

MACHOCRACY: DEHUMANIZATION AND OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN

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Are we all human beings? In this article, we report evidence that individuals tend to deny humanity to other groups, a phenomenon called dehumanization. Infracommunication theory states that individuals deny uniquely human attributes to other groups: the outgroup is perceived as less human than the ingroup. However, humanity may be denied in at least two ways: groups may be equated to animals or, alternatively, to machines. Female objectification is a special form of dehumanization: women are considered only for instrumental use. Objectification theory states that women are objectified when they are perceived as objects for personal use. Mass-media contribute to depict an objectified version of women, in that media represent a distorted, excessively thin, image of the female body. Exposure to the media leads women to compare their bodies with the thin ideal and to experience dissatisfaction and low self-esteem. Media are invited to present average-size models of women hence proposing a more realistic representation of the female body and preventing women's body dissatisfaction and eating disorders.

Key words: Objectification; Objectification theory; Infracommunication; Dehumanization; Dementation.

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An Italian documentary, titled *Videocracy* (directed by Erik Gandini in 2009), focused on values and ideals broadcasted by commercial television. Interestingly, the beginning of this pop television fits with the first sexy-quiz, in which women appeared half-naked. Since then, the exploitation of women's bodies on television, and generally in mass-media, has become commonplace.

Therefore, the question which arises is: nowadays, are women generally considered as human beings or sex objects? The present article addresses the topic of humanity attributions. A growing body of research in social psychology shows that social groups may be excluded from the human category, a phenomenon which has been called "dehumanization." Dehumanization may occur under different conditions: groups may be likened to animals or machines. Female objectification is a special form of dehumanization where women may be likened to objects for personal use. Female objectification may have serious consequences for the target, such as decreased well-being and eating pathologies. Strategies to control female objectification should, therefore, be proposed.

DEHUMANIZATION

History offers tragic examples of the denial of humanity to others. One needs only think of the Holocaust; Hitler denied humanity to Jews: he relegated Jews to an animal status, describing them as polyps, lice, hyenas. About six million Jews were brutally murdered. In wartime, dehumanization of outgroup members can justify violent behaviors and suppress empathic concerns for their suffering. More generally, outgroup dehumanization may serve to legitimize and maintain ingroup superiority (Bandura, 1999).

Over the last 15 years, the study of humanity attributions has received great attention from social psychologists. Leyens et al. (2000) introduced the term *infrahumanization* referring to the tendency to perceive outgroups as less defined than ingroups in terms of uniquely human characteristics such as intelligence, morality, and language. The authors considered the distinction between primary (non-uniquely human) and secondary (uniquely human) emotions. Primary emotions (e.g., excitement and anger) are experienced by both animals and human beings, whereas secondary emotions (e.g., hope and regret) are experienced only by human beings, who are capable of self-reflection, anticipation, and retrospection. Studies by Leyens et al. showed that individuals, as a way to circumscribe full humanity only to the ingroup, assign more secondary emotions to the ingroup than to the outgroup. No difference emerged in the attribution of primary emotions. This effect was replicated in many studies (see Leyens, Demoulin, Vaes, Gaunt, & Paladino, 2007), using uniquely human and non-uniquely human traits instead of emotions (see, e.g., Capozza, Falvo, Favara, & Trifiletti, 2013; Capozza, Trifiletti, Vezzali, & Favara, 2013; Costello & Hodson, 2012; Vaes & Paladino, 2010). The outgroup, therefore, is perceived as less human than the ingroup. Notably, *infrahumanization* emerged also when using implicit measures: the denial of full humanity to the outgroup may occur outside conscious awareness (e.g., Boccatto, Cortes, Demoulin, & Leyens, 2007; Paladino et al., 2002). Further research on this topic revealed that social groups may be dehumanized in at least two ways: by being equated to animals, or to machines (Koval, Park, & Haslam, 2010).

