Teaching: Understanding Our Inner Darkness May Shed Light into Humanity’s Common Good

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Aimed at integrating cutting-edge psychological science into the classroom, Teaching *Current Directions in Psychological Science* offers advice and how-to guidance about teaching a particular area of research or topic in psychological science that has been the focus of an article in the APS journal *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

**More teaching resources in this Observer:** Ethical Research to Help Romania’s Abandoned Children


Our common “goodness” is evident in our inborn capacity for compassion, willingness to help others, and automatic reflex toward cooperating with others (Keltner, 2009; Rand & Nowak, 2013), even in difficult circumstances (Gruber & Marques, 2023). Humans are, in many ways, born to be good—but we don’t always live up to this capacity.
One example of our psychological dark underbelly is dehumanization, defined as the tendency to see another person or group of people as “less than” human and to consequently deny them basic human rights and fair treatment. Dehumanization helps explain humanity’s darkest behavioral moments including war and violence, slavery, racism, and even genocide (e.g., Markowitz & Slovic, 2020).

But when, why, and how do we dehumanize others? Karantzas, Simpson, and Haslam (2023) argue that researchers have made significant progress in better understanding dehumanization. They suggest ways that people dehumanize others, from denying someone’s basic humanity to more subtle forms in everyday relationships.

Karantzas and colleagues describe how our understanding of dehumanization has evolved over time. Traditional models included two ways people can be dehumanized:

(1) by denying people their basic human uniqueness, or what separates humans from other non-human animals, such as the capacity for higher-order intelligence and morality or

(2) human nature, or what distinguishes people from non-living objects, such as the capacity for emotions.

Most research has focused on social cognitive processes, such as trying to understand the type of people or life factors that lead people to dehumanize others. People are also more likely to dehumanize others based on their own personal life experiences (e.g., when they have been maltreated themselves), individual traits or qualities (e.g., narcissism, psychopathy), and attachment patterns (e.g., higher levels of attachment insecurity).

The boundaries of dehumanizing can expand from strangers to even our most intimate relationships. In romantic relationships, many of the most destructive patterns may be more subtle forms of dehumanizing the partner. This can include treating the partner as if they are immature, displaying contempt, humiliation, and even engaging in conflict avoidance. If these types of behaviors occur frequently or are severe, they can reflect a form of interpersonal dehumanization that can damage the relationship and, importantly, deny the partner a sense of basic humanity. Not surprisingly, these behaviors lead to negative relationship outcomes (i.e., lower relationship quality, commitment, and satisfaction) and individual outcomes (e.g., greater negative emotions, depression feelings, and self-appraisals). We can also extend these darker tendencies to friendships and coworkers as well.

Bottom line: Appreciating the common humanity in your partner and others matters for your relationships and your own well-being. The study of dehumanization not only helps us understand our darkest moments but may also offer an unexpected path toward restoring our common human good.

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**Student Activity**
A group activity can help students reflect on different kinds of dehumanization and brainstorm a more prosocial path forward.

Begin with a small group exercise. Ask students to write down the definition of dehumanization: what does it mean, and when does it happen? Ask the students to share aloud with their group or partner their descriptions and find common or overlapping themes in their responses. Next, ask students to think about the different contexts in which dehumanization can occur, and to explicitly consider Keltner and Haidt’s (1999) four levels of analysis: individual, dyadic (e.g., romantic relationship, friendship), group, and cultural. Invite students to share their responses with the class.

Have students reflect on their notes: What’s missing? What other aspects may define or drive people toward dehumanizing others? Ask them to discuss this in pairs or their small group.

Later, work as a class to consider potential solutions to minimize the negative consequences of dehumanizing others. Are there ways to bridge divides by recognizing the common human qualities we share? Have the class brainstorm examples of ways we can see or appreciate human uniqueness in others as well as our common human nature (including people we know as well as those we don’t).

If you have time, have them watch one of the following free videos depicting well-known examples of dehumanization and the psychological influences behind them. Have them come back to their lists: What other factors may drive us toward dehumanization? What ideas can be used to recognize the humanity in all people?

- (5 minutes) PBS Learning Media “Dehumanization of the Enemy” discussing examples from the International Museum of World War II.
- (11 minutes) The Psychology of Dehumanization (by Andy Luttrell) where he discusses the meaning of dehumanization and how researchers can study dehumanization in everyday interactions.
- (60 minutes) The Aspen Ideas Festival includes a panel featuring APS Past President Jennifer Eberhardt, Adam Grant, and John Dickerson discussing dehumanization and human biases.

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References


