

The Processes of Dehumanization in the Encounter with the *Other*: An Exploratory Study During the Lynching of African Americans in the United States, 1882 – 1968

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Abstract:

The dehumanization processes represent a failure in the attribution of thinking skills to other human beings. Based on ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, and nationality, social prejudices are reinforced in basic neurocognitive structures. Still, their manifestation is conveyed by personal goals and normative beliefs, which develop in an environment of a dyadic relationship or intergroup contexts. Therefore, this paper aims to peruse the perspectives for a theory of dehumanization, supporting them with neuroscientific research on the neural basis, and exploring the forms of dehumanization that African Americans suffered when they were victims of lynching in the United States.

Keywords: dehumanization, lynching, cognitive bias, stereotypes, race

Introduction

The phenomenon of dehumanization denotes the psychological condition characterized by the tendency to consider others as endowed with sub-human characteristics. One believes that others are excluded from what is typically considered the way of being of a person (Zimbardo, 2007). This tendency implies the denial of univocally human attributes. It is often accompanied by contempt and disgust and a tendency to explain the behavior of others in terms of desires and intentions rather than cognitive states (Haslam, 2006). Since its introduction at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the term "dehumanization" has accumulated various meanings. It is used to refer to:

1. Actions that subject others to resentment or, in a more Kantian way, treat others simply as means (MacKinnon, 1987);
2. rhetorical practices that metaphorically compare human beings to non-human beings as animals or inanimate objects (Bar Tal, 1989);
3. denial of subjectivity, individuality, action, or the distinctive attributes of others (LeMoncheck, 1985);
4. treating others in such a way as to erode, block or extinguish some of their distinctly human attributes (Mikkola, 2011);
5. conceiving others as sub-human creatures.

This last interpretation of the term allows us to understand better how this phenomenon has played a significant role in episodes of genocide, war, slavery, and other forms of mass violence.

Dehumanization is a topic that involves different branches in the field of moral psychology and public policy. In light of this, it is surprising to note that not much attention has been paid to the subject by philosophers. Furthermore, the research in this regard is almost exclusively limited to the work of social psychologists.

Several scholars considered the phenomenon of dehumanization as the central nucleus of human cruelty because it involves a perception and a description of the *other* as less endowed with "human attributes". It frequently occurs in situations characterized by high levels of stress, as in cases where it is necessary to manage a large flow of people (Bandura, 1977). Could this be valid during attempted mass lynching cases too? Considering the heritage of the colonial era and exploring the social context of the United States between the 19th and 20th centuries, this paper explores how the conscious and unconscious processes of dehumanization supported and promoted forms of extra-legal violence, such as lynchingⁱ, against African Americans.

The legacy of slavery

Many observable discoveries in literature concern the basic mechanisms of social cognition that, to varying degrees, underlie other forms of prejudice, such as those based on ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, and nationality. These can determine various forms of dehumanization, mainly for African Americans between the XIX-XX century.

How did the previous colonial period of slavery influence the processes of dehumanization and forms of violence - such as lynchings - connected to them?

Scholars explain that African slaves had often suffered singular abuses because of their characteristics and the level of cruelty that accompanied them. In particular, women suffered differently because they were victims of sexual abuse and other barbaric mistreatment inflicted only on them (Davis, 1993). There are countless stories of black women raped by their masters, husbands, and other male slaves. Some even claim that their promiscuity (Hooks, 1981) provoked the violation of the dignity and will of these women. As Hooks points out, if a black woman wore clean clothes and presented herself in a dignified manner, she often became the victim of: "White men intent on ridiculing and mocking her self-improvement efforts," and during the Reconstruction phase, black men tended to assume patriarchal roles, while encouraging black women to take on a somewhat submissive part, in this way dehumanizing their human being endowed with agency (Hooks, 1981, p.55).

Even today, these attitudes influence the conditions of life of black women, who continue to see their intellectual, physical, social, and educational abilities underestimated by society (Morton, 1991) through mechanisms such as objectification, alteration, and self-esteem. Objectification pushes us to consider a person as different and/or inferior and plays a critical role in the process of opposing differentiation. In any context, objectification forces the individual to define him/herself.

