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Abstract

Dehumanization is a complex, relational and subjective phenomenon. Studies on it primarily focus on how it enables abuse in the midst of conflict, or how it shapes perceptions of others. Scholars, however, have not deconstructed it into components. The current article breaks down dehumanization into three components: elements, characteristics, and dimensions. It is hoped that the discussion of the connection between the three can encourage additional discussions on how each of the components contributes to dehumanization and how that can help towards undermining it. Until the phenomenon is understood from its most basic to its most elaborate parts, undermining dehumanization as a means to securing positive peace will remain challenging. The components came to the fore through the content analysis of dehumanization in anecdotes from survivors of the Holocaust. The latter study looked into the use of non-human referents applied to humans or their lived experiences. The findings were additionally considered in light of the literature on perpetrators and of samples that matched search criteria but were not deemed dehumanizing.

Keywords: *dehumanization, Holocaust, human-dog relation, labeling/euphemisms, propaganda, systems theory*

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Abstract

Dehumanization is a complex, relational and subjective phenomenon. Studies on it primarily focus on how it enables abuse in the midst of conflict, or how it shapes perceptions of others. Scholars, however, have not deconstructed it into components. The current article breaks down dehumanization into three components: elements, characteristics, and dimensions. It is hoped that the discussion of the connection between the three can encourage additional discussions on how each of the components contributes to dehumanization and how that can help towards undermining it. Until the phenomenon is understood from its most basic to its most elaborate parts, undermining dehumanization as a means to securing positive peace will remain challenging. The components came to the fore through the content analysis of dehumanization in anecdotes from survivors of the Holocaust. The latter study looked into the use of non-human referents applied to humans or their lived experiences. The findings were additionally considered in light of the literature on perpetrators and of samples that matched search criteria but were not deemed dehumanizing.

Introduction

“The Components of Dehumanization” distinguishes between three parts of dehumanization: elements, characteristics, and dimensions. The need to make a distinction between them first emerged during a literature review on the phenomenon and the analysis of anecdotes of survivors of the Holocaust aimed at studying the dynamics of dehumanization (dissertation research – Luna, 2014). The discussion of the terms presented throughout the article is aimed at pinpointing the complexities of a phenomenon that is multi-layered, though not often

acknowledged as such, relational in nature and dependent on individual, group and contextual idiosyncrasies and subjectivities. It is believed that until dehumanization is understood and deconstructed from its most basic components to its most complex dynamics it will be challenging to neutralize it. Embedded in the values of a society, dehumanization can undermine the existence of social justice in positive peace. It is thus hoped that the current article will encourage further discussions on how the different parts of the phenomenon are connected to one another and to other phenomena.

Dehumanization and Positive Peace

Studies on conflict dynamics show that dehumanization undermines ways of viewing that have moral implications (e.g. Haslam, 2006; Hinton, 1996; Leyens, 2009; Scheck, 2006; Uvin, 1997). These moral implications determine what is good and bad, acceptable and non-acceptable towards an in-group versus an out-group. By framing others as something other than human, the dehumanizer challenges their sense of individuality, identity and community (Kelman, 1973), enables their moral exclusion and group discrimination (Opatow, Gerson, & Woodside, 2005), and psychologically conditions the abuser to morally disengage from this “non-human” (Bandura, 1999) in order to justify violence and abuse (Stanton, 1998).

Dehumanization is thus present in ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. The phenomenon is embedded in language (e.g. insults and propaganda), emotions (e.g. anger, compassion, indifference), ideology (e.g. Nazi pseudoscientific ideas of Aryans as a superior race and Jews as sub-humans), psychological conditioning (e.g. using views of a non-human other to justify abuse), behavior (e.g. beatings, exclusionary attitudes that marginalize someone or a group), laws (e.g. the Nuremberg laws of 1935 that limited the rights of Jews under the Third Reich), and the various institutions of society (i.e. family, religion, government, education, and the economy) that affect interpersonal relations (e.g. Dower, 1986; Hiebert, 2008; Müller, 2007; Scheck, 2006). Furthermore, Leyens and colleagues (e.g. Paladino et al., 2002) have shown that dehumanization can also be present in mild ways that individuals may not be aware of, a state termed “infrahumanization” (Leyens, 2009, p. 808).

