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Review

The loss of humanness in close relationships: An interpersonal model of dehumanization

Gery C. Karantzas[1], Jeffry A. Simpson[2] and
Bengianni Pizzirani[3]

Abstract

To lose one's sense of what it means to be human reflects a profound form of loss. Recent research in the study of dehumanization highlights that the loss of humanness can be experienced at the hands of close others. Moreover, acts of dehumanization can take many forms in close relationships. In this paper, we review the emerging literature on the study of dehumanization within interpersonal relationships, placing a specific emphasis on adult romantic relationships. We situate our review of the literature within a newly developed model of interpersonal dehumanization. This model outlines how many destructive relationship behaviors reflect forms of dehumanization, which can result in a vast array of personal and relational losses.

Addresses
[1] Deakin University, Australia
[2] University of Minnesota, United States
[3] Monash University, Australia

Corresponding author: Karantzas, Gery C (gery.karantzas@deakin.edu.au)

Humans are social animals with a fundamental need for social connection. We seek out those closest to us for love, comfort, and security when distressed [1–5] and long for their praise and approval during triumph or success [6,7]. Social connection is also a central theme in people's accounts of what it means to be human [8,9]. Nevertheless, it is at the hands of close others that we

also experience social disconnection and, with that, a loss of what it is to be human. What relational acts produce the loss of humanness? Among myriad negative and destructive relationship behaviors, which ones are especially dehumanizing? In this article, we extend Haslam's [10] model of dehumanization to illustrate how destructive behaviors that occur in close relationships are characteristic of different forms of dehumanization. We then review recent research that offers a dehumanization perspective within close relationships with a focus on romantic relationships.

Dual model of dehumanization

Dehumanization has been traditionally researched within intergroup processes as a unidimensional construct [11,12]. However, advancements in the conceptualization of dehumanization [13,14] have examined this phenomenon within the context of interpersonal relationships [15–17] and, more recently, romantic relationships [18–20]. According to Haslam's [10] dual model of dehumanization, a person can be denied humanness on two dimensions: (1) the *denial of human uniqueness*, and (2) the *denial of human nature*. The denial of human uniqueness involves denying a person of the qualities assumed to separate humans from animals. Such qualities include (but are not limited to) self-regulation, intelligence, and social refinement [13,18,21]. The denial of human uniqueness, therefore, involves treating a person as a child—as unintelligent, uncivilized, or irrational. The denial of human nature involves denying a person of the qualities assumed to separate humans from mechanistic objects [10,14]. Such qualities include cognitive flexibility and the ability to experience and express emotions. The denial of human nature, accordingly, involves treating others as if they are machines, rigid/narrow-minded, are useful only to serve another, and as if they have no feelings [13,18,21]. Indeed, recent work on dehumanization in romantic relationships indicates that these two dimensions can be distilled into two facets.

Specifically, the denial of human uniqueness entails treating a romantic partner as unrefined and/or immature, whereas the denial of human nature entails treating a romantic partner as if they are exploitable and/or

emotionless [19]. Haslam [10,13,14] and others [18,19] have noted that people also vary in the way dehumanization is perpetrated. For example, the perpetration of dehumanization in relationships can be highly overt and explicit, with people making statements to close others that clearly communicate the denial of human-ness—either human uniqueness, human nature, or both. Conversely, the perpetration of dehumanization can be subtle and implicit. Subtle and implicit denials can involve ascribing few human qualities to another or making upward comparisons in which close others are deemed to have fewer human qualities than other in-dividuals or social groups [10,13]. Thus, the perpetra-tion of dehumanization can occur in a variety of ways and not all aspects of dehumanization need be denied for dehumanization to take place. Indeed, any relational act that denies another any fundamental human quality is dehumanizing, but the more overt and frequent, the greater the dehumanization.
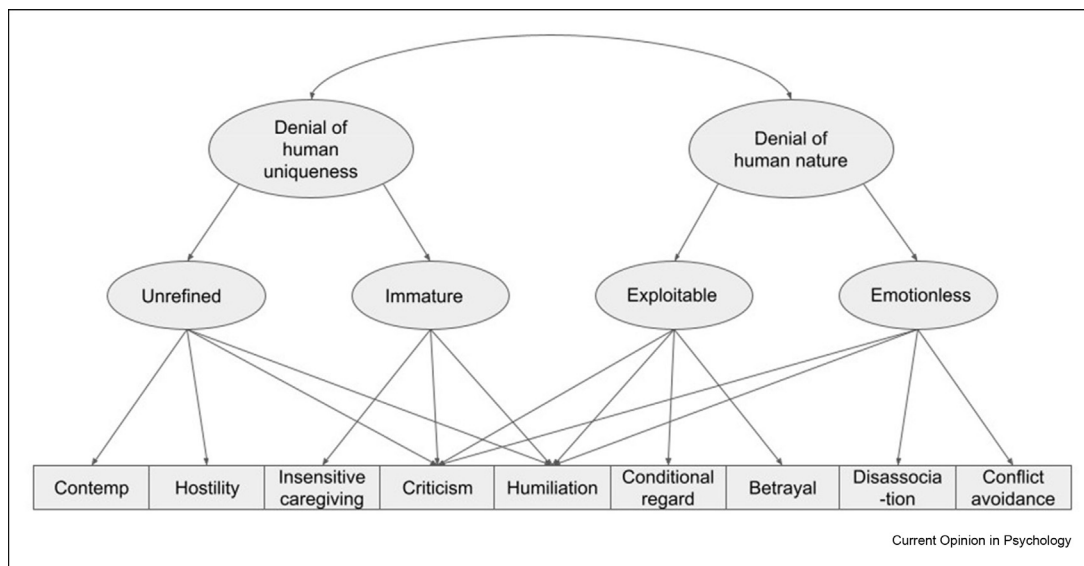
Dehumanization in romantic relationships

