

## MIT Open Access Articles

*Reply to Fincher et al.: Conceptual specificity in dehumanization research is a feature, not a bug*

The MIT Faculty has made this article openly available. **Please share** how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

**Citation:** Rai, Tage S., Piercarlo Valdesolo, and Jesse Graham. "Reply to Fincher et Al.: Conceptual Specificity in Dehumanization Research Is a Feature, Not a Bug." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 115, no. 15 (March 22, 2018): E3331–E3332.

**As Published:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1802004115>

**Publisher:** National Academy of Sciences (U.S.)

**Persistent URL:** <http://hdl.handle.net/1721.1/118868>

**Version:** Final published version: final published article, as it appeared in a journal, conference proceedings, or other formally published context

**Terms of Use:** Article is made available in accordance with the publisher's policy and may be subject to US copyright law. Please refer to the publisher's site for terms of use.





REPLY TO FINCHER ET AL.:

# Conceptual specificity in dehumanization research is a feature, not a bug

Tage S. Rai<sup>a,1</sup>, Piercarlo Valdesolo<sup>b</sup>, and Jesse Graham<sup>c</sup>

Fincher et al. (1) argue that our conceptualization of dehumanization as “the failure to engage in social cognition of other human minds” (2) is too narrow. Importantly, Fincher et al. (1) do not dispute our actual findings. They agree that reduced perception of mental and emotional states in victims generates apathy that enables harm for instrumental gain, while recognition of those same states may be required to harm victims to satisfy moral motives (2). Instead, the substance of Fincher et al.’s (1) critique is that we fail to investigate broader, vaguely defined dimensions of dehumanization that could conceivably be related to moral violence. However, we consider our conceptual specificity and tight operationalization of dehumanization to be a feature of our research, not a bug.

Our definition (2) fails to capture “all forms of dehumanization” as it has been used colloquially and in prior research. But that is because dehumanization research has been muddled by overly broad and imprecise definitions that potentially confound distinguishable psychological processes (3). For example, while Fincher et al. (1) state that “humanness involves more than just thinking and feeling,” they never provide a clearly specified definition for the psychological processes that constitute dehumanization. It is not enough to state that dehumanization occurs when people refer to others as “pigs,” “brutes,” and “snakes.” These are behavioral outputs of an underlying psychological process, not the psychological process itself. While comparisons to animals and body parts may reflect the denial of human attributes, they may also reflect insults intended to shame and humiliate victims that require the recognition of human attributes (what is the point of taunting

someone by calling them a rat if you actually think they are one?) (4–7).

We agree with Fincher et al. (1) that studies of atrocities should examine both attributions of animal essences and mental state denial. But teasing these processes apart and understanding the distinct role that dehumanization plays in conflict can only be accomplished with the kind of conceptual specificity and “narrow” scientific operationalizations that Fincher et al. are arguing against. Only by specifying and limiting the psychological mechanisms that comprise dehumanization can progress be made. For example, our model (2) predicts that dehumanization may be most important for indirect, structural violence against strangers that is enabled by indifference rather than direct, personal violence in existing relationships that is motivated by antipathy. It also raises new questions about how dynamic instrumental and moral motivational processes are before, during, and after an aggressive act (8–10).

Fincher et al. (1) close their commentary by suggesting that we must incorporate “the full complexities of . . . dehumanization” by “mapping different forms of dehumanization to different classes of outcomes” to “capture the inhumanity in denying humanity.” But collapsing mental state denial, mental state recognition, comparisons to animals, and “a depraved moral sensibility” together within the category of dehumanization creates a confusing map with fuzzy borders. Drawing precise boundaries around distinguishable entities is the best guide for future research and reveals that some of the worst atrocities originate from the recognition, rather than the denial, of humanity.

**1** Fincher KM, Kteily NS, Bruneau EG (2018) Our humanity contains multitudes: Dehumanization is more than overlooking mental capacities. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 115:E3329–E3330.

**2** Rai TS, Valdesolo P, Graham J (2017) Dehumanization increases instrumental violence, but not moral violence. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 114:8511–8516.

<sup>a</sup>Sloan School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA 02139; <sup>b</sup>Department of Psychology, Claremont McKenna College, Claremont, CA 91711; and <sup>c</sup>David Eccles School of Business, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT 84112

Author contributions: T.S.R. designed research; T.S.R. performed research; P.V. contributed new reagents/analytic tools; T.S.R. analyzed data; and T.S.R., J.G., and P.V. wrote the paper.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Published under the [PNAS license](#).

<sup>1</sup>To whom correspondence should be addressed. Email: tage@mit.edu.

Published online March 22, 2018.

- 3 Haslam N, Loughnan S (2014) Dehumanization and infrahumanization. *Annu Rev Psychol* 65:399–423.
- 4 Manne K (2016) Humanism: A critique. *Soc Theory Pract* 42:389–415.
- 5 Appiah A (2008) *Experiments in Ethics* (Harvard Univ Press, Cambridge, MA).
- 6 Bloom P (November 27, 2017) The root of all cruelty. *The New Yorker*, pp 74–77.
- 7 Rai TS (2015) Corporations are cyborgs: Organizations elicit anger but not sympathy when they can think but cannot feel. *Organ Behav Hum Decis Process* 126:18–26.
- 8 Rai TS, Fiske AP (2011) Moral psychology is relationship regulation: Moral motives for unity, hierarchy, equality, and proportionality. *Psychol Rev* 118:57–75.
- 9 Rai TS, Fiske AP (2012) Beyond harm, intention, and dyads: Relationship regulation, virtuous violence, and metarelational morality. *Psychol Inq* 23:189–193.
- 10 Fiske AP, Rai TS (2014) *Virtuous Violence: Hurting and Killing to Create, Sustain, End, and Honor Social Relationships* (Cambridge Univ Press, Cambridge, UK).