



Focusing on the self to humanize others: the role of empathy and morality

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Literature on dehumanization has mainly focused on factors that might reduce dehumanization and increase humanization of others. In this article, we claim that, rather than changing the way others are perceived, research on the topic should consider focusing on the human qualities of the self or ingroup, which could in turn facilitate people's humanization of others. The main focus of this approach is exemplified by morality and empathy, as they represent uniquely human characteristics needed for human survival. Several lines of research consistent with this notion are reviewed, highlighting how the relationship between self or ingroup focus, morality/empathy, and reduced dehumanization is relatively understudied. We conclude by suggesting that future research should address these issues, thus expanding the understanding of the factors leading to humanization — and ultimately improving relations between groups and individuals.

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Introduction

Dehumanization can be defined as the perception and treatment of others as less than fully human [1]. It can be expressed in downplaying or denying the human traits [2], emotional experiences [3], or complex mental states of others [4,5]. Dehumanization is associated with various negative outcomes, most notably hostility and aggression [6–8]. To these outcomes, we can add the negative consequences of perceiving that one is dehumanized by others (i.e. meta-dehumanization) [9–11]. Dehumanization may also be considered an antecedent of moral exclusion of outgroups [12], conceptualized as categorizing groups outside the boundaries in which moral considerations apply, resulting in their perception as nonentities, expendable or undeserving [13]. The outcomes of moral exclusion may span from disregard for rights violations and systematic economic disadvantages [14] to severe exploitation [13] indiscriminate aggression and even mass violence [15].

The negative implications of dehumanization have led researchers to investigate the factors that might contribute to humanizing others. Both intergroup contact [16,17] and imagined contact [18] were found to contribute to humanization of outgroups. One mechanism through which contact can promote humanization is by reducing the salience of group boundaries and promoting a common identity [19]. Indeed, studies have found that emphasizing a superordinate category or cross-cutting categorizations can contribute to humanization of outgroups [20,21]. In particular, emotional similarity between groups was found to increase outgroup humanization [22]. Other factors shown to increase humanization are perceived similarity between humans and animals [23] and thinking of counterstereotypic exemplars [24]. One common denominator of these approaches is promoting humanization by changing the way that others are perceived and categorized.

While the importance of building a humanized perception of previously dehumanized others as the state-of-the-art approach is crucial, we suggest a different way with potential to advance humanization of others:

focusing on the human qualities of the self and ingroup. Several lines of research are consistent with our claim. For example, studies have shown that meta-humanization, the perception that one's ingroup is seen as human by outgroups, can lead to outgroup humanization and improved intergroup attitudes [25,26]. At the individual level, an enhanced sense of interpersonal security (i.e. sense that one is loved, protected, and cared for through interpersonal interaction) can reduce dehumanization [27]. In a similar fashion, finding out that an ingroup member helped a member of a rival outgroup can also reduce dehumanization [28]. Additionally, thinking about how God would want one to respond led to less dehumanization of outgroups among religious respondents [29].

While these studies support the notion that turning the focus inward can contribute to humanization, a question arises: what specific aspects of the self and ingroup are particularly important? In the present work, we would like to suggest that self and ingroup morality and empathy are especially likely to reduce dehumanization of others. Both can be considered human characteristics and may even be essential for human survival [30]. Empathy is crucial to understanding the feelings of other people and therefore becomes an essential component of human interactions. It is also involved in caring for others and could provide the foundation for care-based morality [31]. Similarly, morality can be conceptualized as a "mental phenomenon that consists in thoughts and feelings about rights and duties, good and bad character traits (virtues and vices), and right and wrong motives and behaviors" [32] that is unique to humans. Most importantly, both are associated with prosocial behaviors [33–35]. Thus, thinking about self and ingroup moral values and empathic qualities may stand in contrast to dehumanizing others.

In the following sections, we review evidence consistent with the notion that emphasizing the morality and empathy of the self or ingroup can facilitate humanization of others. We also consider the relationship between morality and empathy and its implications for humanizing others. We conclude by suggesting new directions of research to support our propositions.

