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Darker Demons of Our Nature: The Need to (Re)Focus Attention on Blatant Forms of Dehumanization

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Abstract

Although dehumanization research first emerged following the overt and conscious denials of humanity present during war and genocide, modern dehumanization research largely examines more subtle and implicit forms of dehumanization in more everyday settings. We argue for the need to reorient the research agenda toward understanding when and why individuals blatantly dehumanize others. We review recent research in a range of contexts suggesting that blatant dehumanization is surprisingly prevalent and potent, uniquely predicting aggressive intergroup attitudes and behavior beyond subtle forms of dehumanization and outgroup dislike, and promoting vicious cycles of conflict.

Keywords

intergroup relations, dehumanization, metadehumanization, prejudice, conflict, aggression

Disciplines

Cognition and Perception | Cognitive Psychology | Communication | Community Psychology | International and Intercultural Communication | Peace and Conflict Studies | Personality and Social Contexts | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Psychology

**Darker Demons of our Nature: The Need to (Re-)Focus Attention on Blatant
Forms of Dehumanization**

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Abstract

Although dehumanization research first emerged following the overt and conscious denials of humanity present during war and genocide, modern dehumanization research largely examines more subtle and implicit forms of dehumanization in more everyday settings. We argue for the need to re-orient the research agenda towards understanding when and why individuals blatantly dehumanize others. We review recent research in a range of contexts suggesting that blatant dehumanization is surprisingly prevalent and potent, uniquely predicting aggressive intergroup attitudes and behavior beyond subtle forms of dehumanization and outgroup dislike, and promoting vicious cycles of conflict.

Keywords: Intergroup relations, Dehumanization, Meta-Dehumanization, Prejudice, Conflict, Aggression

“These Roma are animals ... Inarticulate sounds pour out of their bestial skulls... These animals shouldn't be allowed to exist.”— *Zsolt Bayer, co-founder of Fidesz, Hungary's ruling party (2013)*

“One officer we interviewed told us that he personally has heard coworkers and supervisors refer to black individuals as ‘monkeys, animals, savages, and pieces of s***’ ... Residents reported treatment so demeaning they felt dehumanized”. — *DOJ report on investigation of Chicago Police Department (2017)*

Explicit dehumanization has featured heavily in some of the darkest chapters of human history. Scholars suggest that the depiction of groups such as Africans, Native Americans, Tutsis, the Roma, and Jews (alongside others) as apes, savages, or vermin not only accompanied colonization, slavery, and extermination, but facilitated these atrocities (Smith, 2011). Yet today, we tend to consider the overt dehumanization of other groups a relic of a distant past—far beyond the pale of our civilized modern societies. Here, we highlight recent psychological research raising doubts about such optimism. This work reveals that the tendency to overtly dehumanize other groups continues to be a relevant feature of contemporary society, and suggests a pressing need to re-focus research attention on blatant dehumanization to complement the existing emphasis on subtle and implicit forms of dehumanization and help us better understand how, when, and why we come to openly view others groups as less than fully human.

A (Very) Brief Overview of Dehumanization Research

In the wake of World War II, psychological research was drawn towards examining how conscious, overt dehumanization promoted the horrors of war and genocide. Kelman (1976) described how blatant dehumanization weakened restraints on humans' violent behavior by de-individualizing victims, thus rendering them an undifferentiated mass. Bandura (1999) and Opatow (1990) similarly suggested that dehumanization lifted typical prohibitions against violence by stripping targets of the moral consideration extended to others. With a few notable exceptions (e.g., Bandura, Underwood, & Fromson, 1975), however, this early work was largely theoretical.

