# Dehumanization and Perceptions of Immoral Intergroup Behavior

Larisa Heiphetz, Columbia University, 1190 Amsterdam Ave, New York, NY 10027. Phone:

212-854-1348. Email: lah2201@columbia.edu (Corresponding Author)

Maureen A. Craig, New York University, 6 Washington Place, New York, NY 10003. Phone:

212-998-8386. Email: maureen.craig@nyu.edu

**Abstract**

Members of stigmatized groups often face dehumanization. The current work investigated whether individuals may also dehumanize perpetrators of bigotry. Three main findings emerged. First, participants perceived racists as less than fully human. This finding also generalized to sexists, suggesting that the propensity to dehumanize perpetrators of bigotry is not limited to racists. Second, the extent to which participants dehumanized racists predicted the degree to which they reported that ambiguous behaviors performed by strangers reflected racial bias. Third, this association did not emerge when participants evaluated behaviors performed by their friends, suggesting that views of "racists" in general may not be linked with evaluations of behaviors performed by at least some close others. These findings demonstrate that dehumanization extends to perpetrators of bias and predicts evaluations of their behaviors.

Keywords: dehumanization, morality, prejudice, racism, sexism, social cognition

**Dehumanization and Perceptions of Immoral Intergroup Behavior**

**1. Introduction**

In 2018, the clothing store H&M ran an ad featuring a young Black boy wearing a sweatshirt that said "coolest monkey in the jungle." Following a public outcry, H&M apologized and pulled the ad. This was but one example of the long history of likening Black people to non-human primates. Soon after encountering West Africans for the first time, Europeans began describing them as closer relatives of apes than of other humans (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008). Such imagery has persisted through the founding of the United States (whose constitution described enslaved people as three-fifths of a full human being for the purposes of determining political representation) to the antebellum period (when Black men were described as "bucks," a term that also refers to non-human male animals) to the 1990s (when police in California referred to cases involving young Black men using the acronym NHI, standing for "no humans involved," and referred to disputes involving Black people as "something right out of *Gorillas in the Mist*"; Kennedy, 1998; Lott, 1999).

Black people and members of many other groups that face systemic prejudice and oppression have experienced such dehumanization for centuries. The literatures examining dehumanization within psychology and philosophy have therefore rightly focused on understanding the process and implications of people's dehumanization of groups that have historically faced prejudice (e.g., Black Americans; Haslam, 2006; Lott, 1999). The current work built on these findings to ask whether people may dehumanize those who perpetrate prejudice (e.g., racists) in addition to those targeted by prejudice and, if so, what other aspects of cognition might be associated with such dehumanization.

**1.1. What is Dehumanization?** In general, dehumanization refers to "conceiving of others as subhuman creatures" (Livingstone Smith, 2014, p. 815) or "the denial of full humanness to others" (Haslam, 2006, p. 252). There are multiple ways of meeting this definition, including perceiving people as machines (Haslam, Kashima, Loughnan, Shi, & Suitner, 2008) or other objects (LeMoncheck, 1985; Nussbaum, 1995), denying that some people are capable of experiencing human emotions (Demoulin et al., 2004), and failing to attribute a human mind to another person (Harris & Fiske, 2006; Waytz, Gray, Epley, & Wegner, 2010).

As illustrated above, another form of dehumanization involves portraying humans as akin to non-human animals (Kahn, Goff, & McMahon, 2015). One notion implicit in these animalistic representations is that the dehumanized group is somehow "lesser" than the dehumanizing group. People sometimes portray all living beings and non-living things along a continuum from "lesser" (inanimate objects, non-human animals) to "greater" (humans) to "greatest" (saints, angels, God; Brandt & Reyna, 2011; Livingstone Smith, 2016, 2018; Lovejoy, 1936; Manne, 2018). Thus, using animalistic language to refer to people can represent those people as "less than" individuals who are described as more fully human.

Our main research question asked whether perpetrators (rather than targets) of racism may be perceived as less than fully human. The present work focused on this form of animalistic dehumanization for two reasons. First, much work on race-based dehumanization has focused on animalistic representations of stigmatized racial groups (e.g., Appiah, 2010; Goff et al., 2008; Harris, 2017; Haslam, Loughnan, & Sun, 2011; Kteily, Bruneau, Waytz, & Cotterill, 2015; Lott, 1999). Thus, to closely align with past research on dehumanization in the domain of race, we focused on animalistic representations of prejudiced people. Second, this type of animalistic dehumanization has received national prominence during the twenty-first century. As president,

Barack Obama faced an unprecedented number of death threats—an occurrence that scholars

have linked in part to numerous depictions of him as a non-human primate (Parks & Heard,

2009). His successor turned dehumanization on others, referring to Omarosa Manigault Newman

as a "dog," calling members of the gang MS-13 "animals," and opining that undocumented

immigrants "infest" the United States (Resnick, 2018). The prevalence of animalistic

representations of other human beings has led some scholars to call for more research on this

blatant form of dehumanization (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017). In line with this view, we reasoned

that focusing on animalistic representations was especially timely given the increasing

prominence of rhetoric portraying humans in animalistic ways.

In sum, dehumanization typically refers to the perception that another human being is not

completely human, including animalistic representations of that human being. People who

dehumanize may acknowledge that the targeted group has some human characteristics (e.g.,

being "evolved" to some extent) while denying its members full humanity. The present work

examined correlates of dehumanization, particularly as directed at perpetrators of prejudice.

**1.2. Dehumanization against Members of Groups that Face Disadvantage.** Nearly all

work on dehumanization to date has focused on perceptions of groups that face societal

disadvantage or oppression. As discussed above, extensive research has documented portrayals

of Black people as non-human primates (e.g., Appiah, 2010; Goff et al., 2008; Harris, 2017; Lott,

1999). Further, women are sometimes portrayed as inanimate objects or simply a collection of

body parts (Bernard, Gervais, Allen, Campomizzi, & Klein, 2012; Nussbaum, 1995), while

immigrants are sometimes depicted as non-human animals such as vermin (Utych, 2018). During

World War II, Nazis referred to Jews as dogs and rats; in the early 1990s in Rwanda, radio

broadcasts referred to Tutsis as cockroaches (Over, in press; Tirrell, 2012). This appears to be a

frequently utilized animal for dehumanizing, as a Hong Kong police officer association recently referred to protesters as cockroaches as well (RTHK English News, 2019).