Focusing on self or ingroup morality to humanize others

Moral expansion

One line of relevant research on self-morality and humanization can be found in literature on moral expansion, defined as the expansion of our concern and obligation beyond our immediates toward relatively distant others, such as outgroups, animals, plants, and natural environments (i.e. a counterpart of moral exclusion) [36,37]. Our moral circles are a metaphorical

boundary drawn around the entities we include in our realm of moral concern and obligation, while those we exclude from this realm of concern are conceptualized as outside our moral circles [36–38], unworthy of moral consideration and fair treatment [13]. Crimston and colleagues demonstrated the link between expanding moral boundaries and willingness to make personal sacrifices for the morally included, such as allocating time, money, or other resources, defending or enacting rights, and creating opportunities to benefit others [37]. Expanding the moral concern and obligation toward others that had been morally excluded may therefore imply acknowledgment of their needs, rights, and status as fully human (i.e. rehumanization). Accordingly, a recent study found that asking participants to reflect on reasons for including others in their moral circles (vs. reasons for excluding others) led to greater inclusion of a rival group within moral boundaries and reduced support for their collective punishment [39]. Such a process of contemplating the expansion of previously restricted moral circles may reflect positively on the self and the ingroup, highlighting their morality and humane virtues. This, in turn, may reduce the willingness to exclude and punish once distant or dehumanized others.

Moral conviction

Further support to our claim comes from research on moral conviction, defined as a strong and intuitive motivation associated with people's opinions on topics of social discussion, such as euthanasia or death penalty [40]. Attitudes charged with moral convictions (i.e. moral mandates) are authority- and peer-independent, and thus differ from personal preferences and group norms for several unique characteristics, such as perceived objectivity and universality. Moral mandates are therefore more resistant to change [41] and strongly connected to intense emotional reactions (e.g. pride or anger) [40]. It follows that moral conviction is intrinsically connected to behavioral intents aimed at supporting one's moralized stance, such as collective action and activism on topics such as social discrimination [42] and gender equality [43]. Recent research [44] found a positive relation between the perceived need to reduce economic inequality (among those in favor of reducing it), and support for government redistributive policies. These findings hold even when controlling for attitude strength, material interest (i.e. income and subjective socioeconomic status), and economic system justification.

Moral identity

In a similar fashion to moral conviction, moral identity theory emphasizes the importance of focusing on the moral self as a way to behave morally toward others. Moral identity is a schema of moral values that build the moral self [45] and predicts moral cognitions and behaviors [46]. In this way, research has shown that having

morality salient on their identity makes people feel more responsible to act morally, making them more prone to help others and wanting to have a positive impact on society [47]. There is also evidence that those who have a salient moral identity tend to be more moral. Reed et al. [48] explained this relationship arguing that being empathetic and having concern for others is a moral exemplar that works as a source of motivation to follow that example. Furthermore, moral identity, or moral self, can influence the way we treat others, even members of the outgroup. Reed and Aquino found that a strong moral identity (i.e. relevance of the moral self when describing oneself) expands the circle of moral regard [49]. By default, ingroup members are likely to fall within said moral regard circle. However, a stronger moral identity also implies that members of an outgroup are considered deserving of the same moral regard [49]. To sum up, these findings show that making the moral self salient can help bring individuals together and mitigate outgroup derogation. We thus suggest that this may also have a positive effect regarding dehumanization, since expanding the circle of moral regard to members of the outgroup may diminish the tendency to dehumanize them.

Focusing on self or ingroup empathy to humanize others

Defining empathy

When it comes to empathy, there are numerous definitions and the term is widely used and confused with different concepts. However, broadly speaking, “empathy occurs when an observer perceives or imagines someone else’s (i.e. the target’s) affect and this triggers a response such that the observer partially feels what the target is feeling” ([38] [page 82]). De Vignemont and Singer [50] define empathy by four conditions: if someone is empathic, this person is required to be (a) in an affective state, (b) that state has to correspond to the other person’s affective state, (c) it has to be the consequence of the observation or imagination of the other person’s affective state, and (d) the empathic person must realize that the other person is the source of their own affective state. The first two conditions allow us to differentiate empathy from similar concepts such as sympathy. One could argue that the latter might reduce dehumanization of others, since it is strongly related to (pro)social behavior. However, this might be relevant only when focusing on empathy or sympathy toward an outgroup. Sympathy can more precisely be described as a ‘feeling for’ the other person, whereas empathy could be described as ‘feeling as’ the other person feels [51,52]. This distinction might be significant when it comes to reducing dehumanization of others. We argue that the emphasis on ‘feeling as’ someone else requires the recognition that both individuals are similar at least in some respect, possibly both being human, compared

with ‘feeling for’ someone, which does not require the same conclusion.