ANIMALISTIC DEHUMANIZATION

Animalistic dehumanization refers to the denial of uniquely human features, such as morality, intelligence, and secondary emotions. When groups are denied uniquely human features, they are perceived as similar to animals. Research has demonstrated that animalistic dehumanization may occur automatically. Boccatto, Capozza, Falvo, and Durante (2008) used subliminal presentations of a human face and an ape face. The participants' task was to distinguish person names (typical ingroup and outgroup names) from no-sense strings of letters. Names and letters strings appeared on a computer screen. Each name was preceded by a subliminal image that could be the human or the ape face. Subliminal stimuli were presented so fast (15 ms) that participants were unaware of the nature of the images; thus, they had no control over the influence of the priming image on the task of name identification. Results showed that the human face facilitated the identification of ingroup names. In contrast, the face of the ape facilitated the identification of outgroup names. In other words, participants performed better when confronted with ingroup/humanity associations and outgroup/animality associations. This study highlights animalistic dehumanization: the ingroup is perceived as prototypically human, while the outgroup is likened to animality (for similar findings,

see Capozza, Andrighetto, Di Bernardo, & Falvo, 2012; for a case of animalistic dehumanization in a medical setting, see Trifiletti, Di Bernardo, Falvo, & Capozza, 2014). In another context, Goff and collaborators (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008) found that White Americans associate Blacks with apes. This association, to which people lack conscious access, may increase explicit endorsement of violence against Black targets (see also Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, & DiTomaso, 2014).

To investigate animalistic dehumanization, a study was performed using a morphing technique (Capozza, Boccatto, Andrighetto, & Falvo, 2009). Morphing is a computer-based procedure which creates a continuum of intermediate images from two images used as endpoints. The intermediate stimuli are formed by different portions of the original images. A continuum of faces, from ape to human, was created. Participants were presented with several faces from this continuum: some were ambiguous, that is, difficult to recognize as human or animal. Participants had to classify each face as human or ape. When participants worked in the ingroup context, they categorized ambiguous faces as apes: participants excluded not fully human exemplars from the ingroup in order to protect its human distinctiveness. Conversely, this exclusion was not present for the outgroup, a portion of animality being accepted as a part of its members' nature.

A case of animalistic dehumanization was revealed by Saminaden, Loughnan, and Haslam (2010). These authors found that people from rural, primitive or tribal societies are associated with animal stimuli more strongly than people from modern, industrialized societies. Interestingly, these associations were independent of explicit and implicit evaluations.

MECHANISTIC DEHUMANIZATION

Warmth, curiosity, and emotions are typical attributes of human nature, although they are shared with animals. When groups are denied the human nature, they are likened to machines. Pasin, Capozza, Andrighetto, and Visintin (2010) used an implicit measure to assess the strength of the association of the (Italian) ingroup and the (English) outgroup with human or machine stimuli. Results showed that participants performed better when faced with associations between the ingroup and human primes than between the ingroup and machines primes. Further, the more the English outgroup was dissociated from the typical features of human nature, the more it was assimilated to a robot. Dissociation from warmth, curiosity, emotionality may thus lead to a mechanistic form of dehumanization (Haslam, Loughnan, Kashima, & Bain, 2008; see also Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). Also business people, perceived as lacking human nature, are associated with automation constructs (Loughnan & Haslam, 2007). Research has finally shown that, when people are ostracized, they see themselves and those who perpetrate ostracism as having less human nature (Bastian & Haslam, 2010; see also Bastian & Crimston, 2014).

OBJECTIFICATION OF WOMEN

Objectification theory posits that women are objectified when they are perceived as commodities or objects for the use of others, and their individuality and personality are denied (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). It is a special form of dehumanization because women are merely considered for instrumental use. A large number of studies addressed the consequences of objec-

tification on women's self-perception (see Volpato, 2011) and behavior: self-objectification decreases well-being (Breines, Crocker, & Garcia, 2008), increases depressed moods and disordered eating (Peat & Muehlenkamp, 2011; Tiggemann & Kuring, 2004; Tiggemann & Williams, 2012), enhances body shame and body guilt (e.g., Calogero & Pina, 2011), impairs cognitive performance (Gay & Castano, 2010), and bolsters women's support for the gender status quo (Calogero, 2013). Self-objectification has also been linked with substance abuse (Carr & Szymanski, 2011) and self-harm (Muehlenkamp, Swanson, & Brausch, 2005). However, only recently researchers have begun to investigate how focusing on women's appearance may affect their perception and their humanization.