The scope of the areas and institutions that dehumanization has an impact on means that it can affect interpersonal, institutional, and structural types of violence (Barak, 2003). The immediate consequence of this is the undermining of social justice within a society that

challenges the existence of positive peace. Positive peace is present when the values, attitudes and institutions of a society support and enable social, economic and political justice and promote and enforce their protection for all groups within it (Diamond & McDonald, 1996).

Dehumanization, to assure positive peace, cannot be neutralized until the concept is clarified and deconstructed. It is not clear from the literature how the different parts of dehumanization work with one another, what these are, similarities or differences, and the relevance of each. The issue is complicated by a misuse of terms that are associated, sometimes interchangeably, with the word “dehumanization” – such as humiliation, degradation, animalization, and labeling – that create confusion about how the phenomenon is unique from other phenomena (e.g. Prescott, 2010).

The Components

In a dissertation study of 451 anecdotes from 74 survivors of the Holocaust, the application of non-human references to experiences as potential indicators of dehumanizing situations were thematically analyzed. The content of these experiences related pieces that were relevant to them, were expressed at times as dehumanizing by the survivors, and were interpreted by the researcher as components of a dehumanizing experience. On their own, these components do not have to be dehumanizing, but their combination can result in the experience or perception of dehumanization.

The distinction that the individual components are not exclusively dehumanizing but can stand on their own as part of other phenomena is important. It highlights how every aspect of society is interconnected (systems theory) as all the different parts have an impact on the others. Therefore, when considering how to actively undermine dehumanization through education initiatives an awareness of these individual parts may provide a place to start. In addition, it shows that the experience by a victim of dehumanization and the intent to dehumanize are dependent on how the various components are meant, interpreted, and understood as dehumanizing by the parties involved (i.e. the dehumanizer, the dehumanized, and the third party – in this case, the researcher). The following anecdote describing a concentration camp experience by Birnholtz (1982) can help illustrate this; the non-human references are italicized:

So my brother was hiding out this boy, was hiding out this boy and uh, and in the barracks, and the German, Stiglitz, found out that he hid him. So he took him to the back and he gave my brother twenty-five beatings on his back with a stick. And uh, this

Stiglitz, if he saw a man walking, if he saw a man walking he would say--and he was walking with a big German shepherd dog. He said, "*Mensch, dem Hund.*" *The dog he would call person and that person would be a dog.* He would say to him--if he didn't like the way you bowed to me, the way you said hello, he would say "Mensch, ??? Hund." That means, "Dog eat up that man."

The anecdote contains an insult (calling the inmate a dog, which is part of linguistic constructions), descriptions of behavior (abuse), references to context (in the camp), the name of the abuser (important as an identifier of the perpetrator), his nationality (German), other individuals (inmates) and beings (the shepherd dog). Embedded in these are certain dynamics such as the German overseer as an agent, the inmates as patients (i.e. lacking agency to stop abuse), issues of power (of overseer over inmates; limited power by the inmates), control (of inmates over their own bodies; of guard over the inmates; of guard over the dog), and face (inability of inmates to restore face when they are insulted through references to non-humans). In addition, there is the historical human relation to dogs who were the first animals to be domesticated by humans (Morey, 2010; Price, 2002) and used for various purposes such as behavioral compliance of other beings (e.g. cattle, institutionalized humans such as prison inmates or in this case concentration camp inmates). The human-dog relation influences how the Jewish inmate as a mistreated human is equated to a non-human, spoken to and behaved towards compared to the dog.

