

## Exploring Alienation, Self-Dehumanization, and Aggression in Adolescents: Institutionalized vs Noninstitutionalized

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### Abstract

**Background:** Self-dehumanization is a scarcely studied process linked to stigma in minority groups that is promoted by the dissatisfaction of various psychosocial needs and is associated with antisocial or immoral behaviors. On the other hand, alienation is a subjective state of deprivation or "estrangement" from one's own nature, involving deficiencies in psychosocial needs, and predicting various types of deviant behaviors in adolescents. **Objective:** The aim of the following research is to verify if alienation is a predictor of self-dehumanization; and, secondly, if the experience of alienation and self-dehumanization promotes self-reported aggression in institutionalized and non-institutionalized adolescents. **Methods:** Sixty six "67" adolescents (27 of them institutionalized, 35 non-institutionalized) filled out self-report measures of alienation, dehumanization and aggression. **Results:** Through mean differences tests and various regression, mediation, and moderation analyses, it is found that the experience of alienation is a significant predictor of self-dehumanization and that both self-dehumanization and alienation (partially mediated by self-dehumanization) predict self-reported aggression. However, moderation analyses show that this is not the case for non-institutionalized minors. **Conclusion:** Both sets of findings allow for the consideration of interventions specifically aimed at mitigating alienating elements and problematic types of self-dehumanization.

**Keywords:** Self-dehumanization, Alienation, Adolescence, Aggression, Institutionalization.

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## Introduction

Self-dehumanization is a relatively recent line of research with significant psychosocial relevance due to its undesirable effects at both the intrapersonal and interpersonal levels (Bastian & Crimston, 2014). Although further research is needed to corroborate it, dissatisfaction of basic psychological needs seems to be a prominent antecedent (Fontesse et al., 2019). In this sense, social alienation is a phenomenon that precisely reflects a lack of satisfaction of these needs (Seeman, 1959) and has psychosocial consequences similar to those of self-dehumanization (Williamson & Cullingford, 1998). Like self-dehumanization, social alienation is characteristic of groups at risk of exclusion (Rayce et al., 2018).

The present study aims to address the scarcity of research linking self-dehumanization with an integrated view of psychosocial needs in general and with social alienation in particular, as well as analysing this phenomenon in specific groups that are in a situation of vulnerability. To make a progress in these directions, this work explores in-depth the relationship between self-dehumanization and social alienation, as well as the relationship between both and violent tendencies, in a sample of adolescents institutionalized due to being in a situation of vulnerability, and another of non-institutionalized adolescents.

The following paragraphs will give an overview of the fundamental concepts for understanding this research.

## Self-dehumanization and alienation

### *From Dehumanization to self-dehumanization: its causes and consequences*

Dehumanization consists in “the act of perceiving or treating people as if they are less than fully human (Haslam,

2016, p.25), “The denial of full humanness to others” (Haslam, 2006, p. 252). Very closely linked to stereotype and prejudice (Kteily & Landry, 2016), it has been described as a moral disengagement mechanism (Bandura, 1999) and as the most determinant aspect in explaining cruelty among human beings (Blanco, 2004). It can adopt a blatant or a subtle and implicit form, and it has shown to be present in both contexts of violent conflicts and in everyday life situations (Haslam, 2016).

In his Dual Model, Haslam (2006) distinguishes two types of dehumanization. Firstly, animalistic dehumanization appears when others are perceived as animals, and it occurs when they are seen as lacking exclusively or uniquely human (UH) characteristics, which distinguish human beings from other animals, such as language, higher mental processes, emotions, consciousness, prosocial values, etc. Secondly, mechanistic dehumanization takes place when others are seen as machines, things or inert objects, that is, when they are perceived as lacking Human Nature (HN) characteristics, which are typical, essential, or central to human beings, although not necessarily exclusive to our species (such as emotionality, warmth, open-mindedness, individual initiative, and depth).

However, dehumanization does not only occur when perceiving other groups or individuals, but, in certain circumstances, an experience of dehumanization of the self can also take place. Self-dehumanization is a phenomenon very closely related to stigma and stereotype, that implies to see oneself as less human -as lacking basic human attributes-, and that can either adopt an animalistic and/or mechanistic form (Bastian & Crimston, 2014).

But, what conditions promote self-dehumanization?

Previous research has identified several factors that favour the emergence of self-dehumanization, although this

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knowledge is not still fully integrated. Some of these factors are described below.

***Perpetrating immoral and violent behavior:*** committing harmful behavior to others, such as ostracizing them, leads to self-dehumanization. In this sense, Bastian et al. (2013) shown that perpetrating social exclusion or ostracism to others was perceived as immoral and led to self -dehumanization. In addition, Kouchaki et al. (2018) found that immoral behavior - recalling events when participants acted in an unethical way in general, or in a dishonest manner- lead to higher levels of self-dehumanization. But even engaging in non-harmful violent actions, as occurs in video games, has been shown to have the potential to trigger self-dehumanization, both when the violence is directed towards another player and when it is directed towards the computer (Bastian et al., 2012).