In some cases, dehumanization may be relatively implicit. For instance, participants may recognize ape images faster after viewing pictures of Black, versus White, faces (Goff et al., 2008). Or, they may pair words designating femaleness (e.g., "woman," "she") more quickly with animal words (e.g., "animal," "paw") than with human words (e.g., "human," "culture"; Rudman & Mescher, 2012). In other cases, however, the notion that living beings vary in how human they are becomes quite explicit. For instance, White participants report that groups such as Arabs and Muslims are less evolved than groups such as Whites and Americans, positioning members of the former groups as closer to "ape" and members of the latter groups closer to "fully evolved human" on a pictorial scale depicting human evolution (Kteily et al., 2015). Such blatant dehumanization is prevalent: participants often rate out-group members as 10-15 points (on a 100-point scale) less human than in-group members, and in several studies, a quarter or more of participants rated out-group members as less than 75% human (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017).

Dehumanization can have important consequences. For instance, animalistic representations of immigrants can increase anger and disgust, which, in turn, lead to anti-immigrant attitudes (Utych, 2018). The strength of men's associations between women and animalistic constructs predicts their expressed willingness to rape and sexually harass women (Rudman & Mescher, 2012). Associating Black people with apes is linked to acceptance of violence against Black people (e.g., greater likelihood of assigning the death penalty; greater perceived justification in police use of force; Goff et al., 2008; Lott, 1999). In general, when

applied to humans, animalistic imagery is often associated with genocide and other forms of violence (Kahn et al., 2015; Kelman, 1976; Tirrell, 2012).

In sum, past research provides strong evidence that members of disadvantaged groups experience dehumanization. Dehumanizing representations can predict a host of negative consequences, including aggression and other forms of violence, for members of these groups. Building on this research, the current work investigated the extent to which perpetrators of prejudice, rather than its targets, may face dehumanization.

**1.3. Dehumanization of Prejudiced People and its link to Perceptions of Bias.** As discussed above, past scholarship has focused almost exclusively on dehumanization of groups that face disadvantage or oppression (e.g., Haslam, 2006; Lott, 1999). This focus is understandable because, as noted above, dehumanization against societally disadvantaged groups is prevalent and can lead to a host of negative consequences. At the same time, little is known about individuals' potential to dehumanize individuals who perpetrate prejudice. Thus, it is currently not clear whether dehumanization is solely directed at individuals who are targeted by prejudice or whether dehumanization may represent a more general cognitive phenomenon.

Why might people dehumanize perpetrators of prejudice? Scholars have described dehumanization as a form of moral exclusion, arguing that dehumanization allows individuals to avoid extending moral consideration to the dehumanized group (Kelman, 1976; Opotow, 1990). Given that individuals often perceive racism as morally bad, view racists as bad people, and go to great lengths to avoid being seen as racist themselves (Blum, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Richeson & Shelton, 2007), it stands to reason that individuals may place the social category "racists" as outside of the bounds of moral consideration and dehumanize individuals whom they perceive to fall into this category. The dehumanization of

perpetrators of prejudice (i.e., enactors of immoral intergroup behavior) is consistent with the view of dehumanization as reflecting moral disregard (e.g., Opotow, 1990).

This view is not limited to perceptions of racists; indeed, it was developed to explain why people might dehumanize targets—rather than perpetrators—of prejudice. Furthermore, some prior work supporting the view that dehumanization can reflect moral disregard has shown that people dehumanize individuals they perceive as immoral, including people who have committed crimes (Bastian, Denson, & Haslam, 2013), people who have harmed others (Khamitov, Rotman, & Piazza, 2016), and people who oppose the participant's political ideologies (Forscher & Kteily, 2020). In our view, the idea that dehumanization reflects moral exclusion can also explain why people might dehumanize perpetrators.

In addition to testing the extent to which individuals dehumanize perpetrators of immoral intergroup behavior (such as racism), the current work investigated how this dehumanization may be linked to individuals' perceptions of bias. People often disagree about whether particular situations reflect bias. This is particularly true of ambiguous situations that can be interpreted in multiple ways. For instance, a White person may stand on a bus rather than sitting next to a Black person, a behavior that could be attributed to bias (the White person not wanting to be in physical proximity to a Black person) or other motives (the White person wanting to stand because she had been sitting for a long time). Past work on perceptions of bias in such situations has focused on characteristics of the situation; for instance, participants perceive more bias when the perpetrator is prototypical (e.g., when men, rather than women, perform ambiguously sexist behaviors; Bucchianeri & Corning, 2013). Past work has also focused on the perceiver's group membership; for instance, Black people more readily perceive racial bias than do White people (Adams, Tormala, & O'Brien, 2006; Carter & Murphy, 2015).

The current work asked whether the extent to which people dehumanize racists might be associated with individuals' perceptions of racism. Our reasoning was as follows: while individuals often perceive racism as morally bad and racists as bad people (Blum, 2002), individuals often hesitate to refer to specific individuals as bad. Instead, they view the "true self" as morally good, reporting that good behaviors reflect a person's innermost essence while bad behaviors only reflect that person's "surface" self (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2014). Further, goodness is perceived as more innate and unchanging than badness, which people view as more temporary and mutable (Heiphetz, 2019). Because people generally view their fellow humans as morally good, they may be reluctant to describe those fellow humans' ambiguous behaviors as racially biased, a stigmatizing term that connotes immorality (Blum, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986).

This process, in which individuals hesitate to label instances of ambiguous bias as reflecting racial bias, may be attenuated among individuals who dehumanize racists. The view that *humans* are good—and therefore the hesitation to label their behaviors using terms that connote extreme immorality—may not apply among people who are willing to endorse representations of racists as less than fully human. Thus, individuals' disinclination to refer to fellow humans' actions using stigmatizing terms may apply to a weaker extent if they do not perceive the perpetrators of those actions to be completely human. Studies 1-2 tested this possibility.

In addition, Study 2 examined the extent to which the link between dehumanizing racists and perceptions of racial bias may vary depending on *who* is enacting the potentially biased behavior. Specifically, we reasoned that dehumanizing racists may be connected more strongly with perceptions of strangers', versus friends', behaviors. Prior research suggests that

psychological distance can play an important role in social judgments (Trope & Liberman, 2010). For example, people view and communicate with individuals who are psychologically close to them (e.g., the self, family members, friends) differently from psychologically distal others (e.g., strangers; see Brown & Levinson, 1987; Stephan, Liberman, & Trope, 2010). This effect may occur because of a difference in the level of abstraction with which people view psychologically close, versus distant, others (Liberman & Trope, 2008; Trope & Liberman, 2010). In other words, people typically construe socially distant individuals more abstractly than socially close individuals, with a focus on the central or stereotypic features of their group memberships or the broad traits they possess. In contrast, individuals typically focus on the more concrete, incidental, and idiosyncratic features or traits of socially close others (Liberman & Trope, 2008), perhaps unsurprisingly given the greater amount of information that people possess about those closest to them as compared with the amount of information they possess about strangers.