The glue that holds these components together is the assigning and interpreting of their meaning as dehumanizing. Meaning was proposed to be the overlapping function of dehumanization for perpetrators, as shown in the literature on perpetrators and dehumanization that acknowledges the phenomenon as a means to justify abuse, and for the victims who used non-human references to show how as humans they were treated and lived as non-humans, and to justify behavior that was morally reprehensible outside of the camp environment (e.g. stealing from the dead). What the function of dehumanization is for survivors is not a subject found addressed in depth in the literature. The terms elements, characteristics, and dimensions as components of dehumanization helped to explain and distinguish how these individual parts relate to one another.

Elements.

Elements are defined here as the individual parts in an exchange or situation that can range from units of verbal and body language (e.g. words, postures) to interpretations of a combination of those units as a type of exchange (e.g. as in humiliation) that may or may not be dehumanizing. They came to the fore as a concept associated with dehumanization as I deconstructed the anecdotes in the original study for thematic analysis. I felt I needed to find a way to visualize, summarize and explain the layers of meaning encountered. I decided to capture them at the level of “realms” as illustrated in Figure 1.

The tangible and material realm contains the physical and visual that draws attention to an interaction that seems unnatural (i.e. odd or out of place) between two human beings or groups. Unburied corpses; mutilated corpses (burned, cannibalized, defiled by other means); emaciated, tortured, and disfigured live bodies; movement that deviates from the natural movement of the individual under healthy conditions; beatings; unsuitable living and environmental conditions (fenced enclosures, no bedding, no lavatory, no eating utensils, unsuitable food); dominant versus submissive postures or body language; visual symbols that differentiate between individuals and groups (signs, clothing, colors, written documents/buildings) are examples found in the survivors’ interviews.