Dehumanized people are often referred to as "others" based on race, ethnicity, gender, and other cultural attributes. A person is a victim of objectification when he/she is seen as an object to be manipulated and controlled (Collins, 1990). In particular, the African American woman subjected to a master became, in American society, the basis for the definition of the category of the "Other" (Christian, 1985) supporting that the image of the black woman represented the opposite of the colonizer: it was not a male, it was not white and, generally, it was not wealthy. As long as the image of the "Other" is connected to that of the "Black Woman", it provided an ideological justification for oppression phenomena based on race, gender, and a class of belonging

(Christian, 1985). Inevitably, the labeling of a person as "Other" contributes to the process of stereotyping and dehumanization. Under the social stigma deriving from the past condition of colonial slavery, not be able to have access to certain positions of work due to the legacy of the various forms of dehumanization threw blacks into a situation of social vulnerability in which they were hardly able to face.

Slavery officially ended in 1865. However, despite its dissolution, it has shaped social, economic, and political programs since its inception in the United States, thanks to the various forms of dehumanization that had consolidated over time. This phenomenon influenced the development of coercive systems of social and economic control in the Southern United States. Sharecropping, lynching, and Jim Crow laws developed in response to the social and economic vacuum created by the abolition of slavery.

Although politics cannot change the history of local areas, different or additional policies could make it possible to cope with economic disparities between whites and blacks in areas historically affected by high rates of slavery. As O'Connell (2012) points out, racial inequality can be reduced by dismantling or reconfiguring the social structure. It means that it is also necessary to act on the dehumanization processes resulting from the social stigma of the ex-colonial condition of slavery.

The *other* dehumanized

During the second half of the nineteenth century, the nationalist discourse interweaved with "scientific" reflections on racial differences, given Darwin's theories and the increasingly frequent contact between Western and non-Western peoples. Even human zoos were built, in which people not deriving from Europe were exposed as if they were animals (sometimes together with exotic animals). This type of encounter puts the other in a state of inferiority. This concept of "inferiority", sometimes associated with the idea of "primitiveness," is the basis of the racial classifications elaborated starting from the second half of the nineteenth century. The different races are classified and placed on a hierarchical scale. The Aryan race is at the apex of purity, and by extension, the other races are considered less human, and therefore they will be dehumanized.

Godwyn has identified three essential components of dehumanization. First, the relationship between how these individuals belonging to the dehumanized population and their true nature appears. The colonists believed that even if the Africans seemed to resemble humans, they were not such. The second component is metaphysical and refers to their alleged non-human "status" as if they were "devoid of souls". The third concerns the demolition of the moral hierarchy of this population; these surrogate human beings are not considered simple non-human, but as less than a human being, therefore inferior (Godwyn, 1680).

These components are often seen in those episodes of dehumanization and human cruelty that have happened throughout history (Smith, 2011). In general, the phenomenon of the dehumanization of *the other* finds its focus on difference and on differential treatment which, in turn, is based on this difference. This treatment is accompanied by the denial of autonomy, freedom, and the ability to change others. The use of certain group stereotypes and the tendency to see the individual as belonging to the group and having unchanging and stereotypical characteristics means denying him/her the possibility of change. This one-dimensional view of the other causes him/her to be seen as an object to which specific characteristics and immutable traits can be ascribed. Therefore, the character of the dehumanized person is seen as static. It is a central factor in the process of dehumanization since being able to bring about change is a fundamental aspect for the human being. The difference between oneself and the other is used as a "marker" to give it a "static" character. Hence, this difference becomes a justification for the differential moral

treatment reserved for him/her, differential treatment, which in turn reinforces the perception of *this other* as different, practically in-human (Oelofsen, 2013).

It can be well understood exploring Jesse Washington lynching, as reported in an article of the *Argus-Leader* on May 15, 1916:

Waco, Texas, May 15, 1916. - With 15,000 persons as witnesses, including women and children, Jesse Washington, the negro boy, who confessed to criminally assaulting and murdering Mrs. Lucy Frya, seven miles south of here, last Monday, was taken from the district court room today and burned on the public square. The burning came at once after the negro's trial was over and after the jury had brought in a verdict of guilty giving him the death penalty. Someone started the cry of "Get the negro," and Washington was seized. A suggestion that he be burned on the plaza met with instant response and he was dragged to the city hall yard where the chain already around his neck was thrown over the limb of a tree, wood secured, and the fire started.