***Receiving interpersonal and dehumanizing maltreatment:*** Bastian and Haslam (2011) propose that being a victim of different forms of interpersonal mistreatment and dehumanizing experiences gives rise to cognitive and affective consequences typical of self-dehumanization. In coherence with them, Renger et al. (2016) found that being treated with low respect (based on being treated with no equality) leads to self-dehumanization. Moreover, while dispositional traits and situations that favor suffering positively relate to self-dehumanization, on the other side, self actualization, dispositional factors and situations that imply wellbeing negatively correlate with self-dehumanization (Sakalaki et al., 2017). Finally, as a distal cause, child maltreatment has also shown to promote both self-dehumanization and dehumanization of others (Jiang et al., 2021).

***Ostracism and social exclusion:*** Following Bastian and Haslam (2010), our own sense of humanity may be derived

from our interactions with others, and so the experience of being ostracized or excluded by others would lead to self-dehumanization. In coherence with this assumption, across two experiments these authors found that social exclusion and ostracism lead to self-dehumanization, and that this effect is most evident or consistent in the case of mechanistic dehumanization.

***Lack of Control. Powerlessness:*** that is, inducing experience of low power, in the sense of being controlled by other people has shown to produce more general and mechanistic self-dehumanization (Moller & Deci, 2010; Yang et al., 2015).

As can be observed in this review, a significant portion of the factors predisposing to self-dehumanization are related to the lack of satisfaction of basic psychological needs highlighted by multiple theoretical approaches (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryff, 1989). According to this idea, Fontesse et al. (2019) propose that the dissatisfaction of needs for belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaning would be a fundamental antecedent of the experience of self-dehumanization in psychiatric patients with severe alcohol-use disorders. However, this model has not been empirically addressed in the context of self-dehumanization to date - although it has been explored in a very close one, that of metadehumanization (Demoulin et al., 2020).

Regarding its consequences, moreover being associated with aversive psychological states at the cognitive and emotional levels (Bastian & Haslam, 2011), self-dehumanization has also negative implications at a relational level, often leading to diverse forms of antisocial and violent behaviors. In this regard, Kouchaki et al. (2018) shown that self-dehumanization increased several types of immoral behavior, such as cheating in tasks aimed to earn money, or to adversely affect a mate in a performance task. Self-dehumanization has either shown to

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positively correlate to aggressive behavior (Jiang et al., 2022). Furthermore, self dehumanization has shown to mediate in the relation between the lack of satisfaction of basic psychological needs - those that promote self-dehumanization- and different kinds of unethical behavior. In this sense, self-dehumanization mediates the relation between being treated with disrespect and unethical behavior (e.g., justifying to keep money that does not belong to participants), (Rengel, 2016, study 2). Besides, mechanistic self-dehumanization has shown to mediate the relation between low control -autonomy- and interpersonal violence (Moller & Deci, 2010). Nevertheless, most of the research on self-dehumanization cited so far has been conducted with general population and convenience samples composed of students or individuals without specific requirements, who completed an online questionnaire, rather than with populations where this issue is more relevant. In this sense, self-dehumanization appears to be characteristic of stigmatized and socially excluded groups, such as psychiatric patients, drug abusers, students with special educational needs and other minorities (Fontesse et al., 2019; Sin et al., 2023).

### *Alienation in adolescents*

As it has been argued, the lack of coverage of basic psychological needs appears to be a factor that predisposes to self-dehumanization, and both phenomena are characteristic of and certain minorities, can facilitate antisocial and violent tendencies. As it will be seen in following paragraphs, alienation is another long-standing phenomenon in the social sciences that involves the dissatisfaction of basic psychosocial needs, promotes antisocial behaviors, and has a special impact and relevance on certain minority groups, such as adolescents, particularly those at risk of exclusion.

Alienation is a complex, confuse and polysemic concept with a long tradition in philosophy and social sciences, which can be understood as a negative or undesirable relationship of separation between individuals and some aspect of their environment (e.g., society, nature, work), where the characteristics of that environment do not meet the needs of the "supposed" human nature (Seeman, 1959; Jiménez, 1985; Piñuela & Yela, 2019). Different types of alienation can be distinguished based on the alienating aspect of the environment, such as religious, political, or labor alienation (Israel, 1971). From a psychological perspective -focused on the subjective, cognitive, or emotional experience of alienation- the most influential perspective is that of Seeman (1952, 1971), who distinguishes six variants of alienation: social isolation, powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, self-estrangement, cultural estrangement. Three of them are particularly relevant to this work as they resemble three of the needs that previous research has linked to self-dehumanization:

***Social isolation:*** takes place when perceive themselves as detached from society, others, and the social system as a whole, leading to low expectations of being socially accepted and included.

***Powerlessness:*** defined as ‘the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks’ (Seeman, 1976, p. 403).

***Meaningless:*** Individuals are unclear about what they should believe or which criteria to follow in decision-making, cannot make clear predictions about future effects of behavior because of the little connection existing between the past and the future.