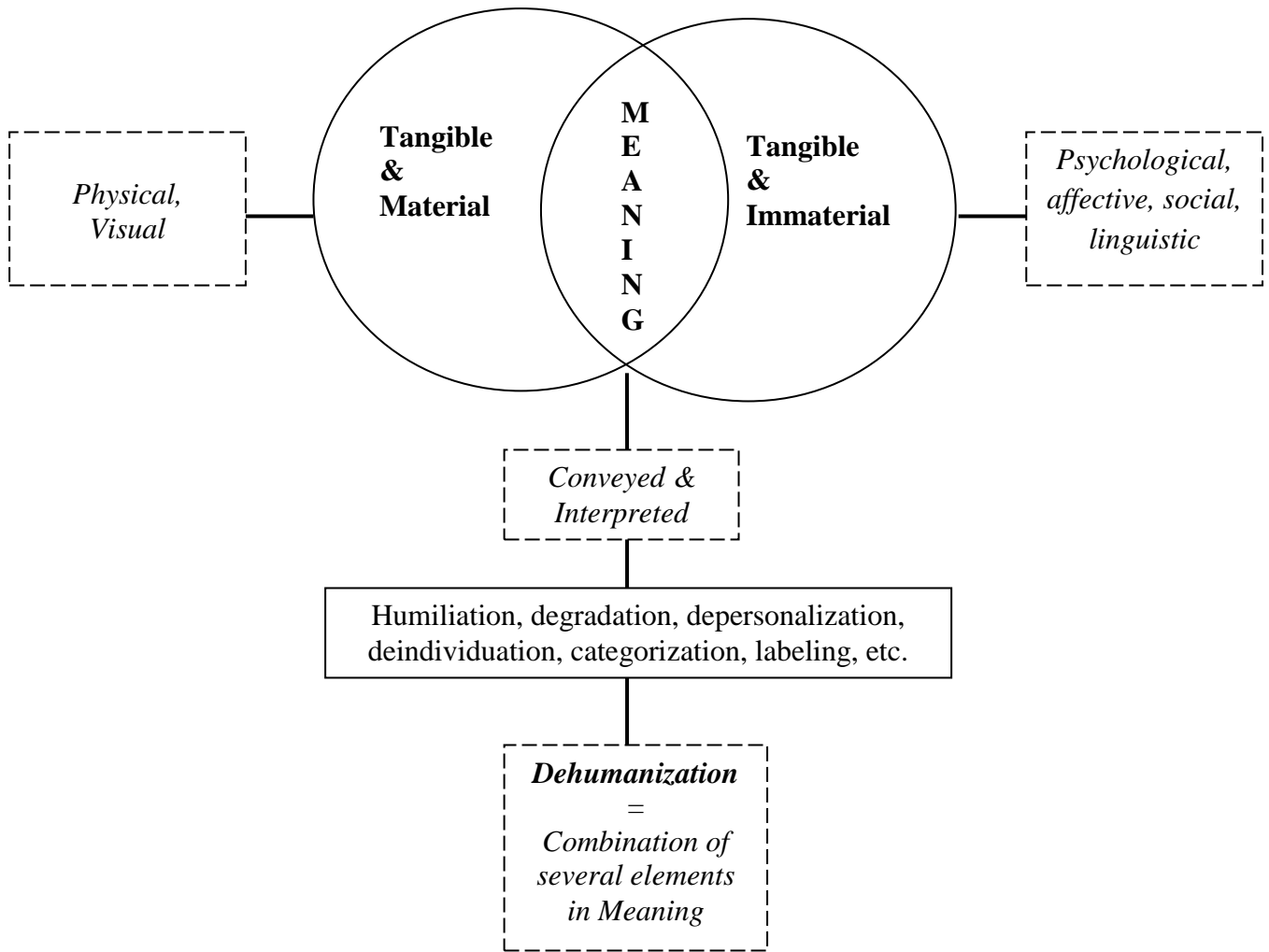


Figure 1:
The elements of dehumanization

Tangible and material are noted as connected but not equal elements of the same realm. Tangibility describes what is perceived and seen; material is the physical, what can be touched. A man, in a military uniform, with fists raised, standing over another who is laying on the ground, dressed in rags, dirty and bloody, with arms raised over and palms away from face is an example of material. Understanding the material as a situation in which the uniformed man is beating or has beaten the man laying on the ground, who is shielding himself from the blows, represents what is tangible about the example.

Tangibility provides a layer of meaning to the material, and links it to the immaterial realm. This realm contains the psychological, affective, social, and linguistic aspects of interaction; it is the combination of all strategies for meaning making within the individual that can manifest outwardly in interaction: spoken language, societal mores, culture, emotions, and thoughts. The uniformed man in the prior example, which is loosely based on a combination of similar situations described in the anecdotes reviewed (e.g. Ferber, 2001, on getting kicked, beaten, and stepped on while on the ground by a German overseer), can call the other a “pig” but the word is not seen floating in the air as he says it. The intention and emotions behind the expression used by the uniformed man are not visual though visual cues (e.g. facial expressions) can hint at them, and can be interpreted differently by onlookers (e.g. frustration or aggression) in the same way that their understanding by and effect on the man on the ground as an insult is not spelled out in a material manner. Neither are the reasons behind the physical interaction obvious and visual without additional (material and immaterial) information provided.

Dehumanization, when examples in the testimonials are considered, is then what happens when multiple elements of the tangible/material and tangible/immaterial overlap in a third realm – meaning (i.e. what is conveyed and interpreted). Several of the latter’s elements are combined in dehumanization into one instance that is deemed dehumanizing by one or several parties (perpetrators, victims, and third parties – bystanders, or observers removed in time and place). When one considers these elements in light of the dynamics that affects them, the characteristics of dehumanization come to the fore.