Given these disparate ways that people view and engage with socially close versus distant others, we sought to determine whether the link between dehumanization of racists and perceiving individuals as behaving in biased ways may be disrupted if the individual to be judged is a close other (i.e., a friend). Judgments regarding the abstract category "racists" (composed of many individuals whom the participant presumably does not know) may be more closely associated with perceptions of behaviors performed by strangers (whom the participant also does not know) and less strongly associated with perceptions of behaviors performed by a friend (a specific person whom the participant does know and presumably does not view as a "racist"). Study 2 tested this possibility.

In sum, past work on perceptions of racism has focused on effects based on perceivers'
group memberships and on characteristics of the situation. The current work built on this
foundation to investigate potential links between dehumanizing racists and perceiving ambiguous
actions as reflecting racial bias.

**1.4. Overview of Current Research.** Ongoing conversations in philosophy and
psychology center on dehumanization, or the perception that some individuals are less than fully
human. The current research contributes to these conversations in two ways. As a first aim,
rather than the traditional focus on the extent to which individuals dehumanize societally
disadvantaged groups, the present work tested the extent to which participants dehumanize
racists (Studies 1-2) and sexists (Study 1). Second, the current research investigated the extent to
which dehumanization is associated with perceptions of ambiguously biased behavior performed
by strangers (Studies 1-2) and friends (Study 2) as reflecting bias. Prior work in this area has
largely focused on characteristics of the situation and on perceivers' group membership. We built
on this research to investigate how perceptions of bias might be linked to dehumanizing
perpetrators of bias.

## 2. Study 1

As discussed in the introduction, much prior work on dehumanization has focused on
groups stigmatized on the basis of race and ethnicity (Appiah, 2010; Bloom, 2017; Goff et al.,
2008; Kteily et al., 2015; Livingstone Smith, 2018; Lott, 1999). Study 1 investigated the flip side
of this topic by probing dehumanization of racists. Specifically, Study 1 tested the extent to
which individuals dehumanize racists and the degree to which such dehumanization is associated
with perceptions of racial bias. We predicted that such an association may be particularly likely
to emerge in ambiguous situations, where any type of response (that the behavior reflected a

great deal of racial bias, a medium amount, or none at all) would seem plausible. In contrast, we expected that perceptions of clearly biased or clearly unbiased events would not be linked with dehumanization, given that we expected that nearly all participants would view blatantly racist situations as reflecting racial bias and race-neutral situations as not reflecting racial bias. To assess the generalizability of effects, Study 1 also investigated links between dehumanization of sexists and perceptions of sexism.

**2.1. Method**

      **2.1.1. Participants.** We sought to recruit approximately 350 participants because we were unsure as to what effect size to expect and wanted a relatively large number of participants to detect even a relatively small correlation between dehumanization and perceptions of bias. Ultimately, 380 participants responded to our survey. We excluded participants based on responses to an attention check question that asked them to recall one of the vignettes presented earlier in the study (see below). Data from one session were excluded because the response to this question was identical to a previous session, including the same typo, leading us to believe that one participant's responses may have been recorded twice. Data from 46 additional participants were excluded because they did not answer the attention check question correctly (e.g., provided answers such as "not sure" or "I do not remember" or did not answer the attention check question at all). The patterns reported below for all studies also emerged when including all respondents in analyses.

      The final sample after exclusions included 333 participants who were recruited online via Amazon Mechanical Turk and received $0.75. In this and all subsequent studies, only eligible participants (United States residents who had an approval rating of 95% or higher from the online platform) could see our recruitment message. On a demographic questionnaire completed

at the end of the study, 189 self-identified as female, 142 as male, and 2 as "other." Participants

also self-identified as African American (*n*=24), Asian American (*n*=32), European American

(*n*=244), Hispanic American (*n*=11), Native American (*n*=3), and "other" (*n*=2); 17 additional

participants selected multiple racial categories.

**2.1.2. Procedure.** After providing their consent to complete the study, participants

completed a number of measures. Items within each measure appeared in a randomized order.

The Blatant Dehumanization Scale was always presented first. Participants then completed the

measures of perceptions regarding racism and sexism; the order of these two measures was

counterbalanced across participants. Next, participants completed the Modern Racism Scale and

Modern Sexism Scale, also in counterbalanced order. Finally, all participants completed a

demographic questionnaire.

*Blatant Dehumanization Scale (Kteily et al., 2015).* We selected this scale as a measure

of dehumanization for several reasons. First, many measures of dehumanization are relatively

subtle, such as reaction-time measures that do not explicitly ask participants to judge the

humanity of other people (Goff et al., 2008; Rudman & Mescher, 2012). However, recent

scholarship has argued for greater study of blatant dehumanization due, in part, to its prevalence

(Kteily & Bruneau, 2017). Second, because this measure is quite direct, it provided a

conservative test of dehumanization. Had we used a more subtle measure, we may have found

even stronger evidence of dehumanization against racists; however, we were interested in

whether dehumanization would emerge even on a blatant measure that required participants to

explicitly report that racists were closer to non-human primates than were other human groups.

Participants read the following instructions: "People can vary in how human-like they

seem. Some people seem highly evolved whereas others seem no different than lower animals.

Using the image below, indicate using the sliders how evolved you consider the average member

of each group to be." Beneath these instructions was a scale from 0 to 100, anchored with a

picture of a clear non-human primate along with the words "least 'evolved'" on the low end and

a clear human along with the words "most 'evolved'" on the high end. We asked for perceptions

of 31 different groups, including the primary groups of interest (racists and sexists); groups

tested in prior work on dehumanization (Muslims, terrorists, Blacks, and Arabs); groups that we

expected, based on prior work (e.g., Kteily et al., 2015) would not be dehumanized (Americans,

middle class people, Canadians, Whites); and filler groups that have not served as a focus of

prior work on dehumanization (e.g., librarians). Descriptive statistics for each item from this

scale in Studies 1 and 2 are available in the Appendix.

*Perceptions of Racism in Ambiguous Situations (Corning & Bucchianeri, 2010).*

Participants read the following instructions: "On the following pages you will read some short

scenarios. Please read each scenario carefully. As you read, imagine that each situation is being

described to you by a peer. After reading each scenario, read the question that follows and

indicate your gut response by selecting an answer choice. There are no right or wrong answers;

your personal opinion and initial reaction is what matters." They then read 11 vignettes and, after

each one, answered the following question: "In your opinion, to what extent did this situation

depict an instance of unfair treatment based on race?" The response scale was anchored at 1

("not at all") and 6 ("very much so"). Seven vignettes depicted ambiguously racist situations.

One such vignette read as follows: "Yesterday I was on the downtown bus. I saw a young white

woman occupying a side-facing bench seat. A black couple boarded and sat down next to her.