Moving beyond the early emphasis on overt dehumanization in antagonistic contexts, and in parallel to a wave of research on subtle and implicit racism, modern dehumanization research has used innovative approaches to demonstrate a variety of subtle ways in which we can deprive others of full humanity in more "everyday" settings. Leyens and colleagues (2000) showed that individuals are more likely to ascribe to their own group (vs. other groups) complex positive and negative emotions considered largely 'human specific', such as shame or elation, while showing no intergroup bias when attributing more basic emotions shared with animals like anger or happiness. Expanding on this *infracumanization* perspective, Haslam (2006) suggested that denying others human-specific emotions (or traits) captures an important form of 'animalistic dehumanization', but that this is complemented by a distinct form of 'mechanistic dehumanization', which is captured by the withholding of traits central (but not unique) to humanity – like warmth and curiosity. Similar to this animalistic/mechanistic distinction in dehumanization, another conceptualization suggests that we can dehumanize others by denying them the human abilities for agency (planning, thinking;

akin to animalistic dehumanization) and experience (feeling, emotion; akin to mechanistic dehumanization) (Waytz, Cacioppo, & Epley, 2014). These approaches are subtle because dehumanization is assessed indirectly, by examining participants' attributions of characteristics *associated* with full humanity rather than directly asking them to rate targets' humanity. Indeed, the fact that dehumanization is being assessed typically remains opaque to the participants themselves.

Modern examinations of dehumanization have also explored dehumanizing perceptions that may be unconscious, and therefore more difficult to recognize and control. Implicit dehumanization has been demonstrated through reaction time tasks, such as the Implicit Association Test, which reveal the extent to which participants cognitively associate their own groups (*vs.* outgroups) with human versus animal or machine-related traits (e.g., Bain, Park, Kwok, and Haslam, 2009; Viki et al., 2006). One powerful line of research has demonstrated that U.S. citizens implicitly associate African Americans with apes, an association linked with consequential real-world outcomes such as the endorsement of violence against Black criminal suspects (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008).

Looking Back to Move Forward?

The “New Look” at dehumanization as a subtle and implicit process has been immensely generative. Still, the pivot towards subtle, ‘everyday’ dehumanization has shifted focus away from the openly endorsed dehumanizing attitudes that inspired much original interest in— but little empirical work on— the topic. Blatant dehumanization may be especially pernicious because those who express it are aware that they are denying targets full humanity—often a key basis for affording others rights, protections,

and moral consideration— and anecdotal evidence suggests that such dehumanization remains relevant in modern societies. In just the past few years, black soccer players have faced monkey chants in European stadia (BBC, 2014), mainstream newspapers have published caricatures depicting the Obamas as apes (Molloy, 2014) and Muslim refugees as rats (Daily Mail, 2015), and American and European political leaders have used overtly dehumanizing language to describe Muslims (‘Rabid dogs’, ‘Lice’), African Americans (‘Apes’) and the Roma (‘Vermin’, ‘Beasts’).

Although modern empirical work on blatant dehumanization remains limited, recent research has begun highlighting its continued importance across cultural contexts and towards a range of targets. One study among students and soldiers in Sweden found that those with socially dominant and authoritarian personalities were more likely to blatantly dehumanize terrorists by endorsing statements like “Terrorists do not deserve to be treated like humans”, predicting support for torture of enemy insurgents and non-combatants alike (Linden, Bjorklund, & Backstrom, 2016). Another study examining partisanship showed that highly politically identified Italians blatantly dehumanized their political opponents (e.g., “Some left-wingers deserve to be treated as animals”) (Pacilli, Rocco, Pagliaro, & Russo, 2015).

Recently, we sought to systematically assess the prevalence, roots, and consequences of blatant dehumanization. As a first step, we developed an unambiguous measure of blatant dehumanization (Figure 1), which provides people with the popular ‘Ascent of Man’ diagram depicting evolutionary progress and asks them to rate where they think each group belongs on the scale, from ape-like human ancestors (0) to ‘advanced’ modern humans (100). Testifying to its validity, ratings on the ‘Ascent

dehumanization' scale correlate robustly with the degree to which people judge targets to be characterized by overtly dehumanizing traits, such as “savage”, “barbaric”, “unsophisticated”, “primitive”, and “irrational” (Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015, Study 5).