Heflick and Goldenberg (2009) asked participants to evaluate the American politician Sarah Palin and the actress Angelina Jolie; to test objectification, participants were instructed to focus on "person's appearance" or simply on "person." Appearance focus led participants to objectify both targets: they were perceived as less competent and, more importantly, as less human. However, the two women are attractive, well-known, and not representative of women in general. In other studies, Loughnan et al. (2010) selected pictures of women varying by face-ism, an index of facial prominence over the whole body in the visual representation of a person; images of women in swimsuits were displayed as: head-only, full-body, and body-only. Participants were asked to attribute to these targets mental states (perceptions, such as seeing and hearing; emotions, such as fear and joy; thoughts and intentions, such as wishes and plans) and moral status. Results showed that participants denied humanity to objectified women: lower face-ism was associated with lower attributions of moral status and mental states. Moreover, participants' gender did not moderate the results, indicating that both men and women deny humanity to objectified women (see also Loughnan, Pina, Vasquez, & Puvia, 2013). In line with these results, Cikara, Eberhardt, and Fiske (2010; Study 2) noticed that, when viewing sexualized women, heterosexual men's hostile sexism was negatively related to the activation of brain regions associated with mental-state attribution.

In addition, relying on an implicit measure of dehumanization in which participants had to associate pictures of sexually objectified and non-objectified men and women with human and animal concepts, Vaes, Paladino, and Puvia (2011) found that only sexually objectified women were dehumanized. This result was unaffected by participants' gender. Using a similar implicit measure, Rudman and Mescher (2012) demonstrated that men who dehumanize women (by associating them either with animals or objects) are also more inclined to sexually victimize them. Overall, these studies consistently establish that objectified women are denied humanity and moral status, and that not only men, but also women, can engage in this process. Puvia and Vaes (2013) investigated the psychological processes that are involved in women's dehumanization of sexualized female targets. They showed that both women's motivation to look attractive to men and the internalization of cultural beauty standards were positively correlated with the dehumanization of sexually objectified female targets, and that self-objectification mediated these relations.

The idea that sexually objectified women are perceived as objects has received further considerable support. Bernard, Gervais, Allen, Campomizzi, and Klein (2012) observed that sexualized women are recognized equally well when their images are inverted as when they are upright (object-like recognition), while sexualized males are better identified when their images are upright than when are inverted (person-like recognition). Furthermore, Gervais, Vescio, Förster, Maass, and Suitner (2013), using the parts versus whole body recognition paradigm, demonstrated

that women's bodies, but not men's bodies, are reduced to their sexual body parts in the perceiver's mind. However, other studies showed that both men and women are objectified more and to a similar extent when sexualized (see the review by Loughnan & Pacilli, 2014).

The research reviewed so far seems to suggest that objectification involves de-mentalization, namely not recognizing others' mental states (Bocato, 2013). However, an alternative account was provided by Gray, Knobe, Sheskin, Bloom, and Feldman Barrett (2011). In a series of studies, Gray et al. showed that focusing on the body does not diminish the attribution of all mental capacities but leads to a redistribution, with decreased agency (self-control and action) and increased experience (emotion and sensation). These studies seem to contradict previous work on objectification which suggested that a body focus induces de-mentalization. Clearly, further research is needed to clarify this point.

WOMEN AND MEDIA

Mass-media reflect the stereotypes and behaviors accepted in the society where the audience lives. It is well known that media present a distorted image of the female body, namely, the thin ideal. Kaufman (1980) reported that only 12% of female TV characters were overweight, under-representing the proportion of overweight individuals in society. Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, and Kelly (1986) reported that 5% of females on TV were rated as fat, 69% as thin. Fouts and Burggraf (1999) noted that 33% of female characters in situation comedies were below average, 60% average, and 7% above average in weight. Thus, for the past 30 years, women have been portrayed as excessively thin.

Fouts and Burggraf (1999) examined television situation comedies. They found that thinner female characters received more positive comments from their male counterparts. These same authors (2000) also analyzed males' negative comments and audience reactions (laughter, usually taped) directed toward female body weight. They found that 40% of female characters received negative comments from males regarding their weight or bodies; 80% of negative males' comments were followed by audience reactions, such as laughter, "oohs," and giggles. Moreover, the more numerous the negative comments about women's bodies, the greater and more amused the reactions of the audience, thus encouraging such behavior in the presence of others. All the above studies were performed in the USA.

