



Dehumanizing from a Distance: How Perceptions of Human Uniqueness Traits and the Importance of Social Justice Issues Predict Negative Attitudes and Avoidant Behaviors Towards Individuals Experiencing Homelessness



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Introduction

- Individuals experiencing homelessness belong to one of the most highly stigmatized groups³.
- Negative perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness range from being low in warmth and competence to being animalistic or evoking disgust¹.
- While the relationship between negative out-group perceptions and treatment of out-group members is generally well established⁴, less is known about how particular perceptions of individuals experiencing homelessness impact daily avoidance behaviors and attitudes about offering tangible support for those without permanent housing.
- The current research sought to understand how dehumanizing perceptions, in particular, relate to attitudes about and treatment of individuals experiencing homelessness.
- According to Haslam's Dual Model, dehumanization can be assessed using perceptions of the extent to which one possesses human-like traits on two key dimensions: Human Uniqueness (e.g., logic and self restraint) and Human Nature (e.g., warmth)¹.
- We explored the relationship between dehumanization on HU and HN dimensions and self-reported avoidant behaviors and attitudes of support for individuals experiencing homelessness.
- We also investigated factors that might potentially moderate the relationship between dehumanization and negative behaviors – focusing on the perceived importance of social justice importance
- We predicted that levels of dehumanization would positively correlate with avoidant behaviors and negative attitudes towards providing support for individuals experiencing homelessness. Further, we suspected this relationship to be moderated by the perceived importance of social justice issues.

Does dehumanization predict avoidant behaviors and unsupportive attitudes towards providing support for individuals experiencing homelessness?

Methods

- **Participants:** N = 240 (182 female, M = 18.72, SD = 1.10) undergraduate students.
- **Materials and Procedure:** Participants completed a survey about perceptions of, treatment towards, and attitudes about individuals experiencing homelessness.
- **Predictor variables:** Participants rated themselves and individuals experiencing homelessness on Human Nature (HN) and Human Uniqueness (HU) traits as well as their prior contact with individuals experiencing homelessness (100 point analogue scales).
 - Dehumanization scores for HU and HN were computed by subtracting the average self score minus the average individual experiencing homelessness score for each dimension.
 - Two additional questions assessed social justice attitudes and actions (e.g., how important are social justice issues to you?)
- **Outcome Variables:** Avoidant behaviors and attitudes about providing tangible support for individuals experiencing homelessness.
 - **Avoidant behaviors:** Composite score consisted of 2 avoidance items (crossing the street when approaching an individual experiencing homelessness, avoiding eye contact) and 2 approach items (smiling, offering tangible resources) reverse coded (Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$).
 - **Attitudes regarding support:** 2 items assessed attitudes (raising taxes to support individuals experiencing homelessness and hosting a homeless encampment on campus).
- **Hypothesis:** Levels of dehumanization will predict avoidant behaviors and negative attitudes towards providing support for individuals experiencing homelessness.

Results

- Means, SDs, and bivariate correlations in Table 1 provide initial support for our hypotheses.
- A multiple regression analysis revealed that Human Uniqueness, $B = 0.30$, $t = 3.03$, $p = .003$, but not Human Nature, $B = 0.03$, $t = .29$, $p = .78$, significantly predicted self-reported avoidance of individuals experiencing homelessness (Figure 1).
- Attitudes in favor of tax increases to support individuals experiencing homelessness were predicted by dehumanization on the Human Uniqueness dimension, $B = -0.44$, $t = -3.34$, $p = .001$, but not the Human Nature dimension, $B = 0.02$, $t = .14$, $p = .89$.
- Support for hosting a government sanctioned homeless encampment on campus was significantly predicted by Human Uniqueness, $B = -0.74$, $t = -5.44$, $p < .001$, but not Human Nature dimension, $B = 0.29$, $t = 1.80$, $p = .073$.
- Including prior contact in the regression models revealed the same pattern of results and the relationship between human nature and support for hosting a tent city became significant.
- Analyses revealed that the interaction term (HU dehumanization x Social Justice Actions) was a statistically significant predictor of avoidant behaviors, $B = 0.01$, $t = 2.10$, $p = .037^3$, providing evidence for a significant moderating effect. Conditional effects analyses indicated that at medium and high (but not low) levels of social justice actions, the dehumanization-avoidant behaviors link was statistically significant in the expected direction.

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Dehumanizing HU	10.28	16.83	-							
2. Dehumanizing HN	8.60	14.44	.50***	-						
3. Prior Contact	49.07	18.16	-.03	-.10	-					
4. Avoidant Behaviors	46.08	22.83	.23***	.13*	-.42***	-				
5. Tax	48.21	30.39	-.24***	-.11	.14*	-.10	-			
6. Host	58.87	32.55	-.32***	-.06	.09	-.16*	.42***	-		
7. Social Justice Importance	69.41	28.21	-.10	.07	.21***	-.21***	.40***	.23***	-	
8. Social Justice Actions	20.59	22.83	-.13*	-.05	.28***	-.24***	.21***	.20**	.39***	-

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 1

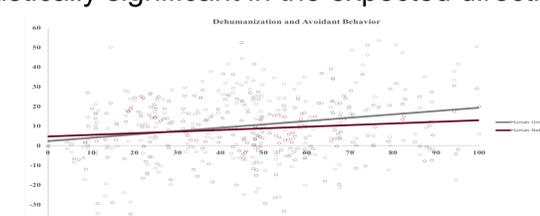


Figure 1

Discussion

- Dehumanization predicted avoidant behaviors and attitudes related to tangible support for individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Believing an individual experiencing homelessness possess fewer Human Uniqueness traits (e.g., logic, self-restraint) than oneself may be a particularly useful predictor of negative attitudes and behaviors.
- Dehumanization on HU is a significant predictor of avoidant behaviors even when accounting for the variance associated with previous contact with individuals experiencing homelessness.
- Based on these results, we concluded that HU dehumanization may only be predictive of avoidant behaviors for individuals who believe social justice issues as personally important, with dehumanization being the strongest predictor of avoidant behaviors for those who place a great level of importance (medium to high) on social justice issues.
- Future research should seek to replicate these findings with a more direct measure of avoidant behavior and to explore causality by manipulating perceptions of Human Uniqueness and Human Nature traits.
- Future research could also explore if there are conditions where dehumanization of Human Nature is a predominate predictor of attitudes and behavior.

Dehumanization of Human Uniqueness, but not Human Nature, traits predict avoidant behaviors and attitudes about support for individuals experiencing homelessness.