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Alienation has received significant attention in the specific field of adolescence, in part because both the incidence of alienation and the severity of its consequences have been shown to be particularly high among adolescents (O'Brien & Brieman, 1988). Among this group, alienation is characterized by a sense of isolation or disruption in four realms for childhood: family, friends, school or work (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). It reflects living conditions that jeopardize their healthy and wholesome development (Rayce et al., 2018). In this sense, it has been shown to be an important causal factor of many social, academic, and health problems in adolescents, such as: academic failure, absenteeism, and school dropout, reduced classroom participation, and disruptive or deviant behavior (Mau, 1992; Morinaj & Hascher, 2019; Williamson & Cullingford, 1998); delinquency, (Sankey & Huon, 1999); suicide (Lester 2020); or reduced wellbeing (Morinaj & Hascher, 2018; Tomé et al., 2016).

Moreover, in the general population and among adolescents, alienation is particularly significant and severe in socially excluded groups, as social exclusion is one of the factors that leads to alienation (Cimen, 2022); Matusitz, 2020). In this sense, alienation and self-dehumanization could be particularly relevant in adolescents institutionalized in juvenile centers because of their vulnerability situation or behavioral problems.

### Objectives and Hypothesis

In summary, previous research suggests that self-dehumanization is closely linked to the lack of satisfaction of basic psychosocial needs (Bastian & Haslam, 2010; Fontesse, et al., 2019; Yang, 2015), which can be summarized as self-esteem, social inclusion, meaning, and autonomy/positive power. Although for

these reasons self-dehumanization seems to be a particularly relevant process in vulnerable groups (minorities, groups at risk of exclusion), this phenomenon has mainly been studied with incidental samples of the general population, primarily university students. On the other hand, social alienation shares certain characteristics with self-dehumanization; it could be an antecedent of self-dehumanization to the extent that it represents a state of dissatisfaction in the described basic psychological needs. Additionally, alienation, as does self-dehumanization, gives rise to antisocial and violent responses comparable to those of self-dehumanization, and is very relevant in specific groups such as adolescents, particularly when they are at risk of exclusion. However, its relationship with self-dehumanization has not been explored to date.

Taking into account the aforementioned limitations, this research aims to improve the understanding of how the dissatisfaction of basic psychological needs - in the form of social alienation - may promote self-dehumanization in a specific group, adolescents, both from the general population and those vulnerable adolescents residing in juvenile protection centers.

Therefore, the general objective of the research is to investigate the relationship between self-dehumanization, social alienation, and aggression in adolescents, both institutionalized and non-institutionalized. For this purpose, aggression is understood as a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that manifests through physical and verbal hurting behaviors, and includes emotional (anger) and cognitive (hostility) components (Buss & Perry, 1992).

Considering that institutionalized adolescents are in a situation of special vulnerability and often have behavioral problems, our first hypothesis (H1) states that institutionalized adolescents will show significantly higher levels of alienation,

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self-dehumanization, and aggressive behavior.

As the second hypothesis, due to the relationships that previous research has identified between basic psychological needs and self-dehumanization, it is expected that levels of alienation will positively predict levels of self-dehumanization in adolescents (H2).

Given the previously found relationship of both variables with antisocial and violent behaviors, according to our third hypothesis it is expected that both levels of alienation and self-dehumanization will be positively predict aggression (H3). In accordance with the suspicion that self-dehumanization may stem from alienation, our fourth hypothesis indicates that the relationship between alienation and violence may also be mediated by self-dehumanization (H4). Furthermore, due to the expected higher vulnerability to alienation and self-dehumanization in the institutionalized group, it is worth to expect that the relationships between these variables and violence may be more pronounced in this group. Therefore, group membership is expected to play a moderating role in the relationship between alienation and violence (fifth hypothesis, H5), and between self-dehumanization and violence (sixth hypothesis, H6), being both relations more intense in institutionalized adolescents than in non-institutionalized adolescents.

Finally, to gain deeper insight into the relationship of both alienation and self-dehumanization with violence, an exploratory objective without any baseline hypothesis is to determine which specific variants of alienation, and which of the two types of self-dehumanization, are most relevant in predicting violence.

## Methods

A comparative method and correlational design was used. Specifically, a cross-sectional study was carried out in

which data were collected through a survey procedure.

## Participants

The universe of this research consisted of underage adolescents aged between 14 and 18 years. Among them, there were two specific groups of interest: adolescents enrolled in secondary education centers, ranging from the second year of Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) to the second year of high school (Baccalaureate); and adolescents who reside in juvenile protection centers.

A non-probabilistic sampling method (convenience sampling) was used. The sample was composed by 62 adolescents: 27 of them (56.5%) were residents in one juvenile protection center - institutionalized minors-, and 35 were non-institutionalized minors (43.5%) from different courses of one secondary education center and one High School in Mallorca. The participants' ages ranged from 14 to 17 years ( $M=14.98$ ;  $SD=1.32$ ), with a higher percentage of participants being 15 years old (29.5%) and 16 years old (22.6%). 52.5% of the participants were males, while 47.5% were females.