By dehumanizing the *other*, one does not feel any regret towards him/her. Exceptionally violent actions can also be carried out without remorse. Many people after the event searched for the remains of Jesse Washington's body to keep as a souvenir in memory of their participation.

Perspectives for a theory of the dehumanization

The whites of the post-antebellum South had not always believed that slaves were subhuman creatures. It seems instead that they considered them human beings chronically and irremediably underdeveloped, primitive and childish, but human. The notion of sub-humanity, or the idea that other organisms are worthless or less than human beings in a specific moral sense, presupposes the idea of a moral hierarchy.

This idea was traditionally represented by the *Great Chain of Being* (Kuntz and Kuntz, 1987; Lovejoy, 1960), a representation of the cosmos as a hierarchy in which every natural type has a fixed rank. God, "the most perfect of beings", was placed on top, and the inert matter was relegated to the bottom. Human beings are set at a level "a little lower than the angels" (Psalm 8: 4-5) and every other organism is assigned to one of the lower ranks. The Great Chain is considered an artifact of the Neoplatonic synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian ideas, which disappeared following the Darwinian revolution. But it also represents a quick examination of the fate of morality. The distinctions that occur naturally demonstrate that the idea of a normative hierarchy is still very much alive in our moral psychology. All of us attribute different degrees of intrinsic value to other kinds of things. We consider our type as having the most significant value, and we think that animals have a more excellent value than plants. We also believe that there is a hierarchy within the animal kingdom, at the head of which there are primates and at the foot of this hierarchy find invertebrates. Subhuman creatures are, therefore, creatures that occupy a degree that is inferior to that of creatures of human rank. We attribute a lower degree of intrinsic value than what we attribute to our genus and to which we experience none or a minor degree of moral obligation.

When we dehumanize others, we think they have the essence of a sub-human type, a species classified at a level lower than us in the axiological hierarchy. It suggests that dehumanization consists of two processes: one involves denying that others have a human essence; when this happens, we think of them as non-human, but not as sub-humans, a condition corresponding to the mechanization of dehumanization proposed by Haslam, which Smith (2011) also calls "objectification". The other process involves attributing to others a sub-human essence, as explained by Haslam with the "animalistic dehumanization". He suggests that dehumanization is much more complex than objectification. When we objectify others, we deny their humanity, but when we dehumanize them, we do both. We reject their humanity, and we attribute to them a sub-human essence (Harris and Fiske, 2006).

Both processes affected the construction of African American identity, but is there a biological origin? Recent literature offers interesting insights to understand how dehumanization has neuronal correlates that support its development.

The neural basis of dehumanization

Some pioneering neuroimaging research attempted to examine dehumanization. In particular, in a recent study by Smith (2014) there was a decrease in brain activity of the medial prefrontal cortex and greater activation of the amygdala and insula when participants were shown images of stereotypically considered hostile and incompetent groups.

The researchers used functional MRI in a between-subjects study in which photographs of social groups were shown to a group and images of objects to the other group. The results showed that the perception of individuals belonging to the out-group (group of non-belonging) with extreme characteristics (for example, homelessness and drug addicts) causes a lower activation of the medial prefrontal cortex and greater activation of the amygdala and the insula (Smith, 2014).

These results suggest that when we are in the presence of dehumanization, there is less activation of the medial prefrontal cortex and greater involvement of the amygdala and insula. They are shown in line with what was observed in previous neuroscientific studies on aggressive behavior, including the famous "Case of Phineas Gage", in which less activation of the ventromedial prefrontal cortex was observed.

Although it is premature to make conclusions about the neurophysiological markers of deindividuation and dehumanization, the research conducted so far underlines how crucial the prefrontal cortex's role is in behavior associated with human cruelty. Previous studies have also noted the importance of other subcortical regions of the brain, such as the amygdala (Damasio, 1994; Reimann and Bechara, 2010).

Deindividuation and dehumanization could also imply visceral responses, such as changes in heart rate, blood pressure, bowel motility and glandular secretion, which in turn could act as important somatic markers in the process of attribution of meaning and evaluation initiated in the course of social gatherings and for the control of aggressive behavior. In particular, in the case of de-individuation, the decrease of activity in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex could perhaps derive from a "feeling of anonymity" and from a loss of personal responsibility, because the somatic states are not triggered by memories and knowledge of social norms and thus lead to disinhibition and the implementation of antisocial behavior.