Exposure to media leads women to internalize such models and compare their bodies with them: as a consequence, women experience dissatisfaction and low self-esteem; in some cases, they may suffer from eating disorders, such as bulimia and anorexia. A large number of studies has investigated the relationship between exposure to the thin ideal, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders: more than 100 studies confirmed these connections, also providing evidence that body dissatisfaction predicts eating pathologies. Grabe, Ward, and Hide (2008) conducted a meta-analysis on both experimental and correlational studies. In the typical experimental study, women were shown pictures or movies containing images of either the thin ideal body or of average shape. Following the manipulation, respondents completed measures of body satisfaction. It was consistently found that women are less satisfied with their bodies after exposure to the thin ideal images than to neutral images. Similar findings have been replicated by using magazine advertisements, televised media, and music videos. Furthermore, correlational research showed that,

among girls and women, regular exposure to the thin ideal body is associated with a negative body image outcome and related consequences, such as disordered eating. In particular, exposure to the thin ideal seems to be related to more frequent bulimic and anorexic attitudes and behaviors, this relation being stronger in the 2000's than in the 1990's. This finding should worry society: eating disorders are one of the most frequent mental diseases among young women, and anorexia is the first cause of death among all mental disorders (Striegel-Moore & Bulik, 2007).

Recently, researchers in the USA have begun to examine images of women in the media depicting not only majority members (i.e., Whites) but also ethnic minority members (i.e., Blacks). Baker (2005) considered images of women in advertisements in magazines targeting White women (Vogue and Cosmopolitan), Black women (Essence and Honey), White men (GQ and Maxim), and Black men (Black Man and King). Findings of this study are illuminating. In White-oriented magazines, women were portrayed as sexual objects, with an emphasis on submission and dependence on men. As anticipated, images of women as sex objects were more frequent in men's magazines: the most common representation of women was in terms of an object to display or to use. Black men's magazines were even more likely to depict women as objects than White men's magazines. However, overall, White women were objectified more than Black women, regardless of the magazine's target. Representations of Black women also included other stereotypical aspects, such as strength and independence or motherhood. Black women are still underrepresented in the media and the image of sexuality and beauty is highly associated with Whiteness; this confirms the racial hierarchy of sexuality and beauty in the mainstream society.

CONCLUSION

In the last decade, social psychologists have strived to understand processes involved in the attribution of humanity to others. Dehumanization is a subtle form of prejudice that may happen both intentionally and without conscious awareness: the ingroup is considered fully human, while the outgroup is perceived as less so. It has been shown that dehumanization may have tragic consequences. Cuddy, Rock, and Norton (2007) examined the intentions of helping following the hurricane Katrina: Whites were perceived as fully human and, thus, worthy of help; in contrast, the decision to help African-Americans was not spontaneous, it depended on the degree of humanity they seemed to possess (participants were White-Americans). Furthermore, dehumanization should be considered in the context of helping professions: doctors and other professionals should be trained to cope with unintended dehumanization. Indeed, research (Monteith, Arthur, & Flynn, 2010) suggests that doctors' efforts to manage implicit prejudice can promote self-correcting thoughts and behaviors aimed at inhibiting even the most subtle forms of prejudice.

Objectification of women is a particular form of dehumanization: women are objectified when their bodies are viewed as commodities, and their minds are denied. Female objectification can be observed in the media: magazines, music videos, advertisements, cartoons, and television comedies (Pacilli, 2012). Interventions should be directed to enhance critical consumption of the media. For instance, Posavac, Posavac, and Posavac (1998) found that female college students were less likely to be affected by images of objectified women after a 7-min educational training involving media analysis. Similarly, Irving, Dupen, and Berel (1998) found that female high-school students were less likely to internalize the thin ideal, after a media literacy intervention. Ideally, media

should stop promoting unrealistic ultra-thin models: Dittmar and Howard (2004) found that women reported lower levels of body-related anxiety after exposure to attractive average-size models. This last finding suggests that exposure to average-size models may protect women from body dissatisfaction and eating disorders.

The objectification of males requires more thorough future research (see, however, Gervais, Vescio, & Allen, 2012; Gray et al., 2011; Loughnan et al., 2010). Future research should also investigate the boundaries of sexual objectification; objectification of men and women has not been found, for instance, in non-western countries (Japan, India, and Pakistan; see Loughnan & Pacilli, 2014).

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