## Procedure

Data collection was conducted using an online questionnaire through Google Forms. The participants took part in the study in a free and voluntary way, and we guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. We presented the study as an opinion pool on different personal and social aspects, where there were no correct or incorrect answers.

The first part of the questionnaire consisted of sociodemographic information (age, sex, level of education, and membership in a youth center), followed by the presentation of the main variables. Two alternative procedures were followed to collect the data. For institutionalized minors, contact was made with the responsible person at

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the youth center, and they were informed about the research being conducted and its objectives. Once their authorization was obtained, the questionnaires were administered to the minors who wished to participate, after obtaining their informed consent. The questionnaires were completed with the assistance of the center's materials (computers) and under the supervision of educators.

For non-institutionalized minors, contact was made with their parents, and they were informed about the research being conducted. The questionnaires were provided to them via email, so they could see the questions that their children would be answering. Once they accepted, the parents provided their mobile phone numbers for the minors to complete the questionnaire if they agreed with the informed consent.

### **Materials**

The material we used is listed below in order of presentation.

### **Alienation**

The scale developed by Rayce et al. (2018) to measure alienation in adolescents was used. It contains 11 items with a scale format ranging from 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum value). Six items were written inversely. The items are part of one of three subscales that correspond to three of the variants of alienation identified by Seeman (1972): powerlessness (3 items, i.e. "How often can you manage things you set out to do?"), meaninglessness (3 items, i.e. "How often do you feel you don't really know what is happening?") and social isolation (5 items, i.e. "Do you feel close to your family?"). The internal consistency of this scale is ( $\alpha=.67$ ). A score for each variant of alienation was obtained from the arithmetic mean of the corresponding items, once the score of the inversely worded items was inverted. An overall alienation score was also obtained corresponding to the arithmetic mean of all

items, once the corresponding items were inverted. Higher scores implies higher alienation.

### **Self-Dehumanization**

Self-dehumanization was measured using the scale developed by Bastian and Haslam (2010) consisting of 12 items in a 7-point Likert-type scale format, ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 7 ("strongly agree"). Five items were written inversely. Six items measure characteristics of "human nature" (i.e., "I feel like I am superficial, like I have no depth"), thus composing a mechanistic self-dehumanization scale ( $\alpha=.67$ ); 6 other items measure uniquely human characteristics (e.g., "I feel like I lack self-restraint, like an animal"), thus composing an animalistic self-dehumanization subscale ( $\alpha=.861$ ). By means of the arithmetic mean of the corresponding items, after reversing the items that had been written in the opposite direction, a score was obtained for general self-dehumanization, another for animalistic self-dehumanization, and another for mechanistic self-dehumanization. Higher scores indicate greater self-dehumanization.

### **Self reported aggression**

To measure the tendency for aggression, we used the short version of the *self-report Aggression Questionnaire* (AQ; Buss & Perry, 1992), proposed by Bryan and Smith (2001). The scale consists of 12 items divided into four subscales, each with 3 items: physical aggression (e.g., "There are people who provoke me to the point that we end up fighting"), verbal aggression (e.g., "My friends say that I argue a lot"), anger (e.g., "Sometimes I lose my temper without reason"), and hostility (e.g., "Sometimes I am quite envious").

Participants responded to the items on a 5-point scale, from 1= ("extremely uncharacteristic of me") to 7 ("extremely character-

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istic of me”). The scale has a high internal consistency ( $\alpha=.893$ ) and is composed of four factors: verbal aggression (3 items, i.e., “I often find myself disagreeing with people”), physical aggression (3 items, i.e. “Given enough provocation, I may hit another person”), anger (3 items, i.e., “Sometimes I fly off the handle for no good reason”), and hostility (3 items, i.e., “I wonder why sometimes I feel so bitter about things”). A violence score was derived from the arithmetic mean of all items, where a higher score indicates a higher level of self-reported aggression.

### Data Analyses

The SPSS 21.0 was used for data analysis. Several independent samples *t*-tests were run to compare the scores of institutionalized and not institutionalized adolescents referring to hypothesis 1. To test hypotheses 2, 3, and 4, Pearson’s correlations between relevant variables were made. Furthermore, a mediation analysis was conducted using the bootstrap procedure, employing the method and

macro developed by Preacher and Hayes (2004; as cited by Hayes, 2013) in order to evaluate conditional indirect effects. To face Hypothesis 5, two moderation analyses were made through two multiple regression analyses. Finally, Complementary multiple regression analyses were conducted to identify the specific variants and types of alienation and self-dehumanization that are most relevant in explaining self-reported aggression.

