Dehumanization of outgroup members and cross-group interactions

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Abstract

Outgroup dehumanization exacerbates intergroup relations, but intergroup contact ameliorates them. An emerging body of research has started to examine the link between intergroup contact and dehumanization in order to provide suggestions on how to improve harmony between different social groups in society. This article examines how direct and indirect contact strategies can reduce outgroup dehumanization and how outgroup humanization can increase willingness for contact with outgroup members. Thereafter, it explores how enhanced empathy, trust, and inclusive norms towards outgroups, along with lower anxiety, explain the link between contact and dehumanization. Lastly, it discusses how political ideology, outgroup threat, and national collective narcissism may influence the relationship between contact and dehumanization.

Outgroup (de)humanization and cross-group interactions

Outgroup dehumanization, the denial of another's humanity in an active and deliberate manner, has been shown to have a detrimental effect on intergroup relations [1, 2]. For example, individuals who dehumanize outgroup members are more inclined to rate them as less evolved and civilized than their ingroup members [3] and may even expect to be dehumanized themselves by the outgroup simultaneously—a process known as *meta-dehumanization* [4]. *Intergroup contact* is defined as cross-group interactions between members of different groups, either directly (i.e., via personal exchanges with outgroup members) or indirectly (i.e., parasocial contact through media, extended contact via family and friends, vicarious contact via videos or stories in which one sees ingroup members positively interacting with outgroups, imagined contact through mental simulation of the self in a positive interaction with an outgroup member, and electronic contact via virtual communities). Intergroup contact is an effective means to improve intergroup perceptions and relations [5, 6].

Accordingly, positive cross-group interactions should be able to reduce outgroup dehumanization , and lower outgroup dehumanization (i.e., more outgroup humanization) should increase willingness for direct contact experiences or enhance the important role of indirect contact strategies (i.e., a virtuous circle between contact and dehumanization) [7, 8].To date, a relatively small proportion of research in social and political psychology has examined either the associations between direct and extended contact and dehumanization or the effect of indirect contact strategies on dehumanization and vice versa [8]. However, the underlying mechanism and potential moderators are other factors that still require further consideration.

This article examines numerous lines of research pertaining to the reciprocal link and/or the effect between contact and dehumanization established by scholars in the field.

Subsequently, it examines the existing literature on the underlying mechanism of the link between contact and outgroup dehumanization. Finally, it suggests potential moderators that could influence such a relationship.

Contact and (de)humanization in a virtuous circle

Research in multiple contexts has shown that direct contact predicts lower dehumanization of outgroups and lower perceived dehumanization by those groups [9]. Reciprocally, outgroup humanization is related to the desire for contact with outgroup members [10]. Furthermore, a meta-humanizing (vs. meta-dehumanizing) intervention has been found to increase people's willingness to engage in intergroup contact [7]. Cross-group friendships and extended contact also increases the likelihood that people will expect outgroup members to humanize them [11]. In addition, both experimental and longitudinal research has shown that, compared to a control condition, an imagined contact condition decreases outgroup dehumanization [12, 13, 14]. Similar findings have also been observed using virtual contact. Specifically, virtual contact (vs. a control condition) designed to facilitate positive cross-group interactions was associated with reductions in outgroup dehumanization and meta-dehumanization over time [9]. Finally, research has shown that giving participants stories of positive interactions between ingroup and outgroup members (i.e., vicarious contact), such as outgroup members helping ingroup members, increases individuals' perceptions of humanity towards outgroups while negative portrayals of outgroups (i.e., parasocial contact) in media, such as depictions that suggest that immigrants spread infectious diseases, enhance outgroup dehumanization [15, 16].

Taken together, research demonstrates that contact is associated with increased humanization of outgroups. The process of humanization also occurs as a result of positive extended, imagined, vicarious, and virtual contact. Commonly, outgroup humanization is associated with greater willingness for intergroup contact. However, negative information in

the news about outgroups contributes to the dehumanization of outgroups among the majority

of the population. These findings have been observed when considering various intergroup

relationships based on religion [9], nationality [10], and ethnicity [17] within both prejudiced

and conflictual intergroup settings.

Mediators of the relationship between contact and (de)humanization

Even though several mediators of the contact-dehumanization reduction relationship

have been investigated to date, we focus here on the role of affect (i.e., intergroup empathy

and anxiety) and the degree to which individuals place their trust in outgroups and social

norms.

When considering the contact-dehumanization reduction relationship, *empathy* is one

of the most commonly measured affective variables. Empathy relates to an affective process

that originates from and conforms to other people's perceived needs, and is frequently

followed by taking the other's viewpoint to consider their situation [18]. For example,

research indicates that a meta-humanizing (vs. a meta-dehumanizing) intervention enhances

outgroup empathy, which then influences willingness for intergroup contact, even while

controlling for outgroup liking [7]. Furthermore, both quality and extended contact were

associated with an increased sense of humanity through enhanced intergroup empathy

[19]. Along with empathy, *intergroup anxiety* is also an important factor that should be

considered. Intergroup anxiety refers to the discomfort one experiences when preparing for or

engaging in intergroup interactions [20]. Quality of contact and extended contact, for

example, were both associated with increased humanity via reduced intergroup anxiety

[19]. Another factor relevant to outgroup humanity is *outgroup trust*. Indeed, outgroup trust is

critical for the development of harmonious relations between groups [21]. Research has

shown that positive imagined contact positively is associated with outgroup trust, which in

turn increases perceived outgroup humanity [10, 13]. Note that besides these emotional

processes, cognitive processes such as increased outgroup knowledge can also in part explain the contact-dehumanization link. To our knowledge, however, this tentative hypothesis has not yet been examined.

