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# Talent for prejudice: Why humans dehumanise others

It isn't only warlords and dictators who treat others as if they are less than human. How can we tame the tendency to demean that lurks inside us all?



**When the face doesn't fit**  
Didier Gaillard/Plainpicture

By **Laura Spinney**

**Editorial:** “The urge to dehumanise others is itself all too human”

HITLER did it when he referred to German Jews as viruses, parasites and rats. In Rwanda, Hutu extremists did it to the Tutsis, calling them cockroaches before killing half a million of them in the bloody genocide of 1994. Dehumanisation has long been thought of as a precursor to extreme acts of violence, but it is alarmingly common, as anyone who follows the news will be aware. To take just two recent, high-profile examples, Italy's first black

cabinet minister, Cécile Kyenge, was compared to an orang-utan by a fellow politician, and in France a candidate for the National Front party likened the black justice minister, Christiane Taubira, to a monkey.

To deny someone their humanity ranks among the most demeaning insults one human can give another, and most of us would consider ourselves incapable of such behaviour. But in the past decade psychologists have come to realise that the tendency to consider others to be less human than ourselves is universal. This form of prejudice isn't only applied along ethnic lines; it can extend to anyone we fail to relate to, from members of the opposite sex and people with disabilities to social, sexual and religious minorities. "It's as if we have a little humanness gauge in our heads that twitches whenever we see another person," says Jeroen Vaes at the University of Padua in Italy.

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The realisation that dehumanising comes naturally does not make it any more tolerable, of course. But understanding why we do it is the first step towards preventing it. We have a way to go. However, recent research does offer some hope, suggesting that although it is easy to trigger such prejudice, it may also be easily subverted and tamed.

So, what do we know? For a start, some people are more prone to dehumanising behaviour than others. Individuals with narcissistic traits are particularly prone to it, as are those with a strong sense of their own elevated position in a social or professional hierarchy. Intriguingly, doctors who dehumanise their patients may have better clinical outcomes, because they are more likely to prescribe painful but effective treatments. Although most instances of dehumanisation are not as blatant as the attacks on Kyenge and Taubira, even subconscious prejudices can affect how we think of and behave towards others. Experiments reveal that when we dehumanise someone, we deny that they have traits such as the ability to be rational or thoughtful. We are more likely to condone police violence towards them. We are also less likely to help or forgive them, and more likely to bully them.

**"When we dehumanise someone, we deny them traits such as the ability to be rational or thoughtful"**

Why we dehumanise is not clear, but it seems rooted in our tendency to judge members of the social groups we belong to as more human than other groups. Vaes, who co-edited a forthcoming book on the subject, points out that this is evident in the names some ethnic groups give themselves. "Rom", the designation used by the Romany people of Eastern Europe, means "human", for example, as does "Ainu" in the language of the eponymous population of northern Japan. And ethnicity is just one of the many ways in which we define ourselves socially. Each of us is also a member of a variety of groups, large and small, based on everything from religion, politics and gender to work, sport and friendship. In fact, the human tendency to split the world into "us" and "them" and then discriminate against outsiders is so strong that it barely requires any prompting (see "Arbitrary affiliations").

A graphic experiment, soon to be published, reveals that we literally see less humanity in the faces of those outside our own group. Jay Van Bavel and his team at New York University showed people images from a computer-generated series in which the face of a Barbie doll morphs incrementally into a human face. If the face was designated as one of their own group – a fellow student at their university, they were told – they perceived it as looking human sooner than if they thought it was the face of someone from a different university.

Meanwhile, scans of their brains showed corresponding increases in activity in the “theory of mind” network of the brain, which is involved in thinking about the minds of others (*Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, in press).

“Judging the mental capacities of others is the essence of human social cognition,” says Van Bavel. “Our research suggests that group memberships – who is with us and who is against us – play a critical role in shaping how we perceive the mental states of those around us.” Van Bavel concludes that our social identity powerfully affects how we evaluate others, including how much humanness we accord them. He suspects that these evaluations happen rapidly, perhaps even within the first half-second of seeing someone.