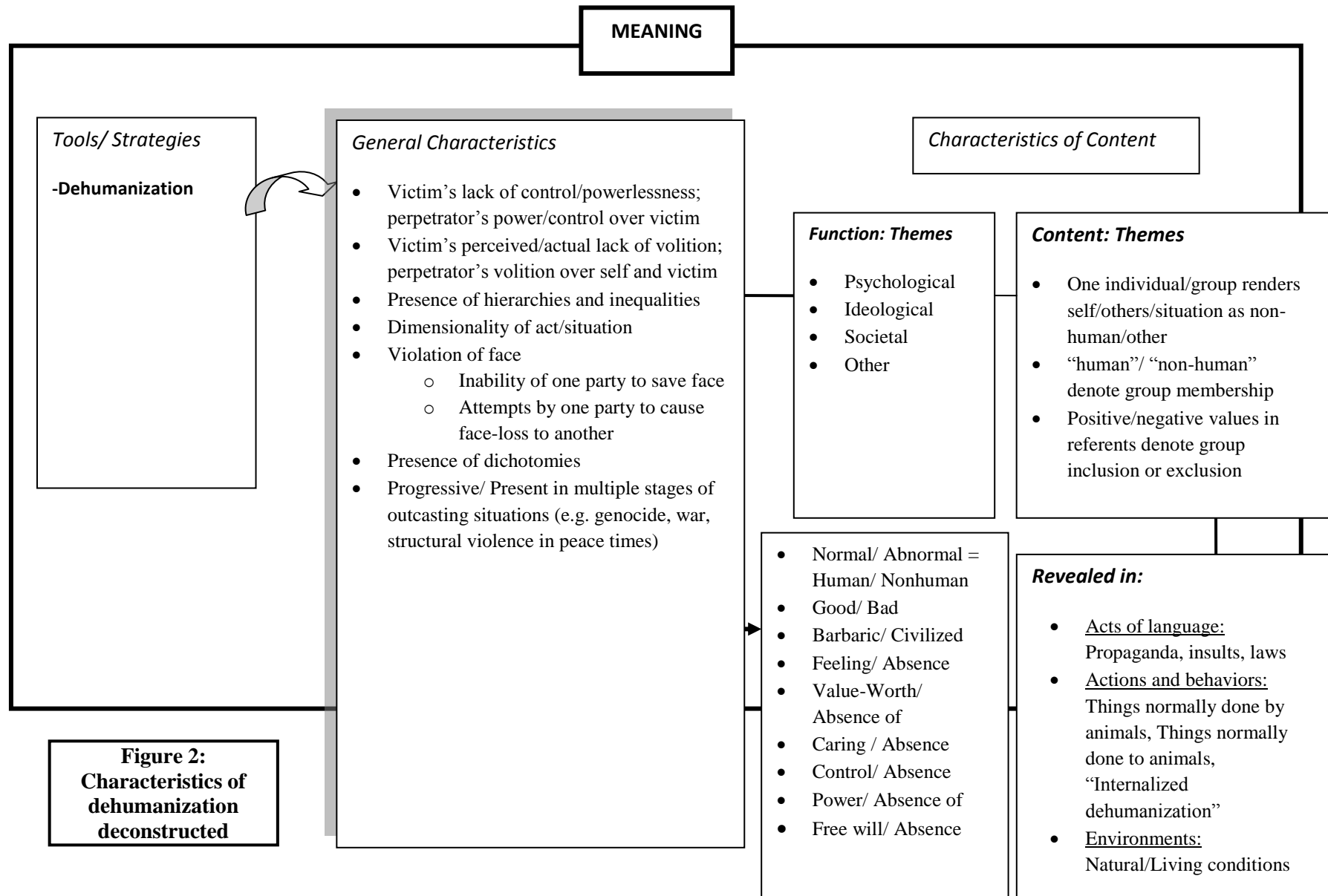
Characteristics.

The characteristics of dehumanization reviewed in the current section were initially derived from the thematic analysis of anecdotes that were deemed dehumanizing. They were then tested on anecdotes that were too subjective for a clear assessment (those containing

insults), and on anecdotes that were not considered dehumanizing although they matched search criteria (i.e. the contained non-human codes applied to humans). The characteristics were useful in differentiating and explaining why some anecdotes and not others were dehumanizing.