Drawing on previous conceptual and empirical work [18−20] we propose an interpersonal model of dehu-manization depicted in Figure 1. As illustrated, the extent to which various relationship behaviors result in the loss of humanness depends on whether dehuman-ization reflects the denial of human uniqueness or the denial of human nature. These relationship behaviors map onto the dehumanization facets identified by Pizzirani et al. [19]. We now outline the major types of relationship behaviors that tend to reflect either the

denial of human uniqueness or human nature in romantic relationships.

Relationship behaviors reflecting the denial of human uniqueness: As shown in Figure 1, contempt, hostility, and insensitive caregiving (i.e., care that is compulsive or controlling) all reflect the denial of human nature. *Contempt* involves acts in which one person exerts a sense of superiority over another and treats them like they are inferior [22,23]. Contempt typically involves statements that communicate incompetence, a lack of intelligence, or disgust/disapproval of a close other. *Hostility* encom-passes acts of ill will that are aggressive, spiteful, and attacking [24,25]. What is common across the perpe-tration of contempt and hostility is that the perpetrator views their partner as unstable, silly, corrupt, immoral, or characterologically flawed, which often results in rela-tional acts that deny the partner sophistication, ratio-nality, and intelligence—qualities that distinguish humans from animals.

Caregiving insensitivity, on the other hand, entails various behaviors that may appear supportive, but nonetheless deny or limit the ability for a partner to cultivate or enact competency, efficacy, and autonomy or to meet the partner's attachment needs for love, understanding, and security. Two examples of insensitive caregiving patterns are compulsive and controlling caregiving, both of which treat the partner as lacking the maturity to deal with situations on their own. Compulsive caregiving is characterized by intrusive and over-involved attempts to

Figure 1

Interpersonal model of dehumanization in romantic relationships. The model outlines some of the major negative and destructive relationship behaviors associated with different facets of dehumanization (latent constructs [ellipses]), which map onto the two distinct, but related, forms of dehumanization (higher order latent constructs)—the denial of human uniqueness and the denial of human nature.

"help" the partner, which undermine, challenge, or short-circuit the partner's ability to resolve a problem by imposing help or assistance, especially when it is unsolicited or unnecessary [26]. Controlling caregiving is characterized by attempts to manage or control the way care is provided, which often includes telling a partner how they should handle a problem or expressing concern over a partner's inability to act independently. The provision of such support or care typically implies a lack of efficacy and questions the competence of partners [27,28]. This type of insensitive support is associated with a range of personal and interpersonal losses, such as reductions in positive mood and self-esteem as well as increases in feelings of distress [27,29,30].

Relationship behaviors reflecting the denial of human nature: Figure 1 also highlights relationship behaviors that reflect the denial of human nature. These include disassociation, conditional regard, betrayal, and conflict avoidance. *Dissociation* can be active or passive, but both forms communicate disregard for the existence of a partner, which reflects a denial of human nature [31]. Active disassociation includes explicit rejection, abandonment, or ostracism as well as withholding love or commitment [32,33]. Passive disassociation includes ignoring the partner (implicit rejection) or excluding them from relationship activities, goals, or plans [32].

Conflict avoidance, which includes conflict withdrawal and stonewalling [22,34,35], communicates apathy or disinterest via actively or passively avoiding conflict, often involving important relationship issues. Withdrawal is commonly witnessed as part of the "demand-withdrawal" conflict pattern in which one person demands, criticizes, or pressures their partner to change, and the partner responds with withdrawal such as ignoring the topic, changing it, or creating greater physical distance from the partner [36]. Withdrawal can also entail minimal concern for the partner, which can create emotional distance and disconnection in the relationship. Similarly, stonewalling can give rise to disconnection because it entails being unresponsive, not listening to, or "tuning out" the expressed wishes, requests, or desires of the partner. Both dissociation and conflict avoidance are regarded as dehumanizing behaviors that treat a partner as if they are emotionless and either have no feelings or do not care about the feelings of others.