Shortly after the couple sat down, the young woman got up, walked down the aisle, and held a

handrail. I noticed that she did not get off at the next stop." We modified two vignettes from the

original scale to create control vignettes that depicted blatant racial bias (e.g., a White mother telling her children that they need to stay away from Black men) and two additional vignettes to create control stories that did not depict racial bias (e.g., a White person saying hello to his friends).

*Perceptions of Sexism in Ambiguous Situations (Basford, Offermann, & Behrend, 2014).* Participants read the following instructions: "On the following pages you will see a set of short scenarios. Please read each scenario carefully. *There are no right or wrong answers; your personal opinion and initial reaction is what matters*. After reading each scenario, read the question that follows and indicate your gut response by selecting an answer choice." They then read eight vignettes and, after each one, answered the following question: "In your mind, to what extent did this situation depict an instance of unfair treatment based on gender?" The response scale was anchored at 1 ("not at all") and 6 ("very much so"). Six vignettes depicted ambiguously sexist situations. One such vignette read as follows: "Jessica, an associate within the finance department, is discussing her performance appraisal ratings with her boss, John. During the meeting, Jessica is reporting back on her accomplishments for the quarter. They discuss a formal presentation that Jessica had single-handedly developed and delivered to a group of key potential clients. After Jessica briefs John on the outcome of this presentation, John asks, 'So, who helped you with your presentation?'" Two control vignettes did not depict gender-based bias (e.g., a performance review in which a first-year associate receives positive feedback and opportunities for additional training). All vignettes were taken from Basford et al. (2014). We did not create any explicitly sexist scenarios. Because the original items included two control stories that did not reflect sexism, we did not modify the vignettes.

*Attitude Scales*. As exploratory measures, we included the Modern Racism Scale (MRS;

McConahay, 1986; 7-point response scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree,"

sample item: "Blacks are getting too demanding in their push for equal rights") and the Modern

Sexism Scale (MSS; Swim, Aikin, Hall, & Hunter, 1995; same response scale as the MRS;

sample item: "Over the past few years, the government and news media have been showing more

concern about the treatment of women than is warranted by women's actual experiences"). These

scales were not central to the predictions tested here and will not be discussed further.

## 2.2. Results and Discussion

### 2.2.1. Extent of dehumanization. On average, participants viewed both racists and

sexists as less than fully human ($M_{racists}$=45.62, $SD_{racists}$=33.56, $M_{sexists}$=51.85, $SD_{sexists}$=31.91),

with racists being judged as even less human than sexists ($t(332)$=-5.70, $p$<.001, 95% $CI_{diff}$: [-

8.38, -4.08], Cohen's $d$=-.31). Racists and sexists were perceived as less human than the groups

that we expected would not elicit dehumanization, such as Whites and middle-class people

($M$=84.36, $SD$=16.88; comparison with racists: $t(332)$=-22.80, $p$<.001, 95% $CI_{diff}$: [-42.08, -

35.40], Cohen's $d$=-1.25; comparison with sexists: $t(332)$=-20.82, $p$<.001, 95% $CI_{diff}$: [-35.58, -

29.44], Cohen's $d$=-1.14). Additionally, racists and sexists were perceived as less human than the

groups studied in prior work on dehumanization, such as Blacks and Arabs ($M$=65.54,

$SD$=25.39; comparison with racists: $t(332)$=12.45, $p$<.001, 95% $CI_{diff}$: [-23.07, -16.78], Cohen's

$d$=-.68; comparison with sexists: $t(332)$=-9.53, $p$<.001, 95% $CI_{diff}$: [-16.52, -10.87], Cohen's $d$=-

.52).[1] These data are illustrated in Figure 1.

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[1] Responses to the dehumanization measure were not normally distributed. Similar to prior work
using this measure (e.g., Kteily et al., 2015), the main text reports parametric analyses that are
often considered to be robust to violations of normality (Field, 2013). However, we also re-
analyzed these data using the sign test, which can be considered a non-parametric alternative to a
paired-samples *t*-test. Sign tests revealed the same patterns reported above: racists were judged to
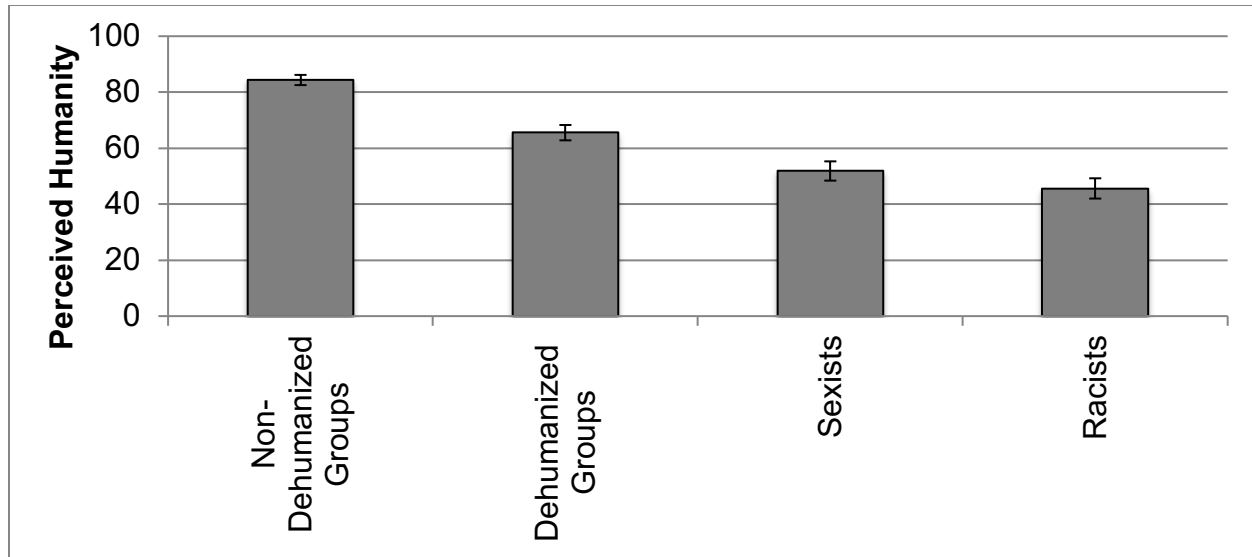
*Figure 1*. Perceived humanity of targets on a scale ranging from 0 (completely non-human) to 100 (completely human), Study 1. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. "Non-dehumanized groups" are those that we expected, based on prior research, would be viewed as human (Americans, middle class people, Canadians, Whites). "Dehumanized groups" are those that we expected, again based on prior research, would be viewed as less than fully human (Muslims, terrorists, Blacks, Arabs).