## Results

### Hypothesis 1

As shown in Table 1, the independent samples *t*-test analysis revealed that institutionalized minors had significantly higher scores than non-institutionalized minors in almost all dependent variables: levels of alienation and its variants, except for powerlessness; levels of self-dehumanization and its two specific types (animalistic and mechanistic); and levels of self-reported aggression. Effect sizes were very high in all the cases (*G* of Hedges between .78 and .89).

**Table 1.** Mean scores (and standard deviations, in parentheses) and results of the independent samples *t*-test for all dependent variables

Dependent Variable	M (SD) institutionalized	M (SD) Non institutionalized	t	Df	P	G Hedges
<b>Alienation</b>	3,25(.52)	2,66 (.41)	5,03	60	.00**	.819
Powerlessness	2,67 (.63)	2,46 (.56)	1,40	60	.17	.506
Meaninglessness	3,25 (.90)	2,27 (.81)	4,48	60	.00**	.792
Social Isolation	3,59 (.58)	3,00 (.51)	4,25	60	.00**	.780
<b>Self-Dehumanization</b>	3,94 (1.00)	2,82 (.83)	4,81	60	.00**	.809
Mechanistic SDH	3,68 (1.27)	2,63 (1.12)	3,46	60	.00**	.734
Animalistic SDH	4,20 (1.00)	3,02 (.81)	5,35	60	.00**	.824
<b>Self reported aggression</b>	3,75 (.75)	2,55 (.62)	6,87	60	.00**	.894

Note. SHD=Self-dehumanization.

N institutionalized = 27

N non institutionalized = 35

\*\* The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

\* The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

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**Hypotheses 2 to 4**

Pearson's correlations between all relevant variables were computed and are shown in Table 2. As can be observed, the

correlations between the 3 variables are positive and quite strong. They all are statistically significant, which is a necessary condition to perform mediation analysis.

**Table 2.** Pearson's correlations between relevant variables

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)
(1) Alienation	1	,700(**)	,631(**)
(2) Self-dehumanization	,700(**)	1	,665(**)
(3) Self-reported aggression	,631(**)	,665(**)	1

\*\* The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

\* The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

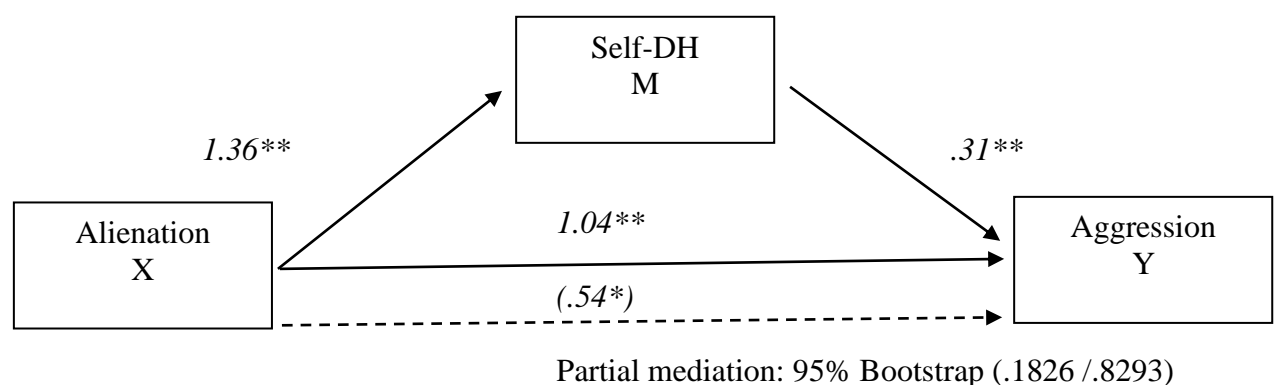
Analyses performed through bootstrapping procedure with Sobel macro using alienation as independent variable, self-dehumanization as mediator variable and self-reported aggression as dependent variable, shown (see Figure 1).

H2. A positive and significant effect of alienation on self-dehumanization ( $b(MX) = 1.36$ ,  $SE = 0.18$ ,  $t = 7.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ), confirming Hypothesis 2;

H3. Regarding Hypothesis3, there was a positive and significant total effect of alienation on self-reported aggression -or aggression, in advance- ( $b(YX) = 1.04$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ,  $t = 6.30$ ,  $p$

$< .001$ ); and a significant positive effect of self-dehumanization on aggression controlling for alienation ( $b(MY.X) = 0.31$ ,  $SE = 0.05$ ,  $t = 5.19$ ,  $p < .001$ );

H4. An indirect effect of alienation on aggression via self-dehumanization, which was positive and significant, as expected:  $B = 0.50$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ,  $p = .002$ , 95% bootstrap CI = [0.1826, 0.8293]. Since the direct effect of alienation on aggression when controlling for Self-dehumanization remained significant but lower than its total effect ( $b(YX.M) = 0.54$ ,  $SE = 0.21$ ,  $t = 2.51$ ,  $p = .015$ ), the mediation of self-dehumanization can be considered partial.