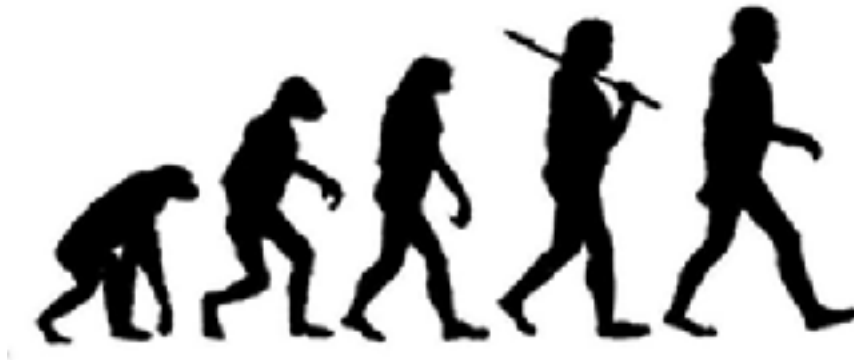


Figure 1. The “Ascent of (Hu)Man” measure of blatant dehumanization. Scores are provided using a slider scale ranging from 0–100, with 0 corresponding to the left side of the image (i.e., quadrupedal human ancestor), and 100 corresponding to the right side of the image (‘full’ modern-day human). Although this popular image incorrectly represents evolution, it nevertheless captures lay conceptions of evolution as linear progression. This figure was originally published in *Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015, JPSP, Figure 1.*

Blatant Dehumanization is Prevalent

Data we have collected with the Ascent dehumanization scale from a broad range of samples in four countries reveal striking levels of blatant dehumanization, primarily towards low status/disadvantaged targets (see Table 1).

Table 1. Average Levels of Blatant Dehumanization using the “Ascent of (Hu)Man” Measure

Source	Sample (# respondents)	Target Group	Average Rating (SD)	Quartiles	Difference score (Ingroup - [Target group])
Kteily et al., 2015, Study 1	Americans (201)	Europeans	91.9 (15.7)	90, 100, 100	-0.4, <i>ns</i>
Kteily et al., 2015, Study 1	Americans (201)	Japanese	91.1 (16.9)	89.3, 100, 100	0.4, <i>ns</i>
Kteily et al., 2015, Study 1	Americans (201)	Australians	90.1 (16.9)	87, 100, 100	1.6, <i>ns</i>
Kteily et al., 2015, Study 1	Americans (201)	Muslims	77.6 (29.7)	60, 91, 100	14.0***
Kteily & Bruneau, 2017, Study 1a	Americans (342)	Mexican Immigrants	75.78 (26.16)	56.5, 82, 100	11.56***
Kteily et al., 2015, Study 5	Americans (300)	ISIS members	53.53 (36.37)	0, 29, 71.8	36.96***
Kteily et al., 2015, Study 3b	British people (107)	Blacks	74.02 (28.83)	60, 81.5, 100	13.12***
Kteily et al., 2015, Study 3b	British people (107)	Muslims	66.14 (33.78)	43, 74.5, 100	21.00***
Kteily et al., 2015, Study 4	Hungarians (906)	Jews	76.59 (26.89)	60, 90, 100	1.94**
Kteily et al., 2015, Study 4	Hungarians (906)	Muslims	65.85 (30.64)	50, 70, 100	12.68***
Kteily et al., 2015, Study 4	Hungarians (906)	Roma	49.56 (37.83)	10, 50, 90	28.97***
Kteily, Hodson, & Bruneau, 2016, Study 4	Israelis (493)	Palestinians	44.69 (27.10)	23, 43, 60.5	35.17***

Note. Difference score refers to the difference in average Ascent ratings of the ingroup (e.g., Americans rating “Americans”) and the target outgroup. Average ingroup ratings can thus be determined by adding the difference score to the target outgroup average rating. *ns* = ‘Not significant’; *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$

For example, across a number of samples, Americans rate Americans, Europeans, Japanese and Australians equivalently high on the scale (i.e., 90-93), but rate Mexican immigrants, Arabs and Muslims 10-15 points lower. Muslims are similarly dehumanized by samples of British and Hungarian participants, as are Blacks in the U.K. In Hungary, ethnic-majority Hungarians rate the Roma (“Gypsy”) population near the midpoint of the scale. Israelis rate Palestinians significantly closer to the quadrupedal human ancestor than a “fully evolved” modern human. Furthermore, although many people rate all outgroup targets as fully human, blatant dehumanization is far from a fringe phenomenon: for example, half of our British sample judged Muslims to be 74.5 or lower on the Ascent scale, and a quarter of our American sample rated Muslims at or below 60 on the scale.