**2.2.2. Perceptions of bias.** The ambiguous race-related vignettes exhibited good reliability ($\alpha$=.80) and were therefore collapsed into one scale. The two blatantly racist vignettes were correlated ($r$=.61, $p<.001$) and formed one "blatant racism" scale; the two racially neutral vignettes were also correlated ($r$=.69, $p<.001$) and formed one "race-neutral" scale. Similarly, the ambiguous gender-related vignettes exhibited good reliability ($\alpha$=.74) and were therefore

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be less human than sexists ($Z$=-5.023, $p<.001$); both racists and sexists were judged to be less human than groups that we did not expect to elicit dehumanization (racists: $Z$=-15.45, $p<.001$; sexists: $Z$=-15.68, $p<.001$); and both racists and sexists were judged to be less human than stigmatized groups studied in past work on dehumanization (racists: $Z$=-10.88, $p<.001$; sexists: $Z$=-7.46, $p<.001$).

collapsed into one scale. The two gender-neutral vignettes were correlated ($r$=.73, $p$<.001) and formed one "gender-neutral" scale.

As a manipulation check, we tested overall perceptions of race-related vignettes by conducting a one-factor, three-level (Vignette Type: ambiguous vs. blatant vs. neutral) repeated-measures ANOVA. This analysis revealed a main effect of Vignette, $F(1.82, 605.45)$=1494.50, $p$<.001, $\eta_p^2$=.82).[2] As expected, participants reported more unfair treatment based on race in the blatant vignettes ($M$=5.66, $SD$=.75) than in the ambiguous vignettes ($M$=3.78, $SD$=1.04, $F(1, 332)$=847.19, $p$<.001, $\eta_p^2$=.72) and more in the ambiguous vignettes than the neutral vignettes ($M$=1.52, $SD$=1.02, $F(1, 332)$=881.47, $p$<.001, $\eta_p^2$=.73). Furthermore, a paired-samples $t$-test demonstrated that participants perceived more bias in vignettes depicting ambiguous sexism ($M$=4.47, $SD$=.93) than in the gender-neutral vignettes ($M$=1.77, $SD$=1.16, $t(332)$=33.10, $p$<.001, 95% $CI_{diff}$: [2.53, 2.85], Cohen's $d$=1.81).

The main goal of analyses regarding perceptions of bias was to determine whether dehumanizing individuals who perpetuate bias predicts perceptions of bias in that domain. To a small but significant extent, the *less* participants reported that racists were fully human, the *more* bias they perceived in ambiguously racist vignettes ($r$=-.18, $p$=.001). However, this pattern did not emerge with blatantly racist vignettes ($r$=-.04, $p$=.494) or race-neutral vignettes ($r$=.01, $p$=.884). These results appear to generalize to groups beyond race. In particular, to a small but significant extent, the less participants viewed sexists as fully human, the more bias they

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[2] Non-integer degrees of freedom reflect an adjustment for a violation of the assumption of sphericity.

perceived in ambiguously sexist vignettes ($r=-.17$, $p=.001$). However, this effect did not emerge in gender-neutral vignettes ($r=-.09$, $p=.087$).[3]

### 3. Study 2

Study 1 showed that people dehumanize perpetrators of prejudice—in fact, more than they dehumanize the groups that have formed the bulk of prior empirical work on dehumanization—and that the extent of this dehumanization predicts perceptions of bias in ambiguous situations. However, all vignettes in Study 1 represented individuals with whom the participant did not have close relationships. Study 2 examined a potential boundary condition by testing whether the results might differ depending on the participant's level of closeness to the actor. As described in the introduction, dehumanization of "racists" in general may predict attributions of bias to behaviors performed by strangers more than to identical behaviors performed by friends. In other words, judgments regarding a category composed of many people the participant does not know personally ("racists") may be more closely associated with perceptions of the behaviors performed by other people the participant does not know personally and less closely association with perceptions of the behaviors performed by close others. Study 2 tested this possibility while also seeking to determine whether the results obtained in Study 1 would emerge in a new sample of participants.

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[3] Because responses to the dehumanization measure were not normally distributed, we also examined the association between this measure and perceptions of bias using Spearman's rank correlation, which does not assume a normal distribution. Again, to a small but significant extent, the less participants reported that racists were fully human, the more bias they perceived in ambiguously racist vignettes ($\rho=-.14$, $p=.010$). This effect did not emerge with blatantly racist vignettes ($\rho=-.03$, $p=.551$) or race-neutral vignettes ($\rho=.01$, $p=.823$). Further, to a small but significant extent, the less participants reported that sexists were fully human, the more bias they perceived in the ambiguously sexist vignettes ($\rho=-.17$, $p=.003$). However, this effect did not emerge in the gender-neutral vignettes ($\rho=-.09$, $p=.116$).

**3.1. Method**

**3.1.1. Participants.** Recruitment and compensation were identical to Study 1. We recruited 426 participants and excluded respondents who did not answer an attention check question that asked them to recall any one of the vignettes presented earlier in the study ($n=42$) or who had completed Study 1 ($n=43$). Thus, the final sample included 341 adults. On a demographic questionnaire completed at the end of the study, 158 self-identified as female, 181 as male, and 2 as "other." Participants also self-identified as African American ($n=28$), Asian American ($n=23$), European American ($n=256$), Hispanic American ($n=18$), and "other" ($n=2$); 14 additional participants selected multiple racial categories.

**3.1.2. Procedure.** Participants completed the blatant dehumanization measure (Kteily et al., 2015) and responded to the race-related vignettes from Study 1 (Corning & Bucchianeri, 2010). Half of participants ($n=170$) were randomly assigned to the "stranger" condition and completed third-person vignettes in which the actor was a stranger whose gender matched the participant's gender. For instance, female participants read about a woman they did not know personally who got up from her seat on the bus when a Black couple sat down next to her. The remaining 171 participants provided the first name of their closest friend, someone "who you feel you know the best and with whom you spend time and talk with on a regular basis." These participants responded to the same vignettes as participants in the "stranger" condition except that the name of each actor was replaced with the participants' friend's name. After each vignette, participants indicated the extent to which the behavior described in the vignette depicted an instance of unfair treatment based on race. In each condition, vignettes were presented in a randomized order. Participants in the "friend" condition also answered additional questions about their relationship with their friend.