**Figure 1.** Mediation analysis. Relations between Alienation, self-dehumanization and self-reported aggression

Note: The figure displays the unstandardized regression coefficients, B. The coefficient of the direct effect is shown in parentheses. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

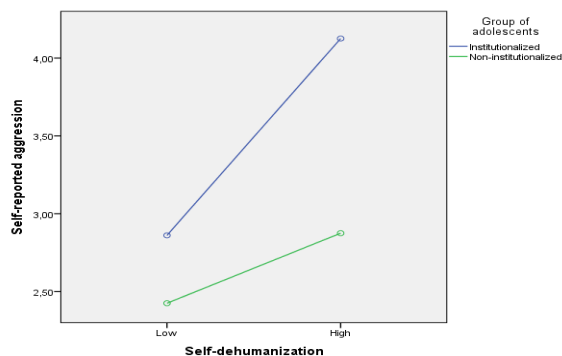
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### Hypotheses 5 and 6

To analyse the moderator effect of group of adolescents (institutionalized or non institutionalized) on the relation between self-dehumanization and violence, a multiple linear regression analyses was performed using aggression as the outcome variable and self-dehumanization, group of the adolescents, and the interaction between both as predictor variables. The results reveal a main effect of self-dehumanization ( $b = .864$ ,  $SE = .258$ ,  $t = 3.34$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and of the interaction between self-dehumanization and group of adolescents ( $b = -.333$ ,  $SE = .166$ ,  $t = -2.01$ ,  $p = .049$ ). Moreover,  $R^2 = .605$  indicates that the model explains 60,5% of the variance in aggression.

To better understand the nature of this interaction, a simple regression of self-dehumanization on aggression were tested separately for institutionalized and not institutionalized adolescents, founding that only among institutionalized adolescents ( $b = .531$ ,  $SE = .11$ ,  $t = 5.00$ ,  $p < .000$ ), but not among non institutionalized ones ( $b = .197$ ,  $SE = .13$ ,  $t = 1.56$ ,  $p = .128$ ), does self-dehumanization predict aggression. Figure 2 shows the sense of this relation.

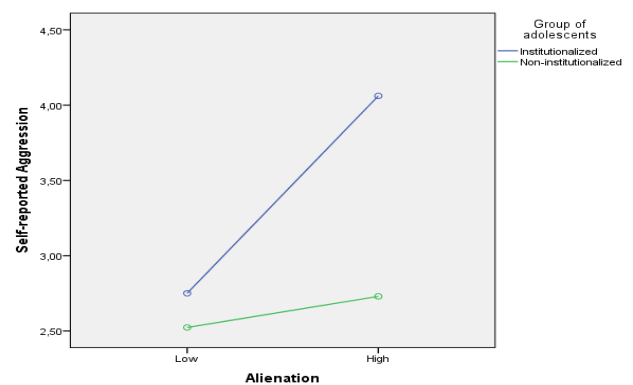
**Figure 2.** Level of self-reported aggression as a function of self-dehumanization for institutionalized and non-institutionalized adolescents. Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-reported aggression.



Note. high and low levels of self-dehumanization were generated with scores that are more than one standard deviation above and below the mean, respectively (Cohen et al., 2003).

The same analyses were conducted, and equivalent results were obtained when exploring the group of adolescents as a moderator variable in the relationship between alienation and aggression (H6): alienation ( $b = 1.688$ ,  $SE = .517$ ,  $t = 3.266$ ,  $p = .002$ ) and interaction between alienation and group of adolescents ( $b = -.731$ ,  $SE = .339$ ,  $t = -2.157$ ,  $p = .035$ ) significantly predicted aggression ( $R^2 = .575$ , indicating that the model explains 57,5% of the variance in aggression)., alienation predicting more self-reported aggression in institutionalized adolescents ( $b = .956$ ,  $SE = .212$ ,  $t = 4.513$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but not in non institutionalized ones ( $b = .225$ ,  $SE = .264$ ,  $t = .853$ ,  $p = .400$ ), as can be seen in figure 3.

**Figure 3.** Level of self-reported aggression as a function of alienation for institutionalized and non-institutionalized adolescents. Higher scores indicate higher levels of self-reported aggression.



Note. high and low levels of alienation were generated with scores that are more than one standard deviation above and below the mean, respectively (Cohen et al., 2003).

### Variants of alienation and types of self-dehumanization predicting aggression

In order to identify which concrete variants of alienation and types of self-dehumanization are most relevant in the relationship of these variables with self-reported aggression, a multiple regression analysis was conducted. The five specific types of alienation and self-dehumanization were introduced as predictors, with self-reported aggression as the

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criterion. The results, as shown in Table 3, reveal that mechanistic self-dehumanization and social isolation are the

only two factors that significantly explain the tendency towards aggression.

