Animals and Androids: Associations Between Social Categories and Nonhumans

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People view social groups as "less than human" in two very distinct ways according to an article published in the February issue of *Psychological Science*.

New research from Stephen Loughnan and Nick Haslam at the University of Melbourne suggests that people often perceive social categories as either lacking characteristics that are uniquely human or that constitute essential human nature. As a result these groups may actually be likened to animals or machines, respectively.

In order to examine these associations, the researchers flashed words on a computer screen to several undergraduates for less than a second. The subjects were faced with the task of deciding whether or not the word belonged to one of a pair of categories – such as artist and animal or business person and human nature – or whether it belonged to neither.

Words that reflected a characteristic of human nature (e.g. curious) were associated with artists whereas words that reflected characteristics unique to humans were more often associated with business people. Similarly, when presented with words such as "android," "artificial," or "computer," subjects were more likely to associate these with the business person category whereas words like "beast," "kangaroo," or "primates" were associated with the artist category.

The results suggest that the traits representing humanness, social categories, and nonhuman comparisons, such as animals and machines, are inextricably linked.

"Although our findings do not allow us to argue that certain groups are directly likened to nonhumans" state the authors, "they suggest a subtle, implicit form of dehumanization operating in everyday group perception." More importantly, these findings suggest that some groups may be attributed with fewer human qualities than others, leaving them vulnerable to prejudiced attitudes.

While the implicit associations found in the study are relatively benign from day to day, Loughnan and Haslam suggest that these associations can become more profound in stressful contexts. "When intergroup antagonism arises, comparisons with nonhumans may become explicit, but at other times, groups are merely perceived as more or less lacking in sophistication and civility (uniquely human) or animation, warmth, and emotional depth (human nature)."