**3.2. Results and Discussion**

      **3.2.1. Extent of dehumanization.** Replicating the results of Study 1, participants viewed racists as less than fully human on average ($M$=45.85, $SD$=34.53). Also as in Study 1, racists were perceived as less human than the groups that we expected would not elicit dehumanization ($M$=86.03, $SD$=16.68, $t(340)$=-23.47, $p$<.001, 95% $CI_{diff}$: [-43.55, -36.81], Cohen's $d$=-1.27) and the targets studied in prior work on dehumanization ($M$=66.97, $SD$=24.16, $t(340)$=-13.65, $p$<.001, 95% $CI_{diff}$: [-24.16, -18.08], Cohen's $d$=-.74).[4] These data are illustrated in Figure 2.
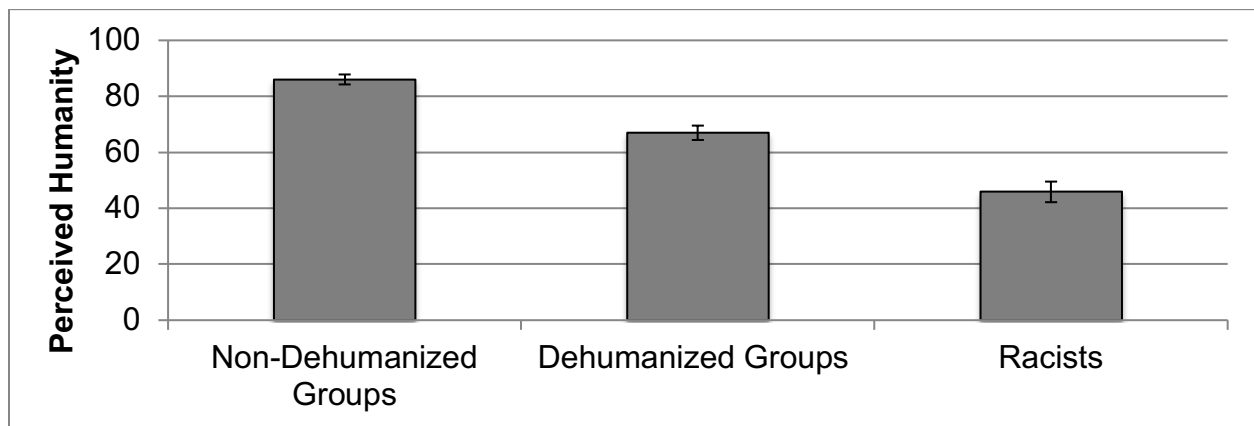


*Figure 2*. Perceived humanity of targets on a scale ranging from 0 (completely non-human) to 100 (completely human), Study 2. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

      **3.2.2. Perceptions of bias.** We did not find differences in the extent to which participants viewed racists as human across condition ($M_{stranger}$=45.93, $SD_{stranger}$=35.28, $M_{friend}$=45.78, $SD_{friend}$=33.87, $t(339)$=.04, $p$=.968, 95% $CI_{diff}$: [-7.21, 7.52], Cohen's $d$=.00). The ambiguous vignettes exhibited good reliability ($\alpha$=.79) and were therefore collapsed into one scale. The two

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[4] As in Study 1, we also analyzed these data using the sign test, which can be considered a non-parametric alternative to a paired-samples $t$-test. Sign tests revealed the same patterns reported above: racists were perceived as less human than groups that we did not expect to elicit dehumanization ($Z$=16.02, $p$<.001) and stigmatized groups studied in past work on dehumanization ($Z$=10.84, $p$<.001).

blatant vignettes were correlated ($r$=.65, $p$<.001) and formed one "blatant" scale; the two neutral

vignettes were also correlated ($r$=.55, $p$<.001) and formed one "neutral" scale.

As a manipulation check, we tested overall perceptions of race-related vignettes by

conducting a 2 (Actor: friend vs. stranger) x 3 (Vignette Type: ambiguous vs. blatant vs. neutral)

mixed ANOVA with repeated measures on the second factor. This analysis revealed only a main

effect of Vignette, $F$(1.63, 551.03)=1151.77, $p$<.001, $\eta_p^2$=.77. Participants reported more unfair

treatment based on race in the blatant vignettes ($M$=5.32, $SD$=1.23) than in the ambiguous

vignettes ($M$=3.18, $SD$=1.09, $F$(1, 340)=851.18, $p$<.001, $\eta_p^2$=.72) and more in the ambiguous

vignettes than the neutral vignettes ($M$=1.52, $SD$=.98, $F$(1, 340)=648.07, $p$<.001, $\eta_p^2$=.66). No

other effects reached significance ($ps\geq$.703; Figure 3).
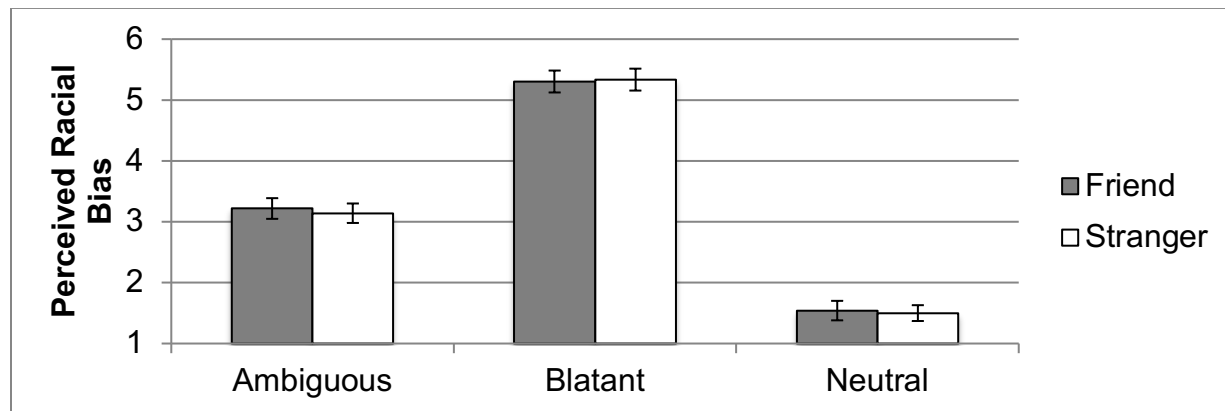


*Figure 3*. Perceived racial bias on a scale asking participants the extent to which each vignette

depicted "an instance of unfair treatment based on race" ranging from 1 ("not at all") to 6 ("very

much so"), Study 2. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

The main goals of analyses regarding perceptions of bias were twofold. First, we sought

to determine whether results from Study 1 showing that dehumanizing racists predicted

perceptions of bias in strangers' ambiguously racist behaviors would replicate in a new sample.