**Table 3.** Multiple regression results

Variables	B	SE	t	p
<b>Alienation</b>				
Powerlessness	-.06	0,144	-0,412	.682
Meaninglessness	.09	0,119	0,77	.444**
Social Isolation	.48	0,171	2,85	.002**
<b>Self-Dehumanization</b>				
Mechanistic SDH	.11	0,096	1,17	.246
Animalistic SDH	.26	0,109	2,40	.020*

Note. SHD=Self-dehumanization.

R<sup>2</sup> = .535 indicates that the model explains 53,5% of the variance in aggression.

\*\* The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

\* The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed)

## Discussion

### Main findings and practical implications

The present research aimed to address certain gaps in the current state of self-dehumanization research and advance the understanding of its nature and effects within the specific group of adolescents, particularly those at risk (interned in juvenile protection centers). Through the testing of various hypotheses, certain findings of interest have been found that represent contributions to the current state of knowledge on this topic.

The first hypothesis of this study proposed that minors institutionalized in protection centers would have higher levels of alienation, violence, and self-dehumanization. The hypothesis was completely confirmed, finding very high size effects of the differences in almost all the variables (G of Hedges between .78 and .89). While this prediction was expected in light of previous evidence regarding aggression –institutionalized minors often

exhibit behavioral problems (González García et al., 2017)– and alienation – minors at risk of exclusion experience higher levels of alienation (Cimen, 2022) –, it represents a relatively novel approach in the context of self-dehumanization. Thus, the results confirm that self-dehumanization is a characteristic and particularly relevant phenomenon in at-risk groups, specially affecting vulnerable individuals.

Regarding hypotheses 2, this study has confirmed that levels of alienation can predict levels of self-dehumanization. Being the first study to specifically examine the role of alienation in promoting experiences of dehumanization, this result contributes to the confirmation of an idea that integrates much of the research on this construct (e.g., Moller & Deci, 2010; Bastian & Haslam, 2010): that the experience of self-dehumanization fundamentally reflects a state of deficiency in the psychological needs identified by various theoretical models (Deci & Ryan, 2001; Ryff, 1989). Although there is evidence and rea-

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sons to support this idea, it has barely been explored within the field of self-dehumanization, with the work of Fontesse et al. (2019) being a notable exception.

Moreover, confirming hypothesis 3, it was found that both alienation and self-dehumanization would predict higher levels of self-reported aggression, and, supporting hypothesis 4, results shown that the effects of alienation are partially mediated by self-dehumanization. These results are consistent with previous research that found self-dehumanization promotes various types of unethical behavior directly or indirectly (Kouchaki et al., 2018; Rengel et al., 2016) and even violent behavior (Jiang et al., 2022; Moller & Deci, 2010). They are also consistent with findings from other studies that found that alienation is positively related to violent behavior (Morinaj & Hascher, 2019). The fact that self-dehumanization predicts aggressive behavior both directly and by mediating the effects of alienation suggests the highly relevant role of self-dehumanization in the genesis of violence. In this sense, following the popular notion of "humanity" referring to a special moral sensitivity that distinguishes human beings, it would be desirable to find effective therapeutic and psychosocial interventions to "re-humanize" oneself. In coherence with that, there is research on the process of "rehumanization" of others, a process opposed to dehumanization that has been applied to the field of collective violence (Oelofsen, 2009), victimization of interpersonal harm (Vaes et al., 2022), health care (Fontesse et al., 2019) or prejudice against minorities (Fiske, 2009) where notions of forgiveness, apologies, empathy, recognition of mind (warmth, competence) in the other are highlighted as key factors. Nevertheless, a parallel line of research on the rehumanization of oneself does not seem to have been developed.

On the other hand, to the extent that the mediation of self-dehumanization in the relationship between alienation and aggression is only partial, interventions

aimed at reducing alienation and thus improving the conditions for meeting basic needs of autonomy, social inclusion and meaning could be effective in reducing violence among vulnerable adolescents.

However, potential contributions to develop effective interventions can also be derived from the last reported analyses, which have allowed the identification of the main components of self-dehumanization and alienation that explain an extreme response such as aggression. Regarding self-dehumanization, the most relevant form appears to be animalistic self-dehumanization. This finding contrasts with the scarce previous evidence in this regard, as Moller and Deci (2010) found that mechanistic self-dehumanization predicted violent behaviors. However, these authors did not measure animalistic self-dehumanization in their study, so the linkage they made between violence and specifically mechanistic self-dehumanization should be taken with reservations. On the other hand, Jiang et al. (2022) found that self-dehumanization in general (without distinguishing subtypes) predicted violence. In the case of the research at hand, the special relevance of the link between animalistic self-dehumanization and violence may be due to the characteristics of the target population: violence in adolescents may not primarily arise from cold and planned behavior resulting from low sensitivity and empathy (which would align with mechanistic self-dehumanization), but rather from impulsive violence derived from adolescent immaturity, more characteristic of animalistic dehumanization. Future research could delve into this aspect, and if corroborated, this knowledge may provide clues on how to design violence prevention programs specifically aimed at reducing certain components of violence. In this sense, interventions based on anger management or self-control could be particularly effective (McGuire, 2008).

