The Empirical Examination of Dehumanisation as a Psychological Construct

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Declaration of Interest: None

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Abstract

Researchers have empirically studied dehumanisation as a psychological construct for the past two decades, revealing a diverse phenomenon with far-reaching societal implications. This special issue presents a series of review articles covering this diversity, discussing the phenomenon in perceptual, meta-cognitive, attributional, interpersonal, intergroup and human atrocity contexts. It incorporates philosophical, developmental, social, cognitive, neuroscience, and comparative psychology perspectives, describing evidence for the brain, behavioural, and societal impacts of dehumanisation. As such, it provides a snapshot of research and perspectives on this topic, and future directions and gaps yet to be addressed.

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In the 1990's, Belgium social psychologist Jacque Phillippe-Leyens repeatedly visited colleagues including Armando Rodriguez-Perez at the University of La Laguna on the Canary Islands in Spain. Islanders had often felt dehumanised relative to their mainland Spanish counterparts since the Islands could be considered the first Spanish colonies. Both social psychologists, along with their students, went about collecting empirical evidence of dehumanisation, showing that emotions reserved for human beings were attributed less to the Islanders than to mainland Spanish people [1]. This early empirical study was followed by a theoretical review of dehumanisation by Nick Haslam [2] in Australia, describing two forms of dehumanisation, and brain imaging evidence for reduced social cognition engagement for traditionally dehumanised targets by Lasana Harris and Susan Fiske [3], and further empirical evidence of racial dehumanisation from Jennifer Eberhardt and Philip Goff [4], both groups in the USA. Suddenly dehumanisation exploded as a topic of empirical enquiry across the behavioural sciences, and a Google Scholar search in May 2023 returning 144,000 when spelling with a 'z' and 31,400 with an 's'.

Dehumanisation research quickly branched out into three approaches. All three make relevant the concept of human, what we refer to as the human stereotype, but in different ways. A first approach explores the attribution of humanness and mental states to others. This is a conscious process, and includes blatant dehumanisation, along with infrahumanisation approaches, among others. A second approach explores the perception of humans. This involves exploring perceptual processes, relying on conscious reports of when a person or human is perceived, but is largely a non-conscious process. A third approach examines actual

mental state inferences to others, usually using language, but also using physiology such as fMRI, facial EMG, or EEG. Together, these approaches have shed light on the phenomenon of dehumanisation beyond the initial studies described above.

This special issue characterises the empirical dehumanisation landscape. It explores the phenomenon in children, in the medical domain, in relation to artificial intelligence (AI), and towards animals. It discusses the introduction of meta-dehumanisation and self-dehumanisation as psychological concepts that extended the bounds of the research field. It explores the use of virtual reality (VR) technology to alleviate dehumanisation, and dehumanisation during torture. It discusses the emotions of dehumanisation, the role of agency, and most certainly infrahumanisation, objectification, the dark triad, and other topics more commonly studied in the field.

The initial set of studies outline the varied approaches to the study of dehumanisation. Beginning with a retrospective of the infrahumanisation theory and literature by Rodríguez-Perez and Betancor, the reviews discuss the expanded approach to the phenomenon. Stinglhamber & Demoulin review the dehumanisation literature from the victim perspective, advocating enlarging the consideration of the victim to include the perceiver as well as target due to self-dehumanisation. Pecini, Guizzo, Bonache, Borges-Castells, Morera, and Vaes examine the different operationalisations employed in the sexual objectification literature, contrasting it with the broader intergroup dehumanisation literature, and discussing the lack of such research on men and non-binary gendered people. Baldissarri and Fourie review the organisational dehumanisation literature and highlight that most of it explored medical contexts. Nonetheless, they discuss triggers of the phenomenon, and impact on both employees and organisations.

The next set of reviews describe the features of dehumanisation common across different forms of the phenomenon. Formanowicz, Bulska, and Shnabel posit agency and communion as fundamental person perception dimensions that are targeted when people dehumanise. Specifically, they argue that low status groups are denied agency, while high status groups denied communion. Lantos explores dehumanisation propensity as an individual difference generalisable across targets and contexts. Giner-Sorrolla, Martínez, Fernández, and Chas review the emotions associated with intergroup dehumanisation, discussing their central role as a content of mental state inference, a trigger of dehumanisation for perceivers, and a consequential experience for targets. Bustillos, Demoulin, López-Rodríguez, Vázquez and Zlobina review social interactions, where self-and meta-dehumanisation become relevant. They advocate for a shift away from a single perpetrator or victim focus, and for researchers instead to study both during interaction.