Replicating Study 1, the *less* participants viewed racists as human, the *more* likely they were to

report that strangers had performed race-based unfair treatment in the ambiguous vignettes ($r$=-.33, $p$<.001), a correlation that did not reach significance for ratings of neutral vignettes ($r$=-.06, $p$=.479). Additionally, for the blatant vignettes, the *less* participants viewed racists as human, the *more* likely they were to report that strangers had performed race-based unfair treatment ($r$=-.20, $p$=.009). This correlation did not emerge as significant in Study 1, is relatively small, and should be interpreted with caution.[5]

Second, we investigated whether participants showed different patterns of results when considering behaviors performed by their friends.[6] Consistent with the idea that perceptions of racists whom one does not personally know may be associated with judgments of strangers' behaviors but not friends' behaviors, no correlations reached significance among participants who indicated whether a friend's behavior (in vignettes identical to those in the stranger condition) reflected unfair treatment based on race ($|r|$s≤.10, $p$s≥.196). Indeed, in the ambiguous vignette condition, the relation between dehumanizing racists and perceptions of racism was stronger when participants evaluated strangers ($r$=-.33, $p$<.001) versus friends ($r$=-.10, $p$=.203;

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[5] As in Study 1, we also analyzed these data using Spearman's $\rho$. Replicating the results obtained with Pearson's $r$, the *less* participants viewed racists as human, the *more* likely they were to report that strangers had performed race-based unfair treatment in the ambiguous vignettes ($\rho$=-.31, $p$<.001), a relation that did not emerge for ratings of neutral vignettes ($\rho$=-.05, $p$=.561). Additionally, for the blatant vignettes, the *less* participants viewed racists as human, the *more* likely they were to report that strangers had performed race-based unfair treatment ($\rho$=-.20, $p$=.008).

[6] The results reported below include participants in the "friend" condition regardless of the race of their friend; however, the patterns reported below also emerged when limiting this sample only to respondents who identified their friend as European American. On average, participants in the "friend" condition reported knowing their friend between four and five years ($M$=7.38 on an 8-point scale ranging from "less than one month" to "more than five years," $SD$=1.26). Using seven-point scales, these participants reported knowing their friend well ($M$=6.61, $SD$=.66), interacting with their friend often ($M$=6.27, $SD$=1.08), feeling close with their friend ($M$=6.41, $SD$=.86), and liking their friend ($M$=6.66, $SD$=.63). Using a seven-point Inclusion of Other in Self scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992), participants reported perceiving themselves and their friend as relatively integrated ($M$=5.40, $SD$=1.47).

difference between correlations: $z$=-2.19, $p$=.029). This difference did not reach significance in the blatant and neutral vignette conditions ($|z|$s≤1.64, $p$s≥.100).[7]

## 4. General Discussion

Both philosophers and psychologists have written extensively about dehumanization—the notion that some people are less than fully human. Literatures in both fields have extensively documented dehumanization against members of groups stigmatized on the basis of race, gender, and other social categories (e.g., Goff et al., 2008; Kteily et al., 2015; Lott, 1999; Livingstone Smith, 2014; Manne, 2018). However, dehumanization against the *perpetrators* of prejudice, rather than its targets, is less well understood. The current work investigated the extent to which perpetrators may elicit dehumanization and potential correlates of the perception that perpetrators are less than fully human.

The current data showed that racists (Studies 1-2) and sexists (Study 1) elicit dehumanization. Participants viewed members of both groups as less than fully human and, in fact, as less human than the stigmatized groups studied in prior work (e.g., Black people). This finding indicates that dehumanization is not limited to the targets of prejudice. Rather, it appears to be a more general cognitive phenomenon that can also be applied to individuals who perpetuate bias.

In addition to documenting the existence of dehumanization toward perpetrators, the current work asked whether such dehumanization might be associated with perceptions of bias, particularly in ambiguous situations. As outlined in the introduction, people often judge their fellow humans as morally good (Heiphetz, 2019). Because racism is often perceived to be

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[7] Similar results emerged when performing correlations using Spearman's $\rho$ rather than Pearson's $r$: dehumanizing racists did not significantly predict perceptions of bias in ambiguous, blatant, or neutral scenarios ($|\rho|$s≤.09, $p$s≥.231).

morally wrong (Blum, 2002; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Richeson &

Shelton, 2007), they may hesitate to label the behaviors of their fellow humans—who, after all,

are perceived as having good "true selves" (Newman et al., 2014)—as racist. However, if racists

are not accorded full humanity, this hesitation may weaken. In other words, dehumanizing racists

may be associated with greater willingness to attribute racial bias to particular behaviors. This

effect may be particularly pronounced in ambiguous situations. Most people are likely to agree

that behaviors such as using racial slurs are racist and behaviors such as greeting a friend are not

racist. Ambiguous situations, such as one where a White person gives up her seat on the bus

when a Black person sits down next to her, leave more room for subjective judgment. Thus, it is

here that the role of dehumanization may be particularly pronounced. The current data supported

these predictions by showing that dehumanizing racists predicted greater perceptions of racial

bias in ambiguous situations. This effect did not appear limited to racists, as greater

dehumanization of sexists in Study 1 predicted greater perceptions of sexism in ambiguous

scenarios.

Study 2 built on these findings by investigating the link between dehumanization and

perceptions of bias among both strangers and friends. Here, we reasoned that dehumanization of

racists in general, many of whom are unknown to the participant, might be associated with

perceptions of behaviors performed by individuals whom the participant did not know. However,

dehumanizing racists in general might have less bearing on perceptions of actions performed by

specific individuals known to the participant, as people make different judgments about

psychologically close individuals than about people and groups they perceive as more distant

(Brown & Levinson, 1987; Stephan et al., 2010). Consistent with this logic, Study 2 showed that

dehumanization of racists predicted the perception that ambiguously racist behaviors performed

by strangers, but not friends, reflected racial bias. In both studies, the correlations between

dehumanizing racists and judging that strangers' behaviors reflected racial bias were relatively

small. Nevertheless, the effect appeared reliable and replicable, suggesting a connection between

these two variables.

By showing that dehumanization is associated with perceptions of racial bias in the

behaviors of strangers, but not friends, Study 2 also contributes to an ongoing conversation in

philosophy about the extent to which moral judgment is invariant across contexts (Knobe &

Doris, 2010; Nichols & Knobe, 2007; Roskies & Nichols, 2008). The current data suggest that

the correlates of social judgment differ when those judgments are made regarding friends versus

strangers. This is an especially important insight in light of the fact that the bulk of empirical

data on moral judgment come from studies in which participants evaluate behaviors of strangers

(e.g., Alicke, 1992; Heiphetz, Spelke, & Young, 2015; Kelly, Stich, Haley, Eng, & Fessler, 2007;

Kneer & Machery, 2019; Nichols & Mallon, 2006; Sarkissian, Chatterjee, De Brigard, Knobe,

Nichols, & Sirker, 2010). Yet, in everyday life, people often make moral judgments regarding

friends and other people they know. Given that these judgments may not align with judgments

regarding strangers, a greater focus on moral judgments regarding close others is a fruitful future

direction for moral cognition research.