Humanizing the outgroup via ingroup empathy

Not recognizing other people as fully human, or denying them, their mental states will have a huge impact on empathizing with them. It has been argued that the reduced attribution of mind to others is a form of dehumanization [53]. Indeed, the more participants dehumanized someone else, the less empathy they showed toward that person — both on a behavioral and on a neural level [54,55]. It should be noted that most of the studies in this domain have not considered the role certain ingroup characteristics may play. Indeed, when group membership was salient, empathic feelings for individual members of a stigmatized outgroup improve attitudes toward the group as a whole [56], such as help intentions [57]. Having considered this, as well as the general connection between empathy and dehumanization, we argue that focusing on certain ingroup features could be considered as a first step for humanization of outgroups. In particular, support for our claim can be found in two lines of research.

Empathic superiority

One line of work is focused on inducing empathic superiority of the ingroup [58]. This research showed that perceiving the ingroup as superior to other groups in empathy involved the paradox of having to recognize outgroup feelings. This reduced inhumanization of a professional outgroup of superior status (psychiatrists) by the ingroup (psychologists). More recent work [65] replicated this effect in different intergroup contexts (i.e. Spanish students vs. Ecuadorian and Germans, or undocumented immigrants).

Ingroup Empathy Theory

A second line of work is based on Ingroup Empathy Theory [59]. Research within this framework shows that minority groups that experienced unfair treatment and suffering are more likely to empathize with other groups. Furthermore, higher empathy of minority group members toward their own group was associated with higher empathy toward outgroups. To summarize, perceiving one’s group as empathic may contribute to expand empathic concern beyond the limits of the ingroup.

The relationship between empathy and morality, and its implications for (de) humanization

While empathy and morality are both associated with prosocial outcomes, the relationship between them is complex. Empathy can provoke the necessary feelings to motivate the cessation of a victim’s suffering, independent of their group membership. Decety and Cowell argue that empathy may also prevent the

rationalization of moral violations [60], for example, priming affective empathy and social norms can decrease harm-reinforcing behavior [61]. We claim this may be because people already have internalized or incorporated an aversion toward violent actions that comes from the emotional component of empathy. But on the other hand, it can contribute to partiality, favoring the members of the group itself, and therefore interfering with moral decision-making [60]. Furthermore, when exploring empathy in relation to moral foundations, perspective-taking has been positively related to ingroup loyalty and negative feelings toward those who disrupt that loyalty. However, high loyalty to the group can lead to personal distress in situations of great pressure in the face of conflicts or moral dilemmas. In addition, the negative relationship between loyalty to one's own group and moral internalization may indicate that morality based on identification with the group does not imply empathy and moral identity and, therefore, moral behavior [62]. On the other hand, the frame could be improved if the question was focused on knowing under what conditions and for whom empathy develops, instead of whether empathy promotes moral behavior [63]. In favor of this claim, previously cited research [44] indeed found evidence that the effect of moral conviction on support for redistributive policies is partially mediated by empathy felt toward the least wealthy part of the population (in line with literature on dehumanization of poor people) [64].

Conclusion

In this article, we proposed a new avenue that may potentially contribute to reducing dehumanization of others. Rather than changing the way others are perceived, we suggested that focusing on the human qualities of the self or ingroup may facilitate others' humanization. In particular, we suggested that focusing on self or ingroup morality or empathy may contribute to humanization, since morality and empathy stand in contrast to the negative treatment of others associated with dehumanization. We reviewed various lines of research that are consistent with this notion. Yet, to our knowledge, only few studies to-date have directly examined the link between focusing on self or ingroup morality or empathy and reduced dehumanization. Future research should address these issues more extensively, which can hopefully expand our understanding of the factors that contribute to viewing others as more human and possibly contribute to improving relations between individuals and groups.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

All authors were involved in all parts of the research.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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6 Dehumanization

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