

The role of agency and communion in dehumanization – an integrative perspective

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Dehumanization, the denial of human qualities to others, should theoretically be predicted by perceptions of agency and communion, the 'Big Two' dimensions coordinating social cognition. However, empirical tests of the relations between dehumanization and the Big Two yielded seemingly contradicting results. We argue that these results can be explained by considering (a) different measurements and conceptualizations used in the dehumanization literature, and (b) different social contexts in which it was studied. Specifically, we suggest that when the target group has a victim status in the conflict, or is relatively disadvantaged in society, it is dehumanized based on perceived low agency. When the target group has a perpetrator status or is relatively advantaged, it is dehumanized based on perceived low morality.

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Introduction: understanding dehumanization from the perspective of social cognition

Dehumanization has been conceptualized as a denial of human qualities to others [1,2] or as seeing others as incapable of mental states such as thoughts and feelings [3]. The term entered contemporary scientific discourse following the atrocities of the Second World War [4]. The empirical research picked up this interest soon after

because dehumanization continues to be a societal process with serious consequences for the dehumanizers, those who are dehumanized, and the social dynamics around their relation. For the first group, dehumanization limits moral restraints related to harming others and is known as an antecedent of violence [5]. Furthermore, dehumanization can alleviate remorse related to already-committed atrocities [6]. While dehumanization can be functional for the dehumanizers as it helps them to justify their wrongdoings and ease emotional stress related to harming others [7], those who are dehumanized might suffer terrible consequences [2,5]. Finally, those who are dehumanized tend to dehumanize in return [8], thus making dehumanization an important contributor to the spiraling effects resulting in perpetuating intergroup conflicts. Given this gravity of dehumanization, not surprisingly, there is an urgent need in the field to systematize the plethora of empirical results on that matter to identify factors predicting dehumanization [2].

Arguably, a highly useful theoretical approach for understanding dehumanization comes from the field of social cognition. Mirroring the famous quote of Sigmund Freud 'Love and work are the cornerstones of our humanness' [9], the so-called 'Big Two' agency-communion framework describes two dimensions that reflect the dual nature of human existence [4,10]. The first dimension, agency, pertains to goal-orientation and having control over one's actions and outcomes [10]. The second dimension, communion, pertains to maintaining meaningful relations with others [10]. Although the two factors are sometimes labeled differently in the literature, for example, as vertical and horizontal dimensions [11] or, specifically by intergroup relation scholars, as competence and warmth [12], their essence remains similar. Noteworthy, recent developments have further distinguished communion into sociability as a reflection of friendliness and morality as the ability to distinguish between right and wrong [13]. This development has allowed for a proper appreciation of morality as one of the key features in social perception, since its role has previously been overshadowed by the joint consideration of morality and sociability within the communion dimension [13]. Importantly, all the dimensions are seen as a cross-culturally universal framework for social cognition [11] and accordingly have been theorized as pillars underlying attributions of humanness and dehumanization [1,4].

Big Two and dehumanization

Despite the agreement to the crucial theoretical role of the Big Two, research results testing the unique predictive power of agency, communion, considered also as morality and sociability, for dehumanization ratings, are yielding inconsistent results. While some studies suggest that all three features predict humanness [14], other studies show the primary importance of agency [3,15], communion, when sociability and morality are collapsed [16], or more specifically morality [17]. In this article, we aim to bring some clarity to the complexity of the current Big Two — dehumanization picture that pertains 1) to the measurement(s) and the conceptualization(s) of the latter construct and 2) to the necessity of including a structural component of social relations to fully grasp the role of agency and broadly understood communion in dehumanization processes. We hope that this approach will be useful to push the field forward toward conceptual and methodological integration.

Big Two and dehumanization — considering measurement and conceptual issues

One reason for difficulties in determining the role of agency and communion in dehumanization may pertain to how dehumanization is conceptualized and accordingly how it is measured. To this day, dehumanization has been operationalized in several ways. It has been captured by measuring neural activity in response to different targets [3] and by a number of self-reported measures, including both subtle indicators based on ascription of primary and secondary emotions [18]; human nature (HN) and uniquely human (UH) features [19]; mind attributes [20], or mental states [3]; as well as blatant measures comprising an Ascent of Man scale [21], and a humanness thermometer [15]. Importantly, some of the commonly applied measures cannot be sufficiently distinguished from measures of agency and communion.

In the theoretical model proposed by Haslam [1], agency and sociability are included in HN and morality in UH measurements. As such, the measurement of morality, sociability, and agency, as well as measurement of HN and UH is not independent and poses a high risk of multicollinearity, affecting the reliability and precision of estimates [22]. Furthermore, given that scales of HN comprise agency and sociability, which are theoretically and empirically different constructs [13], it should not come as a surprise that scales based on Haslam's work [1] often have low reliability [23,24]. Finally, some measures of HN and UH were operationalized as in fact measures of communion and agency, respectively [25], further obscuring the relation between agency and communion and HN and UH.