The current work also raises several other important directions for future research. First,

the present studies used only one measure of dehumanization—a particularly blatant measure

that explicitly asked participants to indicate how "evolved" particular groups of people were

(Kteily et al., 2015). We selected this measure because recent scholarship has argued for a

greater focus on blatant dehumanization (Kteily & Bruneau, 2017), because such forms of

dehumanization have become increasingly prominent in national discourse, and because a blatant

measure provided a conservative test of the extent to which racists would elicit dehumanization. In other words, people who are willing to report that some people are less human than others would also likely show this association on a more subtle measure, but not everyone who shows this association implicitly may be willing to report their dehumanizing views. However, our data cannot directly speak to how much dehumanization would emerge on more subtle measures, such as implicit tasks based on reaction time or tasks that ask participants to attribute particular characteristics (e.g., emotions) to different agents (Demouslin et al., 2004; Goff et al., 2008; Haslam et al., 2008). The current data also did not investigate how such measures might be associated with perceptions of bias. These topics remain open for future research.

Second, several scholars have written on the relation between dehumanization and prejudice. At first blush, these may appear to be similar constructs, linked by a dislike for a particular group. However, the scholarly consensus appears to be that dehumanization is more than simply a negative attitude toward a particular group. For instance, Kahn and colleagues (2015) conceptualize prejudice and dehumanization as distinct phenomena that produce unique behaviors. These scholars construct a 2 (Dehumanization: high versus low) x 2 (Prejudice: high versus low) matrix and draw different conclusions about the behaviors elicited in each matrix (e.g., high dehumanization-low prejudice elicits superhumanization, or the attribution of supernatural or magical abilities to particular groups, while low dehumanization-high prejudice elicits ostracism; see also Kteily et al., 2015; Wilde, Martin, & Goff, 2014). Although the current work focused specifically on dehumanization, future research can probe this construct in conjunction with negative attitudes toward perpetrators of prejudice to determine the extent to which dehumanization and negative attitudes play separate roles in responses to these individuals.

Third, the current data demonstrate a link between dehumanization and perceptions of bias but cannot show that this link is causal. The data presented here are correlational, which leaves open three possibilities: (a) dehumanizing racists causes people to perceive more racial bias in strangers' ambiguous behaviors; (b) perceiving more racial bias in strangers' ambiguous behaviors causes people to dehumanize racists; (c) some other factor, not measured here, causes people to dehumanize racists and also causes them to perceive more racial bias in ambiguous situations. Future work can manipulate dehumanization to determine whether it plays a causal role in increasing perceptions of bias. If such a causal link does not emerge, future work can also probe individual differences that could contribute to the correlational results observed here. For instance, it is possible that people who find racism particularly abhorrent may be particularly likely to view ambiguous behaviors as racist and to dehumanize people who engage in those behaviors. Political orientation may be another individual difference that shapes both views of racists and the propensity to perceive ambiguous behaviors as racially biased. These possibilities remain open for future examination.

## 5. Conclusions

Generations of people have refused to grant full humanity to others, referring to out-group members as dogs, cockroaches, and other non-human animals. The current work suggests that dehumanization extends to perpetrators of prejudice, not just its targets. Furthermore, dehumanizing racists predicts perceptions of the extent to which strangers' ambiguous behaviors reflect racial bias. In demonstrating these effects, the current work brings empirical data to bear on conversations within psychology and philosophy on the nature and correlates of dehumanization.

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**Appendix: Descriptive Statistics for Blatant Dehumanization Scale**

| | Study 1: Mean | Study 1: Std Dev | Study 2: Mean | Study 2: Std Dev |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Primary Items** | | | | |
| Racists | 45.62 | 33.56 | 45.85 | 34.53 |
| Sexists | 51.85 | 31.91 | 53.21 | 33.50 |
| **Groups Tested in Prior Work on Dehumanization** | | | | |
| Arabs | 71.99 | 30.75 | 73.89 | 29.02 |
| Blacks | 81.09 | 23.26 | 81.42 | 24.32 |
| Muslims | 70.99 | 30.48 | 73.75 | 28.74 |
| Terrorists | 38.10 | 34.94 | 38.82 | 35.48 |
| **Groups Not Expected to Elicit Dehumanization** | | | | |
| Americans | 83.13 | 20.06 | 85.57 | 18.69 |
| Canadians | 85.65 | 18.59 | 87.27 | 16.97 |
| Middle Class People | 83.80 | 18.47 | 85.63 | 17.68 |
| Whites | 84.86 | 19.01 | 85.67 | 19.31 |
| **Filler Items** | | | | |

*Other Perpetrators of Prejudice (\*we did not ask participants about ambiguous situations relevant to these forms of bias)*

| | Study 1: Mean | Study 1: Std Dev | Study 2: Mean | Study 2: Std Dev |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Ageist People | 53.48 | 33.00 | 55.16 | 34.05 |
| Anti-Semites | 45.79 | 34.91 | 46.33 | 35.82 |
| Classists | 57.64 | 32.00 | 61.68 | 32.07 |
| Homophobes | 47.85 | 34.91 | 51.30 | 34.96 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Xenophobes | 48.64 | 33.99 | 48.18 | 34.21 |
| *Other Filler Items* | | | | |
| Adulterers | 59.24 | 31.36 | 62.06 | 33.04 |
| Atheists | 78.40 | 25.48 | 79.40 | 27.03 |
| Child Abusers | 34.40 | 34.55 | 35.35 | 35.84 |
| Child Molesters | 34.48 | 33.48 | 35.51 | 35.83 |
| Christians | 74.11 | 27.79 | 77.49 | 26.10 |
| Criminals | 52.09 | 33.52 | 53.96 | 33.50 |
| Ex-Convicts | 60.45 | 30.35 | 63.09 | 30.82 |
| Homemakers | 82.36 | 21.43 | 85.35 | 18.68 |
| Liars | 61.52 | 31.19 | 61.81 | 32.97 |
| Librarians | 86.32 | 18.22 | 87.33 | 17.87 |
| Men | 82.92 | 19.67 | 85.63 | 18.95 |
| Negligent Parents | 46.10 | 34.41 | 47.87 | 33.75 |
| Rapists | 34.87 | 34.26 | 35.79 | 35.37 |
| The Poor | 76.54 | 25.62 | 78.67 | 24.17 |
| Wife Beaters | 38.18 | 34.03 | 39.88 | 36.03 |
| Women | 87.28 | 16.88 | 88.37 | 16.76 |
| Egalitarians | Not Used | Not Used | 70.94 | 30.63 |