The characteristics were then compared to topoi found in the literature on perpetrators and visually reduced into a model that could show how they connected to one another (Figure 2). The topoi in the literature on perpetrators were noted as buzzwords, shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Buzzwords in Literature Mentioning Dehumanization
<i>Animals/Disease names and language – Appearance – Degradation – Discrimination – Evil-Bad/Good – Human/Subhuman – Human dignity/Human nature – Humanity/Inhuman – Humiliation – Identity – Individual/Community/Collective – Labels/Euphemisms/Epithets/Propaganda – Less than/Inferior to/Superior to– Moral: obligations/responsibility/qualms – Objectification – Racism – Stigmatized – Stereotypes – Threat – Us/Them – Worth</i>



**Figure 2:
Characteristics of
dehumanization
deconstructed**

References to the dehumanized as “less than,” for instance, are found in Anderson (2010) and Cohen (1996). This theme in the perpetrator literature was connected to the concepts of hierarchies and inequalities in the general characteristics of dehumanization. The first is seen as fixed (e.g. Aryans above Jews or animals) and shaped by views of world order, while the second is based on values and can flux. Inequalities were defined within the context of the research as any disparity between two things/people/beings that is imbued with positive and negative associations that make one preferable over the other. In other words, the two do not stand an equal chance of been selected thus creating inequality for the entity that is perceived in a negative light (Luna, 2014).

Labeling/euphemisms and propaganda (Ginsburg, 2012; Stanton, 2012) were found to be connected to the violation of face and dichotomies that can be found in language such as insults, ideology, and propaganda. In addition, concerns about the morality of actions were found in perpetrator related texts and survivor anecdotes. For the former, moral concerns involve the need to justify abusive behavior/actions not deemed moral or to delineate group inclusion or exclusion on the basis of moral associations with ideas of human and non-human; for the latter, it involved behavior or conditions that were not seen as appropriate or suitable outside of the extreme environment of the camps or ghettos (e.g. Kelman, 2001, and Stanton, 1998, on moral exclusion that facilitates abuse; Binke, 1997, on stealing from corpses in the camps).

Two types of characteristics were noted in the survivor anecdotes and the literature on dehumanizers: general and content. General characteristics give shape to the dehumanizing exchange or situation; they do not change, but the combination of which ones are present in an exchange does. Content characteristics, on the other hand, are those associated with the human and non-human references or ideas used in insults, propaganda, behavior, thematic function of dehumanization that satisfies the need for a specific type of meaning (e.g. justification of abuse, justification of morally reprehensible acts, keeping a distinction between human and non-human), among others. Content characteristics do change since content is influenced by regional, religious, political, and other types of values that shape how in-group and out-groups are framed and viewed. The content themes noted in Figure 2 (e.g. Things normally done to animals) were based on the analysis of animal references, which was the focus of the original study. Since content changes depending on the non-human referents considered, these themes may change as other thematic references (e.g. devils or parasites) are incorporated.

The example from the previous section, based loosely on the anecdotes of the survivors, can help to illustrate how characteristics and elements work together to understand a situation experienced as dehumanizing by a survivor and interpreted as a dehumanizing by the researcher. As noted, spoken language (the insult), body language, clothing, identification of the exchange as a beating, etc. show the elements in the exchange. When the insult “pig” is slurred at the attacked, the man on the ground is powerless to stop what is happening to the self. The attacker has the power to make the beating happen. The beating has taken place because, one may learn, the attacker sees the attacked as “less than,” the attacked identifies the intentions behind the attack as based on such views, or the attacked feels like “less than” a man, object or being. These descriptions are representative of the characteristics of dehumanization related to power, inequality, and hierarchy. In addition, they show the presence of dichotomies, which are opposites that serve to characterize those they are associated with such as human/non-human, power/less on the basis of group membership and identity.

Differentiating between elements and characteristics and how they conform to one another shows the complexity of dehumanization as a phenomenon. Furthermore, it shows the need to understand it at different levels. These different levels are referred to here as the “dimensions” of dehumanization.

Dimensions.

Dimensions are the different and multiple sides of dehumanization as a phenomenon, as if one looked at it in 3-D. They include the characteristics and the areas of life affected as described by the survivors, or as impacted by the dehumanizer, with the elements acting as the building blocks. “Areas of life” was a thematic category derived from the anecdotes reviewed that helped to visually reduce the data into a table containing them along with the stages of the Holocaust. They included descriptions of behavior (e.g. manners), settings (e.g. housing, barracks, bathroom), language (e.g. insults/cursing), activities (e.g. education, work), and various situations (e.g. beatings, arrival to ghetto/concentration camp).