In dehumanization, the decrease in ventromedial prefrontal cortex activity could also be associated with increased activity of the amygdala (Harris and Fiske, 2006). Being excluded from the moral order of human beings, that is, being the object of dehumanization, could represent an immediate threat, able to activate the amygdala, which in turn triggers visceral somatic changes through the cerebral system. Social motivations, such as the desire for affiliation or competition with others, are among the most potent driving forces of human being (Brewer, 1999). Indeed, it is not surprising that the ability to discern between "us" and "them" is fundamental in the human brain. Even if this type of reasoning requires only a fraction of a second, it constitutes the stage for social categorization, stereotypes, prejudices, inter-group conflicts, and inequality (Ito and Urland, 2003), in the worst case for lynchings, genocide, and wars.

Therefore, even if the prejudice derives from a survival mechanism built on cognitive systems that structure the physical world, its function in modern society is complex, and its effects are often harmful. For the neuroscientist, the neural domain of prejudice provides a unique context for examining the neural mechanisms of the human mind at the base of complex behavior. Social biases are implemented in basic neurocognitive structures. Their expression is guided by personal

goals and normative expectations, which arise in dyadic relationships or intergroup contexts. Although it is difficult to probe the neural basis of prejudice, this offers neuroscientists the opportunity to deepen their knowledge of some of society's most pressing problems, such as discrimination, a conflict between groups, and disparity in health and socioeconomic status.

Social connection as a solution

The Southern States, with a high concentration of black population and a long history of racial oppression through acts of extreme violence such as lynching, continue today to show political divisions, which often cause insurmountable obstacles to healthcare investments and education (sometimes associated with forms of social control based on violence).

Implicit associations influence the way people perceive and interact with others. Implicit prejudices against blacks and minorities lead people to treat them differently, without being aware of their feelings (Strand, 2014). Moreover, these individual perceptions and social interactions influence the institutions and culture of the social system.

Decentralized, incremental, non-obvious, and "legalized" actions that embody implicit prejudices do not constitute discrimination in the traditional legal sense. Furthermore, the link between the individual social interactions and the effects at the collective level does not allow to immediately point out a relationship of cause and effect: an action located in a complex system such as an organization, a region or society, influence but does not determine in the system-level outcomes. Even individual interactions that are relatively free of implicit prejudices and forms of privilege can reproduce disadvantaged situations (Strand, 2014). Although the law provides for freedom of wills, most of the deceased direct their wealth to their families. Since most families are members of the same ethnic group, the wealth of the white population is handed down to the next generation of whites, and the wealth of the black population is inherited by the next generation of blacks. Economic advantages and disadvantages of racial origin, based on the past, are perpetrated in enrichment and disinvestment practices. Similarly, relatively wealthy parents can invest human capital in their children through education and training paths, even if there is no absolute correspondence between wealth and race (Strand, 2014).

The creation of social networks can be a helpful expedient in the challenge against racial discrimination. When people tell their story to others like them, they create a shared identity, which provides a precious sense of autonomy. When they tell their story to others, different from them, they create liaison relationships, which give rise to interpersonal connections. When they see their story told in a collective plot, which becomes dominant in a given society, they experience the relevance, which gives meaning to that story (Strand, 2009).

Relationships create spaces of security and nurturing; liaison relationships allow the emergence of a shared sense of "we" perceived as more extensive than a smaller "us" (Strand, 2011). Two qualities of social networks are essential for countering racism. The first is the existence of relationships that act as a bridge between distinct and cohesive social groups: the race divides people into different social groups, transversal relationships that make distinct groups a single social body can reduce the sense of separation and isolation that, in turn, cause fragmentation and division (Strand, 2015). The second important quality of social networks is what Strand defines as "power-with," a relational model based on humanity and respect, able to overcome the differences that are inevitably created in power relations (Strand, 2015). Respect generates empathy and trust, which are the foundation of shared civic norms and stories and collaboration and creativity (Strand, 2011). Strand uses the term "civity", this word embraces all aspects of social networks. "Civity" refers to the ability of social networks to overcome social divisions: if accompanied by civilization, diversity becomes a source of resilience, creativity, and ability to face difficulties and stressful

situations (Strand, 2011). Although the implicit bias may be pervasive, it is also malleable. Once aware of implicit biases, we can act in such a way as to diminish or eliminate them. We can also monitor our actions, which are often guided by automatism spoiled by prejudice. Similarly, once we are aware of these forms of privilege towards whites, we can act to counter them (Strand, 2015).