Blatant Dehumanization Uniquely Predicts Hostility

Our findings also suggest that blatant dehumanization contributes uniquely to hostile intergroup attitudes and behavior. Across a range of studies, we have regressed aggressive outcomes on blatant dehumanization and subtle forms of dehumanization, assessed both implicitly and explicitly. Consistently, blatant dehumanization was more strongly associated than subtle/implicit dehumanization with attitudes such as supporting the torture of Muslims and Arabs, supporting housing and educational discrimination against the Roma, and supporting collective punishment of Palestinians (Kteily et al., 2015, 2016). Importantly, the same patterns emerge for behavior: Individuals expressing greater blatant dehumanization of Arabs donated less money to Arab (vs. American) victims of conflict, and those expressing more blatant dehumanization towards Muslims or Mexican immigrants were more likely to sign (purportedly real) online petitions urging

Congress to implement policies such as banning Muslim travel to the U.S., or building a wall between the U.S. and Mexico (Kteily et al., 2015; Kteily & Bruneau, 2017)—policies currently being implemented by the U.S. president, Donald Trump. Indeed, our results suggest dehumanization may have been an important basis of support for Trump. In two studies during the presidential primaries, we found that blatant dehumanization of Mexican immigrants and Muslims was strongly associated with supporting Trump, even after controlling for political conservatism and prejudice towards these groups. This relationship was significantly stronger than for any other primary candidate, Democrat or Republican (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017).

Blatant Dehumanization is Distinct from Dislike

Our results also suggest that blatant dehumanization is not merely capturing outgroup dislike. Indeed, although blatant dehumanization tends to be moderately correlated with liking of a target group (typically, $r \sim +.50$), our findings suggest that prejudice and blatant dehumanization uniquely predict attitudes and behavior. Knowing that someone perceives a group as ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’ provides additional information about their likelihood of endorsing aggression towards that target beyond knowing how cold they feel towards them. A recent neuroimaging study affirms this distinction, showing a double-dissociation between brain regions active when making judgments of dehumanization (using the Ascent scale) and dislike (using feeling thermometers) (Bruneau et al., 2017; see also Harris & Fiske, 2011).

Another group of scholars provides converging evidence for the unique potency of blatant dehumanization. Assessing dehumanization using both the Ascent scale and blatant trait attributions (e.g., “savage”), Jardina and Piston (2016) observed significant

dehumanization of black Americans by white Americans among a large representative sample in the U.S. They further found that whites who dehumanized blacks were more likely to support punitive criminal justice legislation disproportionately affecting blacks, such as the *three strikes* laws— a relationship that held controlling for partisanship, conservatism, racial resentment, and racial stereotyping.

What factors predict levels of blatant dehumanization?

Given its consequentiality, understanding the dispositional and contextual factors associated with blatant dehumanization is important. A first factor is status: Groups dehumanized the most (e.g., Muslims, Black Americans, Roma) tend to be lower in status than those who are not (e.g., Europeans, Australians)— a feature that may distinguish blatant from subtle dehumanization, which is frequently observed in the absence of status distinctions (Rodriguez-Perez et al., 2011; but see Capozza et al., 2012).

Second, a sense of threat and/or presence of conflict likely contribute to blatant dehumanization. For example, Americans' blatant dehumanization of Arabs was higher in the immediate aftermath of the Boston marathon attacks than it was several months prior or after; in contrast, subtle dehumanization remained stable across time points (Kteily et al., 2015). Although most existing work has examined advantaged group members' overt dehumanization of disadvantaged groups, violent conflict and associated feelings of illegitimacy might lead even disadvantaged group members (e.g., Palestinians) to blatantly dehumanize their advantaged enemies (e.g., Israelis).

Third, individual differences are associated with the proclivity to blatantly dehumanize. For example, socially dominant and authoritarian people are the most likely to blatantly dehumanize outgroups (Kteily et al., 2015; Linden et al., 2016), although

because this has been documented primarily with dehumanization of disadvantaged and marginalized outgroups, it remains unclear whether it would extend to humanity attributions about higher status outgroups.