In the assessment of anecdotes it was noted that dehumanizing anecdotes tended to include multiple dimensions. Anecdotes where the non-human referent could be minimally associated with an area of life and characteristics were usually not dehumanizing. The use of “pig” as an insult exemplifies this [references to non-humans are in *Italics*]:

And we had some men who snored at night and then nobody could sleep. And then one of the women was very nervous, hysterical, she woke, we woke him up. He apologized and went back to sleep and snored. And *this woman cursed him that he's a pig, he's an animal* (Berki, 1983).

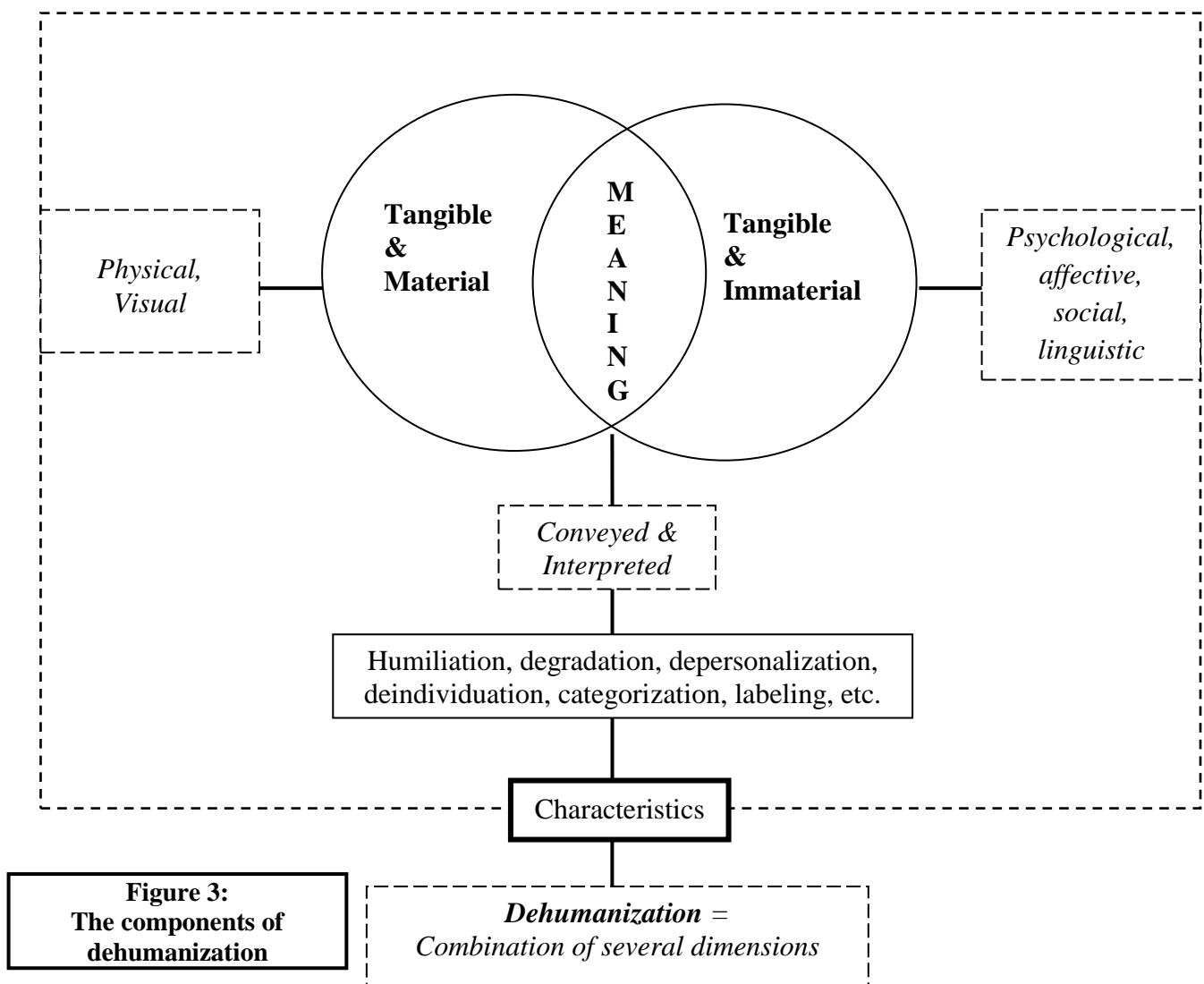
... Then we went outside and they put outside every people, so many people and I see in the line my sister. And I stand up like this and I said in Yiddish “???” in Yiddish the name and she saw me, “Oh my sister!” and she wanted to go to me. And when I star...I step, I want to go to my sister, is coming two policemen--he beat me up. “*Schwein Jude* you wanna, you will...” I forgot what they said--I wanna--no, eh, I wanna run away from the, from the line? I said, “No this is my sister, I want to see my sister.” He said, “There's not sisters, not brothers, not mothers, nothing. You have to go in this line from the right, left, right, left.” Okay. And she stayed, she cried and I'm crying. She went one camp not too far from me and I went other one camp. She went Parschnitz and I went Gabersdorf (Greenspan, 1983).

