**Dehumanization**

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| **What it Means to Dehumanize**

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| Dehumanization is the psychological process of demonizing the enemy, making them seem less than human and hence not worthy of humane treatment. This can lead to increased [violence](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/violence), [human rights violations](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/human-rights-violations), [war crimes](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/war-crimes-general), and[genocide](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/war-crimes-genocide). |

Dehumanization is a psychological process whereby opponents view each other as less than human and thus not deserving of moral consideration. Jews in the eyes of Nazis and Tutsis in the eyes of Hutus (in the Rwandan genocide) are but two examples. Protracted conflict strains relationships and makes it difficult for parties to recognize that they are part of a shared human community. Such conditions often lead to feelings of intense hatred and alienation among conflicting parties. The more severe the conflict, the more the psychological distance between groups will widen. Eventually, this can result in [moral exclusion](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/intolerable-moral-differences). Those excluded are typically viewed as inferior, evil, or criminal.[1]We typically think that all people have some basic human rights that should not be violated. Innocent people should not be murdered, raped, or tortured. Rather, [international law](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/international-law) suggests that they should be treated [justly and fairly](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/principles-of-justice), with dignity and respect. They deserve to have their basic needs met, and to have some freedom to make autonomous decisions. In times of war, parties must take care to protect the lives of innocent civilians on the opposing side. Even those guilty of breaking the law should receive a fair trial, and should not be subject to any sort of cruel or unusual punishment.However, for individuals viewed as outside the scope of morality and justice, "the concepts of deserving basic needs and fair treatment do not apply and can seem irrelevant."[2] Any harm that befalls such individuals seems warranted, and perhaps even morally justified. Those excluded from the scope of morality are typically perceived as psychologically distant, expendable, and deserving of treatment that would not be acceptable for those included in one's moral community. Common criteria for exclusion include ideology, skin color, and cognitive capacity. We typically dehumanize those whom we perceive as a threat to our well-being or values.[3]Psychologically, it is necessary to categorize one's enemy as sub-human in order to legitimize increased violence or justify the violation of basic human rights. [Moral exclusion](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/intolerable-moral-differences) reduces restraints against harming or exploiting certain groups of people. In severe cases, dehumanization makes the violation of generally accepted norms of behavior regarding one's fellow man seem reasonable, or even necessary.

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**The Psychology of Dehumanization**Dehumanization is actually an extension of a less intense process of developing an "enemy image" of the opponent. During the course of protracted conflict, feelings of [anger](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/anger), [fear](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/fear), and [distrust](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/distrust) shape the way that the parties perceive each other. Adversarial attitudes and perceptions develop and parties begin to attribute negative traits to their opponent. They may come to view the opponent as an evil enemy, deficient in moral virtue, or as a dangerous, warlike monster.An enemy image is a negative [stereotype](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/stereotypes) through which the opposing group is viewed as evil, in contrast to one's own side, which is seen as good. Such images can stem from a desire for group identity and a need to contrast the distinctive attributes and virtues of one's own group with the vices of the "outside" group.[4] In some cases, evil-ruler enemy images form. While ordinary group members are regarded as neutral, or perhaps even innocent, their leaders are viewed as hideous monsters.[5]Enemy images are usually black and white. The negative actions of one's opponent are thought to reflect their fundamental evil nature, traits, or motives.[6] One's own faults, as well as the values and motivations behind the actions of one's opponent, are usually discounted, denied, or ignored. It becomes difficult to [empathize](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/empathic-listening) or see where one's opponent is coming from. Meaningful [communication](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/interpersonal-communication) is unlikely, and it becomes difficult to perceive any [common ground](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/commonalities).Once formed, enemy images tend to resist change, and serve to perpetuate and intensify the conflict. Because the adversary has come to be viewed as a "diabolical enemy," the conflict is framed as a war between good and evil.[7] Once the parties have [framed](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/framing) the conflict in this way, their positions become more rigid. In some cases, [zero-sum](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/sum) thinking develops as parties come to believe that they must either secure their own victory, or face defeat. New goals to punish or destroy the opponent arise, and in some cases more militant leadership comes into power.Enemy images are accentuated, according to psychologists, by the process of "projection," in which people "project" their own faults onto their opponents. This means that people or groups who tend to be aggressive or selfish are likely to attribute those traits to their opponents, but not to themselves. This improves one's own self-image and increases group cohesion, but it also [escalates](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/escalation) the conflict and makes it easier to dehumanize the other side.Deindividuation facilitates dehumanization as well. This is the psychological process whereby a person is seen as a member of a category or group rather than as an individual. Because people who are deindividuated seem less than fully human, they are viewed as less protected by social norms against aggression than those who are individuated.[8] It then becomes easier to rationalize contentious moves or severe actions taken against one's opponents.**Dangers of Dehumanization**While deindividuation and the formation of enemy images are very common, they form a dangerous process that becomes especially damaging when it reaches the level of dehumanization.Once certain groups are stigmatized as evil, morally inferior, and not fully human, the persecution of those groups becomes more psychologically acceptable. Restraints against aggression and violence begin to disappear. Not surprisingly, dehumanization increases the likelihood of violence and may cause a conflict to escalate out of control. Once a [violence](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/violence) break over has occurred, it may seem even more acceptable for people to do things that they would have regarded as morally unthinkable before.Parties may come to believe that destruction of the other side is necessary, and pursue an overwhelming victory that will cause one's opponent to simply disappear. This sort of [into-the-sea framing](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/into-the-sea-framing) can cause lasting [damage to relationships](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/damaged-relationships) between the conflicting parties, making it more difficult to solve their underlying problems and leading to the loss of more innocent lives.Indeed, dehumanization often paves the way for [human rights violations](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/human-rights-violations), [war crimes](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/war-crimes-genocide), and [genocide](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/war-crimes-genocide). For example, in WWII, the dehumanization of the Jews ultimately led to the destruction of millions of people.[9] Similar atrocities have occurred in Rwanda, Cambodia, and the former Yugoslavia.It is thought that the psychological process of dehumanization might be mitigated or reversed through [humanization efforts](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/humanization), the development of[empathy](http://www.beyondintractability.org/bi-essay/empathic-listening), the establishment of personal relationships between conflicting parties, and the pursuit of common goals.[1] Susan Opotow, "Aggression and Violence," in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, eds. M. Deutsch and P.T. Coleman. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 417.[2] Susan Opotow, "Drawing the Line: Social Categorization, Moral Exclusion, and the Scope of Justice." In *Cooperation, Conflict, and Justice: Essays Inspired by the Work of Morton Deutsch*, eds. B.B. Bunker and J.Z. Rubin. (New York: Sage Publications, 1995), 347.[3] Morton Deutsch, "Justice and Conflict," in *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, eds. M. Deutsch and P.T. Coleman. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 51.[4] Janice Gross Stein, "Image, Identity and Conflict Resolution," in *Managing Global Chaos: Sources of and Responses to International Conflict*, eds. Chester A. Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela R. Aall. (Herndon, VA: USIP Press, 1996), 94.[5] Jeffrey Z. Rubin and Dean G. Pruitt. *Social Conflict: Escalation, Stalemate, and Settlement,* 2nd Edition. (New York: McGraw Hill College Division, 1994), 99.[6] Ibid., 103.[7] Ibid., 100.[8] Ibid., 104.[9] Opotow, "Drawing the Line," 349.Maiese, Michelle. "Dehumanization." *Beyond Intractability*. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. July 2003. Web. 19 July 2013. |