It is shocking how little prompting Van Bavel’s volunteers needed to trigger their dehumanising tendency, but there is a flip side to this. In another experiment, his team assigned volunteers to small groups that were randomly defined in every way except one – each included both blacks and whites. Not only did participants rate members of their own group more positively than outsiders, regardless of skin colour, but they were also more likely to remember the faces of group members despite having seen them for just a few seconds (*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol 38, p 1566). That’s surprising, given that people are usually worse at remembering the faces of others who do not share their ethnic background – an effect thought to explain the high rates of cross-ethnic misidentification in police ID parades. “That effect goes away the moment those people are part of a group together,” Van Bavel says.

## Rolling back prejudice

The fact that we so effortlessly affiliate with any group is good news for anyone hoping to reduce prejudice, because if social groups are transient, then so is our tendency to dehumanise. Indeed, Van Bavel and colleagues have now found that simply informing people that they have been accidentally assigned to the wrong group causes them to reverse their biases. They and others have found that encouraging interaction between groups helps reduce dehumanising tendencies, too, as does pointing out that members of different groups may belong to the same umbrella group – Irish Americans and African Americans sing the same national anthem, for example. “You can get rid of many types of ethnic bias pretty quickly as long as you make people feel like they share some kind of group identity,” says Van Bavel.

## “You can get rid of ethnic bias by making people feel like they share some kind of group identity”

However, as work published last year shows, there is a danger that by emphasising new groups, you may also highlight new social boundaries. Adam Waytz at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, and Nicholas Epley at the University of Chicago reported that encouraging people to consider their wider social network increased their tendency to dehumanise those beyond that network, making them less likely to attribute human states of mind to outsiders and more likely to recommend that they receive harsh punishment for a misdemeanour (*Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, vol 48, p 70). Waytz thinks the growth of social media could foster this effect unintentionally. Although there is no evidence that it is happening yet, he suggests that posting bullying or abusive comments anonymously on strangers’ Facebook pages might be a first stirring.

But there is another twist. Paradoxically, engaging in such social ostracism leaves us feeling

dehumanised ourselves. Brock Bastian's group at the University of Queensland in St Lucia, Australia, asked undergraduates to think of a time when they had rejected someone socially. They then had to rate their own behaviour morally, and rate themselves with reference to a list of traits that included open-mindedness, rationality and self-restraint. The students accorded themselves less humanity if they felt they had behaved immorally towards the other person. They were also more likely to act socially afterwards by volunteering to participate in another scientific study (*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol 39, p 156).

Vaes thinks people are motivated to recapture the humanity that they lost through behaving immorally. That's effectively what they are doing when they engage in truth and reconciliation commissions, he says, and it explains why this process has been successful in South Africa and elsewhere. "The idea is to make the perpetrators recount their own acts, and so make them aware of the immorality of those acts," he says.

Nobody is suggesting that a truth and reconciliation commission be set up every time someone describes a politician as an animal. But societies can work to break down the boundaries between antagonistic groups by highlighting the shared aspirations, values and humanity of their members. And, if our tendency to denigrate outsiders is matched by one to atone for this behaviour, then perhaps there is hope for the species yet.

## Arbitrary affiliations

Humans have a deep-seated need to feel that they belong to a group, with both positive and negative consequences. What does it take to make a person feel like "one of us"? In other words, how small and arbitrary can a group be while still generating a feeling of "us" and "them"?

The "minimal group paradigm" was devised in the 1970s as a way to explore this. British social psychologist Henri Tajfel and colleagues found that flipping a coin, or simply telling people that a coin had been flipped and that they had been assigned to one of two teams as a result, was enough to produce a measurable preference in them for members of their own team.

Jay Van Bavel at New York University has replicated this finding many times. Typically, those taking part in his experiments never meet the other members of their group and know nothing about them. There is no game or competition involved, no prize or punishment at stake. They are simply told which group they are in and shown pictures of the other members for 2, 3 or 4 seconds each. "That's sufficient to get in-group bias," he says. And, as Van Bavel has also found, sometimes that is all it takes for us to think of outsiders as less than human (see main story).

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