A fourth factor driving dehumanization is the degree to which people believe that a target group denies humanity to their own. In one set of studies, non-Muslim Americans who believed or were told that Muslims saw them in animalistic terms were more likely to reciprocate, blatantly dehumanizing Muslims in kind (Kteily et al., 2016). This (meta-) perception (which we term *meta-dehumanization*) was correlated with but nonetheless distinct from perceiving that Muslims disliked Americans, and exerted unique effects on reciprocal dehumanization (see Figure 2).

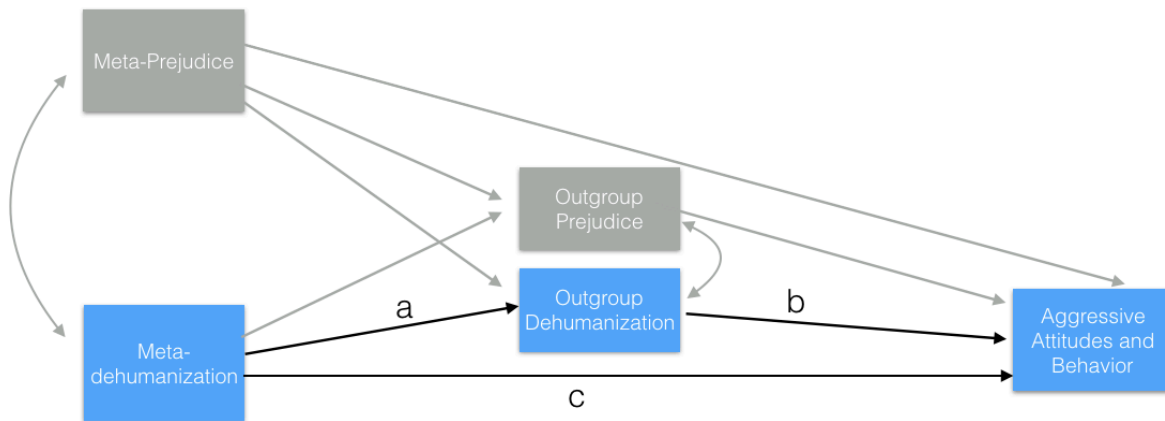


Figure 2. Conceptual diagram of the proposed theoretical model, in which feeling dehumanized by another group (i.e., meta-dehumanization) influences aggressive attitudes and behavior towards that group via outgroup dehumanization, controlling for feeling disliked by i.e., meta-prejudice) and disliking (i.e., outgroup prejudice) that group. Primary variables (blue) and paths (black) of interest appear highlighted. This model introduces a *dehumanization-specific* pathway from meta-perception to aggression. Figure originally published in *Kteily, Hodson, & Bruneau, 2016, JPSP, Figure 1.*

Supporting a link between meta-dehumanization and aggression, Andrighetto, Riva, Gabbiadini, and Volpato (2016) found that experiencing or reflecting on social exclusion involving animalistic language (e.g., being called “jackal” or “mule”) predicted more

aggressive responses than exclusion involving denigrating but non-animalistic language (e.g., “profiteer” or “stubborn”) (see also Bastian and Haslam, 2011).

Meta-dehumanization appears to function similarly among members of minority groups, historically the primary targets of dehumanization. During the Republican primary process, Kteily and Bruneau (2017) observed that Latino and Muslim Americans felt dehumanized by the Republican Party, majority Americans, and, especially, Donald Trump. As among majority Americans, this perception was distinct from feeling disliked by these targets, and uniquely predicted aggression. For example, Muslim Americans who felt dehumanized by non-Muslim Americans more strongly endorsed violent (versus nonviolent) collective action, and indicated less willingness to report to law enforcement suspicious activities potentially related to terrorism.

These findings lend empirical credence to Barack Obama’s suggestion that Trump’s dehumanizing rhetoric against groups like Muslims makes Americans less safe by promoting the behaviors that he aims to curtail (Bradner, 2016). Indeed, our results highlight the potential for vicious cycles of conflict (see Figure 3): Blatant dehumanization of group B by group A might contribute to aggression against group B. This dehumanization (and/or aggression) may lead group B to *feel* dehumanized, promoting reciprocal dehumanization and aggression, and so on.