Typical attitudes of dehumanization are more likely to be implemented in situations where people are in groups than when alone. Still, the role of social connection or dehumanization in these actions is not clear. A combination of factors including de-individuation, the spread of responsibility, and social connection is likely to explain why antisocial behavior occurs more often when people are in a group than when they are alone (Waytz and Epley, 2012), as happened during lynching episodes.

There is, however, one aspect that the research has not clarified. The social connection recalls and satisfies a profound human need, which is a fundamental element for human happiness (Diener and Seligman, 2002). In this regard, the results seem to contradict this statement since the positive mood should probably, favor socialization (Fredrickson, 2004). Despite the aspects that remain to be clarified, we can draw at least two important implications. The first is that dehumanization is often conceived as a source of antipathy towards others. This visceral antipathy should rather be understood as a general indifference or apathy towards the mental states of others and the experiences of others. As George Bernard Shaw (1906, p. 82) noted: "The worst sin towards our fellow men is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them. This is the essence of inhumanity," so people might be willing to bring suffering to others when the latter becomes the object of dehumanization, not simply because of a feeling of hatred, but above all because of a cognitive indifference towards them.

The second implication is that dehumanization will probably have considerably more varied consequences than those more commonly studied, namely violence, aggression, and discrimination towards others³⁴⁰. Dehumanization can lead people to neglect the presence of more complex mental states in others and consider them to reach a personal end through their objectification (Frederickson and Roberts, 1997). Dehumanization can also lead people to ignore others or treat them as children, considering them worthy of moral care but denying their autonomy. In this way, dehumanization could effectively increase prosocial behavior but diminish the abilities of others.

Conclusions

The case of Alton Sterlingⁱⁱ is considered by many to be a modern transposition of lynchings that occurred between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the point that the renowned American football player Colin Kaepernick defined the episode on Twitter: "This is what lynchings look like in 2016!". In this event, police brutality can be interpreted as an extension of the legacy of a white supremacist ideology.

To increase a general insensitivity to the background of African Americans, even when they are victims, is the image that over the centuries has been instilled in people's heads (Chaney and R.V. Robertson; Chaney and Robertson, 2015). Jim Crow's character was explicitly a vehicle used to reach the highest possible number of people to expose black inferiority through the behavioral ridicule of the same character who was a black man, adult, stupid, behaving awkwardly and whose movements were reminiscent of monkeys. Besides, the movie "The Birth of a Nation" by D.W. Griffith of 1915 has supported the stereotypical and negative prejudicial affirmation of the black man. If cinematographically, it represented a turning point in the history of cinematographic language, culturally it reinforced the need for a white supremacist ideology, since blacks were represented as exclusively motivated by their animal sexual instincts' satisfaction (Chaney and

Robertson, 2015; Loewen, 2007).

This set of images has helped define what Armour calls "Negrophobia" (Armour, 1997), also understood as an irrational and unreasonable fear for African Americans. This fear has been the privileged channel of the general desensitization of whites to the suffering of African Americans. The social connection, because it can weaken the various forms of dehumanization, can turn out to be a light at the end of the tunnel of horrors that lynching still represents today.

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Notes

ⁱ Between 1882 – 1968, 4743 persons lost their lives in lynching episodes. 3446 of them were African Americans. The others were white sustainers of the advancement of civil rights or minority group members.

ⁱⁱ Alton Sterling was a 37-year-old African American fatally shot several times at close range by two white Baton Rouge Police Department officers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Due to the unclear nature of the shooting and thanks to the various recordings of witnesses and surveillance cameras, an investigation was opened to clarify what happened, since Alton Sterling did not attempt to shoot the police officers. On March 30, 2018, one of the two agents involved was fired for violating the use of force policies, while the other was suspended for three days for losing his temper.

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