Finally, *social norms* are defined as collective representations of what others do (descriptive norms) and what they think should be done (prescriptive norms) in a given situation [22]. Thus, norms are most likely to be effective mediators when the contact situation provides some favorable information about other ingroup members' attitudes or behaviors in relation to outgroup members [23]. For example, social norms mediate the association between extended contact and the attribution to the outgroup of uniquely human traits [24].

In sum, a small proportion of research has investigated whether empathy, intergroup anxiety, and trust explain the link between direct, extended, and imagined contact and enhanced intergroup humanity. Even so, further research is needed not only to replicate these findings, but also to extend them by examining the underlying mechanisms through the use of virtual, vicarious, and parasocial contact. There is also little research on the role that social norms play in mediating the effects of contact on the dehumanization of outgroups. Further research is therefore needed to investigate whether norms mediate the effect of direct or indirect strategies (i.e., imagined, vicarious, virtual, and parasocial contact) on outgroup humanization. In fact, testing the mediating role of norms in the relationship between indirect strategies and dehumanization would be of critical importance in understanding how to design effective interventions that result in increased outgroup humanization.

Moderators of the relationship between contact and (de)humanization

In this section, we focus on factors that are theoretically likely to moderate the relationship between contact and dehumanization.

Political Orientation. Political ideologies are a powerful set of beliefs that influence the nature of intergroup relations [25]. Past research has shown that political ideology can trigger some individuals to exclude and dehumanize outgroup members [26, 27]. Recent research has also shown that political orientation influences the interplay between outgroup dehumanization and imagined contact on intergroup support and emotions [28]. For example, those who dehumanized the outgroup and endorsed conservative views experienced more positive emotions and were therefore more likely to support the outgroup when they imagined positive contact with them .Thus, we reason that political orientation should also moderate the direct relationship between contact and dehumanization. Indeed, past research has shown that people who score high on social dominance orientation (SDO) and right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) benefit the most from contact experiences [29]. Thus, consistent with previous research, we predict that people with conservative views will benefit more from contact experiences, leading to a decrease in outgroup dehumanization.

Intergroup Threat. In addition to political ideology, intergroup threat, whether real or imagined, plays a crucial role in determining the nature of intergroup relations [30]. Put differently, perceiving an outgroup as a physical threat or as a threat to people's values can shift them from subtle avoidance of intergroup contact to discrimination and overt hostility [31, 32]. Current research has shown that intergroup threat moderates the effect of meta-humanization via reciprocal humanization on outgroup prejudice [33]. Specifically, meta-humanization has been found to predict reciprocal humanization, thus reducing prejudice among highly threatened individuals. As such, we should expect that the most threatened individuals (i.e., individuals who see outgroups as posing a threat to them) should benefit the most from positive direct or indirect contact experiences and thus dehumanize outgroup members to a lesser degree. Similar patterns have been found with hawkishness, need for closure, and ingroup identification [34, 35, 36]. Taken together, this signposts that "prone-to-

prejudice" people may benefit most from contact, though this remains to be examined in relation to dehumanization [37].

  Collective narcissism. Finally, research indicates that a tendency to exaggerate the importance and positive image of the ingroup—that is national collective narcissism—predicts intergroup hostility [38]. National collective narcissism is related to intergroup distrust and a tendency to perceive outgroups as hostile toward the ingroup [39]. A similar effect is expected even with dehumanization and meta-dehumanization. Indeed, individuals who score high on national collective narcissism will tend to avoid cross-group interaction. As a result, a negative relationship between positive (in)direct contact and dehumanization (i.e., more positive contact and less dehumanization) is expected solely among those who score low (vs. high) on collective narcissism. Alternatively, individuals who score high (vs. low) on collective narcissism may benefit from intergroup contact and perceive outgroups as more human.

  Thus, there has been an insufficient amount of research on the factors that may moderate the relationship between contact and dehumanization. On the basis of previous research, we have suggested that people who promote ideologies opposing diversity (e.g., conservatism) or who feel threatened by outgroups may benefit from contact experiences, which may in turn lead to greater humanization toward outgroups. However, whether this is also the case with respect to collective narcissism requires exploration.

  Above and beyond these interpersonal intergroup variables, moderators could also play a role at a more contextual level. We distinguish between situational and environmental/cultural factors. First, the four facilitating conditions proposed by Allport [40], equal group status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and the support of authorities may be crucial, especially given the extreme nature of dehumanization. Second, the history and specific nature of the intergroup conflict can also inhibit the power of contact. Indeed, it

remains relatively unknown whether contact reduces dehumanization in hostile countries (e.g., post-Apartheid South Africa [1, 41, 42]).

Conclusions

The research reviewed in this article corroborates the important link between direct and indirect intergroup contact strategies and dehumanization in improving intergroup relations. The presence of both active (e.g., direct, imagined, and virtual) and passive (e.g., extended, vicarious, and parasocial) cross-group interactions reduces the dehumanization of outgroup members. Simultaneously, the humanization of outgroups encourages a greater willingness to have contact with outgroups. The contact-humanization relationship appears to be explained by increased empathy, trust, social norms, and lower levels of anxiety. Yet, other mediating processes could potentially play a role, too. Furthermore, understanding the ways and/or conditions under which contact strengthens (vs. diminishes) humanization and vice versa is a high priority as the scope of dehumanization studies broadens.

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