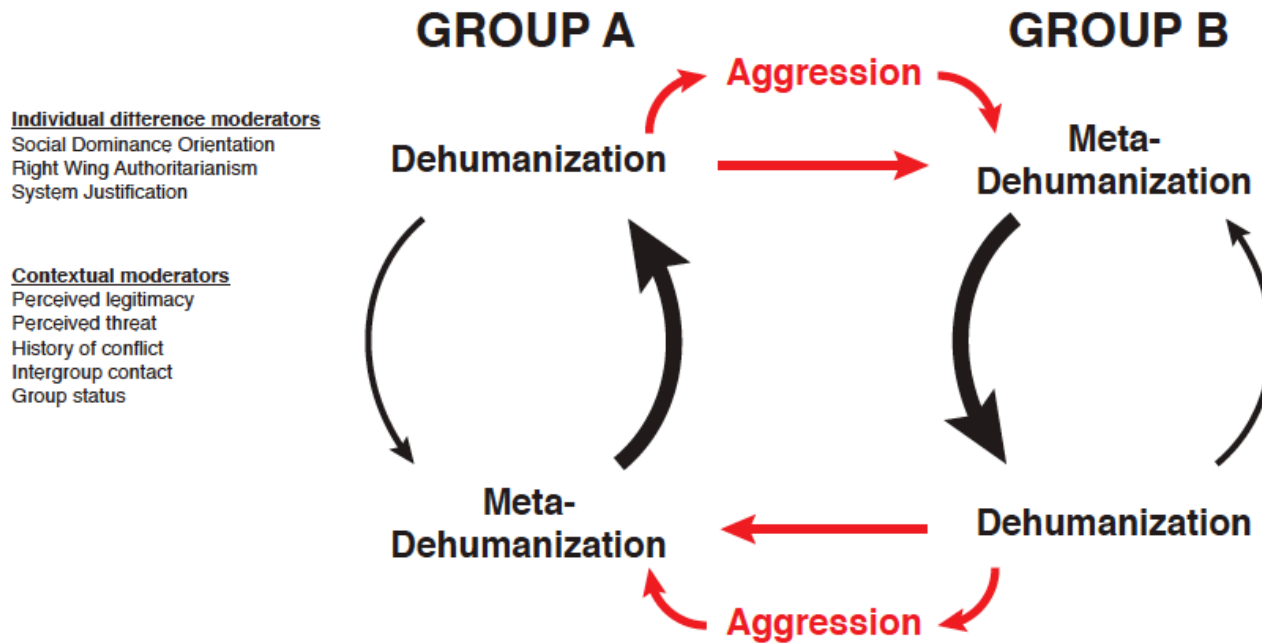


Figure 3. A working model of potential cyclical patterns of violence rooted in dehumanization. Dehumanization and subsequent aggression by Group A towards Group B might lead Group B to feel dehumanized (i.e., *meta-dehumanization*), itself promoting reciprocal dehumanization and aggression towards Group A. This could then feed back into Group A's own sense of being dehumanized by Group B, and so on. Although existing research has most clearly delineated the path from meta-dehumanization → dehumanization (i.e., the thicker arrows), we include an arrow depicting a link from dehumanization → meta-dehumanization to acknowledge the potential for reciprocal causation. We predict that mean levels of meta-dehumanization and dehumanization, as well as the links between these constructs, and their association with aggression, may be influenced by individual difference and contextual moderators, such as socially dominant personality styles or the belief that the other side's views are illegitimate.

Future Directions

The systematic empirical examination of blatant dehumanization is a recent development so, despite current advances, much remains unknown. Future work could further specify the defining characteristics of blatant dehumanization beyond its conscious and overt nature, including by identifying precisely what participants mean when explicitly rating another group as animals. Existing work cannot distinguish whether those who blatantly dehumanize believe that the target is literally less biologically evolved or genetically human, or if they instead dehumanize metaphorically to express their belief that a group lacks capacities or traits central to full humanity (e.g., “rational”, “civilized”) or behaves in ways characteristic of ‘lower’ animals (e.g., “wild”, “barbaric”). Both possibilities are plausible. In fact, Jardina, McElwee, and Piston (2016) report in a popular press article that when asked to identify their thought process when rating African Americans on the ‘Ascent of Man’ scale, one participant responded “I consider blacks to be closer to the animal kingdom” (i.e., a genetic basis for dehumanization) whereas another responded that blacks are “people who act like animals” (i.e., dehumanization by metaphor).