In the first example, there are no power imbalances, no inequality or hierarchy issues, there is no dichotomy and there is no inability by the snorer to restore face upon hearing the insult. Both insulter and insultee are members of the same group, forced into the same overcrowded and difficult conditions of the ghetto by Nazis, and snoring is not something abnormal by human standards (though it is bothersome) that can reflect other types of negative-positive dichotomies. The association in the insult recalled by Berki (1983) is metaphoric and based on onomatopoeic associations referencing only one area of life through the insult: the snoring of the man made him sound like a pig and an animal, but the sound is not based on his view as a non-human, embedded with the other characteristics, by the woman.

The lack of dimensionality in the first example contrasts with its presence in the second. Greenspan's (1983) experience is of the insult “Jewish pig” taking place along with a beating during deportation. It shows two areas of life (insults and beatings) in connection to the physical power exerted by the policemen who deport and abuse the survivor who is unable to stop both; it similarly shows the lack of control over the self by the survivor and the control exerted by the Nazis. Besides these dichotomies there is the human/non-human dichotomy, as the insult informs the worldview about and associated behavior against Jews as other than human since beatings are seen by some as acceptable tools used in the behavioral modification and compliance of non-

humans. Worldviews of Jews as something other than human are further shown in the statement of the policeman that for the deportees “There's not sisters, not brothers, not mothers, nothing” from that point on (Greenspan, 1983). This dismembering of the family reflects Kelman’s (1973) explanation of dehumanization as a denial of community and identity as humans that enables abuse and quiets down moral concerns in the perpetrator. There is thus depth and dimensionality in Greenspan’s account.

Considering the relationship between elements, characteristics and dimensions, Figure 1 is reconfigured as follows in Figure 3 to illustrate their interconnection.



Summary

The discussion presented in this article proposed the deconstruction of dehumanization into three components based on the analysis of anecdotes from survivors of the Holocaust who used non-human references to describe their experiences. Elements are the basic parts in an exchange or situation (e.g. words). The characteristics of dehumanization shape, structure and give meaning to the content of dehumanization. Dimensions show the complexity and depth of dehumanization as an experienced phenomenon. Individually any of these three components may or may not be dehumanizing but their combined presence helps in the assessment and explanation of dehumanization.

The distinction between the three components highlights that the seeds of dehumanization are present in everyday human interaction, language, and ways of seeing that are not always dehumanizing. Their understanding can help to undermine the phenomenon as it is tackled at its most elementary levels. Since dehumanization is a value based phenomenon that affects interpersonal, institutional, and structural types of violence, minimizing it by addressing its components may help in the securing of positive peace within a society. In addition, it can help explain how it is connected to other elements of interaction such as humiliation, degradation, and language to which dehumanization is often connected to but not always differentiated or explained in academic texts.

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