48]. Among disadvantaged groups, intergroup contact promotes collective action to defend their rights when it empowers its members [47]. In this type of contact, members of the disadvantaged group may experience *meta-humanization* consisting in the perception that one's in-group is perceived as possessing dignified, human-like qualities [51]. This, in turn, can increase their sense of competence and agency and motivate them to fight for their rights. Importantly, being seen as agentic is a predictor of humanness ascriptions and contributes to the positive evaluation of all groups regardless of their status in the society [52]. Contact works also for dominant group members, positive intergroup contact can satisfy their need to be seen as moral and warm, which is most salient and crucial in their encounters with disadvantaged minorities [47]. This meta-humanization can promote support for the rights of an underprivileged group and even act as allies on their behalf. Indeed, reassuring a high-status group's warmth increases their willingness to change the status quo toward equality [53]. In a similar way, verifying in-group morality increases collective action intentions in solidarity with immigrants [54]. Accordingly, addressing groups' needs for agency (disadvantaged) and morality (advantaged) can help

address inequality but also restore their relations. This notion is at the heart of a recently proposed Agency — Morality Dehumanization Model [55], which considers dehumanization with respect to both HR and external conditions in which groups operate. For those who belong to marginalized or oppressed communities, their low level of agency stems from restrictions on their political, economic, and social rights, as well as being subjected to negative stereotypes regarding their competence — all of which can result in dehumanization. For those who hold privilege or advantage, and whose power dynamic involves exploiting others, disregarding the moral obligation to care for human dignity may result in being viewed as unprincipled and cold — also leading to being dehumanized. This can result in a reciprocal dehumanization rooted in unequal social relations. Addressing mutual dehumanization requires tackling the inequality, to which purpose taking care for the diverse needs of the stakeholders seems mandatory. Unfortunately, despite extensive research on contact and attributions of humanity [51,56] and also on how intergroup contact fosters action for social change for both minority and majority groups [47], to our knowledge, no research has attempted to directly link contact, humanization, and HR advocacy. This could be a promising line of future research and intervention.

The denial of equal status as human beings represents one of the mechanisms of delegitimation [57], because legitimacy not only has to do with the claims but also with those who make them. In this way, dehumanization of active minorities who defy the status quo undermines the possibility for social change and therefore, greater advances in HR for all. Ironically, those who struggle to reconfigure power relationships and promote oppressed groups' rights are dehumanized by dominant groups. In fact, these stereotypes about HR activists usually contain dehumanizing traits (e.g. irrational, dirty, and aggressive) [58].

Finally, it is possible that changes in the real-life situation (greater HR achievement) of a group lead to its humanization by the rest. For example, passing of government legislation on same-sex marriage in the United States (the right to marry was proclaimed fundamental and inalienable) was associated with clear decreases in antigay implicit and explicit bias [59]. It is argued that attitudes and changes in legislation may be mutually reinforcing, bringing us back to the argument that the de-/humanization of groups and their rights are linked in a circular fashion. Staub [60] indeed argues that assuring humanization requires actively preventing the causes of violence. This preventive exercise includes a position as active bystanders resisting contextual factors leading to HR violations (e.g. scapegoating), but also efforts of reconciliation and rehumanization of the victims after wrongdoing. Evidence of such efforts can be seen when UK Parliament members humanized

refugees to make the government and nation morally accountable for protecting them [61], in research showing how forgiving (versus revenge) is a strategy that results in self-humanization [62] and that when victims accept attempts to reconcile the humanity of both victims and perpetrators can be restored [63].

Taken together, when we go back to basics on dehumanization research, and alongside Staub's Psychology of Evil [60], we consider concepts as delegitimation [57], moral exclusion [64], and moral disengagement [35], we can further enhance the potential of the last 20 years literature on (subtle) dehumanization to better contribute to the discussion on HR violations, such as the ones we described both on scientific literature and wide global policy circles. If dehumanization may be necessary to justify rights violations, we can further study how rehumanization may accompany efforts to promote them.

### Funding

The research reported here was supported by 1) the Polish National Agency For Academic Exchange (NAWA) within the ULAM program (Decision N PPN/ULM/2020/1/00021/DEC/01) to Maria Laura Bettinsoli, 2) funding from the Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia, Portugal (FCT/UIDB/05299/2020) to Mariana Pires de Miranda; and 3) the OPUS 19 grant of the Polish National Science Center (2020/37/B/HS6/02587) to Magdalena Formanowicz.

### Author contributions

Contribution of all authors to this article was equal. The authorship order was determined based on the random author generator.

### Conflict of interest statement

None.

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