Conceptual problems are also encountered when looking at the relationship between the Big Two and the

dimensions of mental life specified by Mind Perception Theory (MPT) [26]: agency and experience. In previous integrative approaches, MPT dimensions were likened to agency and communion [27], however, there are noticeable differences between these concepts. Agency in MPT includes, among other qualities such as memory or emotion recognition, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong and to plan and execute (im)moral acts. Thus, the understanding of agency in MPT diverges from the understanding of agency in the Big Two literature mainly as the ability to accomplish goals and it blurs the distinction between morality and agency [13]. The second factor in MPT is experience, understood as an ability to feel pain and joy. The capacity to experience feelings, however, is not equivalent to communion, which refers to the ability to form relationships with others and show moral behavior. Acknowledging the fundamental differences between agency and communion in the Big Two framework and agency and experience in the MPT framework, as well as recent concerns about the MPT's validity [28] can help avoid unwarranted integrations of the two theoretical approaches.

Overall, the conceptual overlap as well as divergence between some conceptualizations of humanness and the Big Two dimensions can make it hard to capture empirical relations between the two concepts. Applying the theoretical and methodological rigor to studying these links could clarify the actual role of agency and communion in dehumanization. In this endeavor, it is important not to use agency and communion simultaneously as predictors and indicators of dehumanization.

Big Two and dehumanization — considering social context

The second difficulty in establishing the role of the Big Two in dehumanization requires attention to social context in which dehumanization occurs. What is usually forgotten in the studies on the relationship between Big Two and dehumanization is that the former model not only describes the primary dimensions of social cognition, but also relates them to information about the social structure, as the dimensions are predicted by two structural variables — competition and group status [29]. In a similar vein, other theoretical approaches considered agency and morality in the intergroup processes within the context of unequal social relations [30].

Specifically, the needs-based model of reconciliation [30] applied the basic insight that group members wish to maintain their positive social identity [31] to contexts of direct intergroup violence [30] and structural inequality [32,33]. The positive identity of members of victim groups is undermined by their experienced oppression, which limits their ability to have control over

their situation, therefore, their basic need is to regain agency. The positive identity of members of perpetrator groups is undermined by their transgressions, therefore, their basic need pertains to restoring their moral identity [33]. Similar needs arise among members of disadvantaged and advantaged groups when the existing social structure is perceived as illegitimate (i.e. the advantaged group enjoys unearned privileges) [34].

However, not only are the needs of social actors affected by their societal position but also how they are perceived. The dynamics of unequal relations are reflected in stereotypes, with disadvantaged groups predominantly pictured as passive and incompetent (i.e. lacking agency) and advantaged groups portrayed as bigoted and untrustworthy (i.e. lacking communal or moral traits) [12]. Accordingly, we argue that the pathway to dehumanization can differ depending on whether a group is seen as advantaged or disadvantaged within the social context.

Considering social context may help establish why it is difficult to find a common thread in reasons underlying dehumanization of targets as different as the rich and the poor [35] or victims and perpetrators in military conflicts [36]. On the one hand, victimized or disadvantaged groups experience low agency, understood as limited choice related to basic life conditions, such as housing, education, and medical options [37]. Accordingly, groups facing economic or political disadvantages may be dehumanized due to their lower agency or capacity to control their situation. Communion (or morality) seems to play less of a role for the disadvantaged groups, because while they predominantly share the lack of agency, they tend to vary in terms of ascribed communion ([38]: elderly; [3]: people in homelessness crisis). On the other hand, perpetrator or advantaged groups can

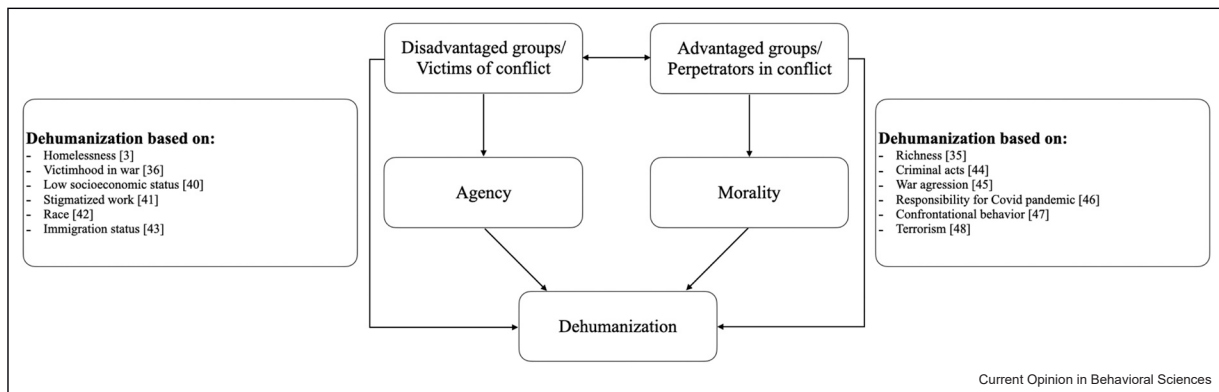
be seen as having controllability over their actions (agency), however, their morality can be questioned, given that their actions are violent or that their advantage is fulfilled at someone else's expense (for a similar account see [29]). Accordingly, these groups can be dehumanized based on their lower morality. Note that within this conceptualization, morality seems to be more relevant than sociability of the two subfacets of communion (in accordance with work attesting to the role of morality in the intergroup relations [13,39]).