This special issue also considers how the perception of non-human agents may affect dehumanisation and the human stereotype. Ruzzante and Vaes describe dehumanisation as a fading of the human-object divide, and advocate for a perceptual approach to the study of dehumanisation that allows for such an operationalisation. Sevillano and Fiske categorise animals according to the stereotype content model. They find a quadrant of dehumanised animals comprising vermin, not animals that are eaten, kept as pets, or are hunters/athletes. They discuss how understanding the perception of animals helps us understand the concept of human. Gradidge, Alcañiz-Colomer, and Loughnan focus specifically on farm animals, reviewing evidence of motivated dehumanisation that impacts mind attribution and moral concern of these animals. Geiselmann, Tsourgianni, Deroy, and

Harris continue discussion of the mind perception dimensions commonly used as measures of dehumanisation, their role in anthropomorphism, and the challenges artificial intelligence (AI) pose as disembodied non-humans that engage the intentional stance.

From a developmental approach of dehumanisation, McLoughlin integrates the promising body of work that explores dehumanisation in childhood and early adolescence, showing that the tendency to attribute less humanness to social outgroup members is sustained in developmental processes. Hagá posits the idea that perceiving children as human becomings or human beings have interesting implications for the dehumanisation of children as well as other social categories.

Dehumanisation appears to be highly relevant in medical care, with severe and frequently invisible effects in quality of care, health inequity and health behaviours. Hoogendoorn and Delgado discuss helpful and hurtful effects of dehumanisation in medical contexts, considering both perspectives, patient outcomes and provider well-being. The authors proposed reconsidering the study of dehumanisation in healthcare by framing it as an emotional regulation strategy used by healthcare providers. Jenkins, Robinson, and Joiner review empirical work of meta- and self-dehumanisation and their impact in clinical psychology. They explore the link between different clinical problems and dehumanisation, focusing on the case of death by suicide.

The analysis of blatant forms of dehumanisation and their connections with violence and human rights are also included in this special issue. Zlobina, Bettisoli, Miranda, and Formanowicz introduce the link between human rights and dehumanisation, considering dehumanisation both as an antecedent and a consequence of the human right violation, and proposing possible strategies to

promote social change based on claiming the human rights for social groups. Fischer and O'Mara analyse the relationships between torture and psychological processes related to dehumanisation, showing evidence of the pervasive effect of the use of dehumanising language and policy against out-groups on violence against those out-groups.

Finally, the special issue includes a set of reviews centred on how to reduce dehumanisation. Borinca, Van Assche, Gronfeldt, Sainz, Anderson, and Taşbaş present the emerging body of research that examines the relation between intergroup contact strategies and dehumanisation as a potential road to improved intergroup relations. They examine the role of empathy, trust, prejudice, and inclusive norms in positive contact experiences that lead to reduce dehumanisation. Crapolicchio, Prati, Dvorakova, Di Brernardo, and Ruzzante present specific strategies that operate at the interpersonal or intergroup level can be effective to overcome dehumanisation and its consequences. Scatolon, Sharvit, Huici, Alamo, Glazer, Lorenzo-Sánchez, and Michna consider focusing on the human qualities of the self or ingroup to facilitate humanisation of others. The authors review the role of morality, empathy, and focusing on the self or ingroup instead of the outgroup to reduce dehumanisation. Farmer explores how virtual reality (VR) may help future inventions against dehumanisation by boosting empathy. He reviews the literature on VR as an intervention to boost empathy, finding mixed results but enough evidence to suggest it may also impact dehumanisation.

In summary, the current special issue serves as an excellent example of the fact that the study of dehumanisation holds value and an extraordinary vitality twenty years after its emergence, with a widespread interest in diverse and novel topics. Future research on dehumanisation will approach multifaceted debates and

challenges that will lead to the advancement in a broader and comprehensive

perspective on dehumanisation.

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