Importantly, that overtly dehumanizing other groups might sometimes (or often) reflect metaphorical thinking does not detract from its importance. If consciously casting a group as “savage apes” or “dirty cockroaches” weakens restraints upon aggressing against them, it is unlikely to matter much to the dehumanized if they aren’t literally seen to lack all the genes constituting *Homo Sapiens*.¹

¹ Note that not all animalistic metaphors need be dehumanizing or hostile, as when we playfully call a child a ‘little piglet’ (see Haslam, Loughnan, & Sun, 2011).

Notably, although blatant dehumanization involves consciously seeing others as lacking full humanity, it need not involve antagonism. Whereas openly perceiving an enemy outgroup as “savage” might justify aggressing against them, a well-meaning teacher perceiving students from a disadvantaged group as “unsophisticated” or “irrational” might paternalistically route them to less challenging academic tracks, thereby limiting opportunities for upward mobility. Future work should examine such possibilities.

Also worth exploring further is the relationship between subtle and blatant dehumanization: Do these constructs represent differences in degree or in kind? When do they align (or not)? And how might they interact to predict behavior? One possibility, for example, is that subtle dehumanization will better predict intergroup outcomes in contexts (e.g., college campuses) where individuals don’t harbor or won’t express blatantly dehumanizing attitudes. Examining how subtle (versus blatant) dehumanizers might react differently to being made aware of their attitudes (e.g., by seeking to control them) would also be interesting.

Finally, since much of the work linking blatant dehumanization to behavioral outcomes is correlational, demonstrating that dehumanization *causes* aggression via experimental and longitudinal designs will also be important. More work is also needed to identify moderators (see Figure 3 for candidate constructs) of the effects of blatant dehumanization (and meta-dehumanization), as is work exploring how to reduce it. Preliminary research provides some optimism: Just as thinking that another group dehumanizes one’s own group increases reciprocal dehumanization, learning that an outgroup *humanizes* one’s ingroup reduces it (Kteily et al., 2016, Study 6).

Although we undoubtedly have more to learn, one thing seems clear: the conscious and explicit dehumanization of others continues to be a feature of contemporary life. Given the strength of association between blatant dehumanization and negative intergroup outcomes, we ignore this at our peril.

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Waytz, A., Cacioppo, J., & Epley, N. (2014). Who sees human? The stability and importance of individual differences in anthropomorphism. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *5*, 219–232. [http://dx.doi.org/ 10.1177/1745691610369336](http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1745691610369336)

Recommended Reading

Goff, P. A., Eberhardt, J. L., Williams, M. J., & Jackson, M. C. (2008). (See References).

An article documenting the implicit cognitive association between Blacks and apes, and highlighting its consequentiality in predicting outcomes such as endorsement of violence against Black suspects and the likelihood of the death penalty convictions.

Haslam, N., & Loughnan, S. (2014). (See References). An in-depth review of classical and contemporary dehumanization research, addressing the causes, consequences, and moderators of dehumanization.

Haslam, N. & Stratemeyer, M. (2016). (See References). A brief overview of research on new directions in dehumanization research, focusing on the period between 2014-2016.

Kteily, N., Bruneau, E., Waytz, A., & Cotterill, S. (2015). (See References). This paper introduced and validated the “Ascent of Man” measure of blatant dehumanization, focusing on the distinction between blatant and subtle forms of dehumanization, and documenting the relevance of blatant dehumanization in predicting aggressive attitudes and behavior.

Kteily, N., Hodson, G., & Bruneau, E. (2016). (See References). This paper introduced the concept of “meta-dehumanization”— the (meta-)perception that one’s group is dehumanized by another group— and highlighted its contribution in promoting dehumanization and aggression.