Integration: agency – morality dehumanization model

The breadth of individual research in the domain of dehumanization indicates that the field is ripe for an integrative approach that goes beyond individual (sometimes contradictory) findings regarding the role of agency and communion (here especially morality) in dehumanization. We argue that this integration can be achieved by systematizing complex data patterns referring to dehumanization in terms of its measurement and contexts in which dehumanization appears — see Figure 1.

Such an integrative approach is very timely as the current increase in structural inequalities might give rise to more blatant forms of dehumanization [48]. Placing the role of agency and communion in dehumanization within the social context can also put dehumanization in a broader framework of human rights perspective. Human rights are based on the value assigned to individuals' autonomy and freedom, as well as on their moral duty to preserve one's own and other humans' dignity [49]. Such a conceptualization is in line with the model proposed here. On the one hand, people feel the need to restore their human dignity when it is violated by limiting their autonomy [50]. As a way to regain control, the powerless might engage in dehumanizing

Figure 1



Conceptual framework of the role of agency and morality in predicting dehumanization depending on the status of the group in the society with exemplary empirical evidence [40–47].

and taking vengeance against the perpetrators. Indeed, sociological research points out that poor people more often engage in violence [51]. Importantly, their engagement can be driven by group-based grievances (e.g. based on illegitimate inequality) or lower potential to resist authorities (e.g. those who mobilize (im)morality-based propaganda to elicit group-based violence). On the other hand, people feel the need to restore their human dignity when they violate the humanity of others through immoral acts or unearned privileges. Unless the perpetrators' need to restore their moral identity is satisfied, they may defend their moral image through moral disengagement [52], which might reinforce out-group dehumanization and inequality.

Accordingly, dehumanization can be seen as a matter of external conditions in which groups operate. For victim or disadvantaged groups, it is a matter of having low agency through restrictions on political, economic, or social rights, and being the targets of negative stereotypes about their competence. For perpetrator or advantaged groups, it is a matter of using the advantage at the expense of others — that is, violating a moral obligation to respect human dignity, which may result in seeing the perpetrating group as immoral and cold. Importantly, both the needs of individuals and their social perceptions can follow the same principle and, as we have suggested above, can also interact. Thus, the proposed agency — morality dehumanization model (A-MDM) extends the current model of reconciliation because acquiring agency or moral acceptance is important for the victim or perpetrator group not only to restore their own positive social identity, but also to allow them to see the other group as a fully humanized partner rather than a dehumanized enemy.

Positioning both groups' needs and their perceptions within the same context can help form a more comprehensive model of context-based factors affecting inter-group relations that is in line with core assumptions of social psychology. Such an approach allows to go beyond assigning primacy to any of the Big Two dimensions in predicting dehumanization (e.g. [14–16]) and instead proposes an integrative theoretical perspective that underlies the context-dependent differential importance of each dimension. Importantly, however, when testing the model, we call upon a clear distinction of the predictors, that is, agency-communion dimensions, from indicators of dehumanization, and many existing measures satisfy that requirement (e.g. [18,21]).

Concluding remarks

The title of the famous poem by Maria Stepanova, 'War of Beasts and Animals,' [53] implies that in conflict situations, the humanity of both parties is compromised. Reverberating this notion, the proposed A-MDM

suggests that group members may lose some of their human dignity and be perceived to be outside the scope of justice [54] either by behaving (and being seen as) immoral or by having limited (and being seen as limited in) agency. How social actors see themselves affects how they see and behave toward others, and these structural features of the situation contribute to sustaining an unjust environment. In terms of practical implications, the A-MDM may allow for designing more effective interventions to decrease dehumanization both by relating to the dehumanized group situations and by addressing group members' need for (re)humanization, which may break the vicious cycle in which the dehumanized become the dehumanizers and vice versa.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Formanowicz Magda: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft; **Bulska Dominika:** Writing – original draft; **Nurit Schnabel:** Writing – original draft.

Conflict of interest statement

There is no financial/personal interest or belief that could affect our objectivity in presenting the ideas of the article entitled: The role of Agency and Communion in Dehumanization — an Integrative Perspective.

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