Regarding the types of alienation most linked to violence, social isolation

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appears to be the most relevant, supporting previous findings (for a review, see Ren et al., 2018). In this regard, the temporal need-threat model of ostracism (Ren et al., 2016) states that ostracism lead to experience dissatisfaction of the four basic psychological needs and, in a following stage, ostracized people respond with antisocial behaviors (so ostracism would be the key fundamental need that promotes aggression, above the other needs). In coherence with that, social exclusion would not be an ideal response as punishment for adolescents' antisocial behavior. on the contrary, the ability to offer social inclusion alternatives to alienated minors-along with other interventions, such as increasing autonomy-would help reduce their aggressive tendencies (Ren et al., 2018).

Finally, hypothesis 5 and 6 was confirmed, finding a moderation effect of the adolescent group on the relationship of both alienation and self-dehumanization with aggression: thus, alienation and self-dehumanization predict aggression only in institutionalized adolescents. These results contrast with those found by Moller and Deci (2010) or Jiang (2022), who find a significant link between self-dehumanization and violence using convenience samples from a general unspecified population. this inconsistency may be due to the fact that in our research the sample size is reduced and, in spite of a marginal positive relation between both variables, it is not statistically significant because of our low sample size. Nevertheless, in the sample of adolescents institutionalized the relation is significant despite the small sample size because the relation is even stronger. Then, our research suggests that the antisocial effects of alienation or self-dehumanization are reduced when studied in general populations, but seem to be much more potent in vulnerable groups. Therefore, if results in hypothesis 1 indicate that the incidence or intensity of self-dehumanization is higher in vulnerable groups such as institutionalized minors, those corresponding to hypotheses 5

and 6 suggest that, in addition, the severity is also higher in this vulnerable groups. This highlights the importance of research to focus more on this kind of groups to address self-dehumanization in a relevant manner. So far, very few research studies have done it. In this regard, noteworthy are some recent papers that address dehumanization in medicine and psychiatric contexts (Fontesse et al., 2019; Lekka et al., 2022), or in students with special educational needs (Sin et al., 2023).

### **Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The main limitation of this research lies in the small size of the sample in its composition, since it was taken from a single child protection center, and from non-institutionalized adolescents to whom we had access, schooled in three formal education centers. Under these conditions, it is not possible to be sure that the findings can be generalized to other samples of adolescents. Furthermore, the data were collected at different time points and using different procedures (for example, with the presence of educators in the case of institutionalized minors), which raises the possibility of the existence of confounding variables that could impact the relationships identified. Nevertheless, the consistency of the results with the initial theoretical model and the strength of the effect sizes and relationships found (for example,  $R^2$  greater than 0.5 in the multiple regression analyses developed) suggest that these findings reflect links between alienation, self-dehumanization, and aggression in institutionalized and non-institutionalized children that are so robust that they could be replicated in very different samples and conditions, even when they are small in number. Nevertheless, future research should corroborate the results with larger and more diverse samples: originating from different geographical contexts, various types of protective centers, or with varied profiles of institutionalized adoles-

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cents. It would even be desirable to test the model with other populations of stigmatized or vulnerable groups, as similar results are expected in such populations.

Another limitation lies in the correlational nature of this research, which prevents establishing causal relationships between variables. For instance, in our work a model has been tested in which alienation promotes self-dehumanization, and both predict violence. However, since engaging in immoral and violent actions has been shown to produce self-dehumanization (Bastian et al., 2012; Bastian et al., 2013; Kouchaki et al., 2018), it would have also made sense to propose a model where self-reported aggression played the role of a predictor variable. In fact, Kouchaki et al. (2018) find that both relationships coexist in the link between immoral behaviors and self-dehumanization, creating downward spirals where self-dehumanization triggers immoral behaviors, and these behaviors reinforce self-dehumanization. Therefore, it would be desirable to complement this research with others that have quasi-experimental and experimental designs, ensuring a better understanding of the nature of the relationships found.

Finally, in spite of the fact that in the research at hand and in most of the previous research self-dehumanization triggers antisocial and violent behaviors, it

has also been found the opposite effect: self-dehumanization as a consequence of own immoral action can motivate people to act in a prosocial way in order to restore the lost humanity (Bastian et al., 2013, study 4). In this sense, another interesting line of research would involve delving deeper into understanding the conditions under which self-dehumanization promotes prosocial responses instead of anti-social ones.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this research, although modest in its aspirations, has attempted to advance the study of self-dehumanization in several ways: first, by studying this process in groups particularly prone to this phenomenon. In this regard, evidence has been provided that self-dehumanization is especially relevant in terms of incidence and severity of its consequences in groups such as institutionalized minors. This study has also been a pioneer in studying the relationship between a self-dehumanization and the classic concept of alienation, providing further evidence on the relevance of unsatisfied basic needs in the origin of self-dehumanization. However, this is only a small, necessary step towards the goal of developing mechanisms to protect us from self-dehumanization.

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