Betrayal—the violation of relationship norms related to loyalty and trust, such as infidelity and deception [32,33,37]—is another relational act that induces the denial of human nature and can create profound personal and relational loss. Importantly, betrayal extends beyond the violation of relationship norms because it connotes the rejection of a partner and communicates that the partner or relationship hold little value [38]. In contrast to betrayal, *conditional regard* conveys that an individual values their relationship partner, but only in terms of the functions the partner fulfills [10,21]. Thus, conditional regard can manifest through acts of objectification, taking a partner for granted [33], or treating them as a means to an end. In both the perpetration of betrayal and conditional regard, the partner is treated as an exploitable commodity who is useful only while of value.

A common thread that binds all these relationship behaviors together is they all involve either physical and/or emotional detachment from the partner. Thus, the enactment of these relationship behaviors thwart meeting others' fundamental need to develop and sustain meaningful, positive close relationships [15].

Relations between behaviors reflecting the denial of human uniqueness and human nature: Criticism and humiliation are two behaviors that can reflect either dimension of dehumanization or the co-enactment of the denial of human uniqueness and human nature. *Criticism* is defined as "negative verbal comments about one's behavior, appearance, or personal characteristics" [pp. 497, 32]. It involves the expression of disapproval usually aimed at a partner's personality or character with the intention of insulting or blaming them [22]. *Humiliation*—engaging in behaviors such mockery, sarcasm, or aggressive humor to undercut a partner's pride or reduce their social status—can involve teasing or embarrassing the partner about their shortcomings. Both criticism and humiliation are dehumanizing in that critical slights or making fun of a partner's character, attributes, or demeanor, typically emphasize uniquely human characteristics that a partner lacks (e.g., lacking cognitive flexibility, social refinement, maturity) or highlights a partner's likeness to animals or machines (e.g., being seen as irrational, cold, only useful for the functions they serve).

The extent to which criticism or humiliation is reflective of the denial of human uniqueness and/or human nature is largely dependent on the relationship issues or conflicts that plague a couple. Many relationship issues center on dissatisfaction with a partner's level of support, problems with emotional intimacy, issues of competency or taking on responsibilities, constructively problem-solving challenges, or attaining relationship goals. Therefore, the degree to which criticism or acts of humiliation reflect the denial of human nature, the denial human uniqueness, or both, is largely dependent on the relationship issue under focus. If, for example, criticism or humiliation targets a partner's intelligence, the dehumanization most likely reflects the denial of human uniqueness. If, however, criticism or humiliation targets a partner's ability to experience or express emotions, the dehumanization probably reflects the denial of human nature. And if criticism or humiliation simultaneously target qualities reflective of both the

denial of human uniqueness and the denial of human nature (e.g., "The reason you can't show your emotions is that you are too dumb to know what you are feeling"), the dehumanization likens the partner to both animal *and* machine.

Research on interpersonal dehumanization: implications for loss

Emerging research on dehumanization in romantic relationships provides initial support for the interpersonal model of dehumanization. Across two studies ($N > 1100$ participants), Pizzirani and colleagues found that insensitive caregiving, conflict avoidance, hostility, and facets of contempt and humiliation (e.g., ridicule) demonstrate moderate-to-large associations with both the perpetration as well as being the target of dehumanization [19]. As part of this work, a relationship-specific measure of dehumanization has provided empirical support for the relational facets of dehumanization illustrated in Figure 1. Additional research offers insights into the personal and relationship losses that are experienced when dehumanization occurs at the hands of close partners. The perpetration of dehumanization, for example, is associated with lower relationship quality and less constructive communication for both the perpetrator and target of dehumanization. Cross-sectional and longitudinal research have also confirmed the perpetration of dehumanization is associated with increases in physical and emotional abuse in romantic relationships, greater teen dating violence, and more sexual aggression towards women [18,19,39,40].

Another line of research has sought to understand the contemporaneous and developmental predictors of dehumanization in close relationships [20]. In a landmark study drawing on data from the Minnesota Longitudinal Study of Risk and Adaptation [41], exposure to maternal hostility, assessed during infancy and early childhood, is positively associated with children's observed dehumanization acts in adulthood during interactions with their romantic partners 20−30 years later. This finding holds even when controlling for participant's sex, social disadvantage, and their mother's level of education. Moreover, the perpetration of dehumanization in romantic relationships in adulthood is also associated with their partner's perpetration of dehumanization. That is, a person's perpetration is predicted by both distal and proximal relationship factors—one rooted in the maternal relationship early in life, and the other pertaining to their current romantic relationship.

The personal losses and costs resulting from experiencing interpersonal dehumanization are many and varied. Early work on interpersonal dehumanization has demonstrated that individuals who are denied human nature often experience negative affect, such as sadness and anger as well as shame and guilt [16]. These individuals also experience negative self-appraisals, including perceiving the self as having mechanistic qualities [15] and reporting deconstructive mental states (i.e., the inability to think clearly or feeling numb) [16]. More recent work has found that the denial of humanness by relationship partners heightens depressive symptoms and reduces positive self-appraisals [19,42].

Conclusion

The loss of humanness is profound, especially when it is perpetrated by close others, such as romantic partners, whose purpose it is to help fulfill our fundamental human needs. Research to date on interpersonal dehumanization provides an important platform from which future research can develop critical insights into understanding how relationship dynamics contribute to experiences of the loss of humanness.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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