

Dehumanization and the Role of Biological Racism in Politics

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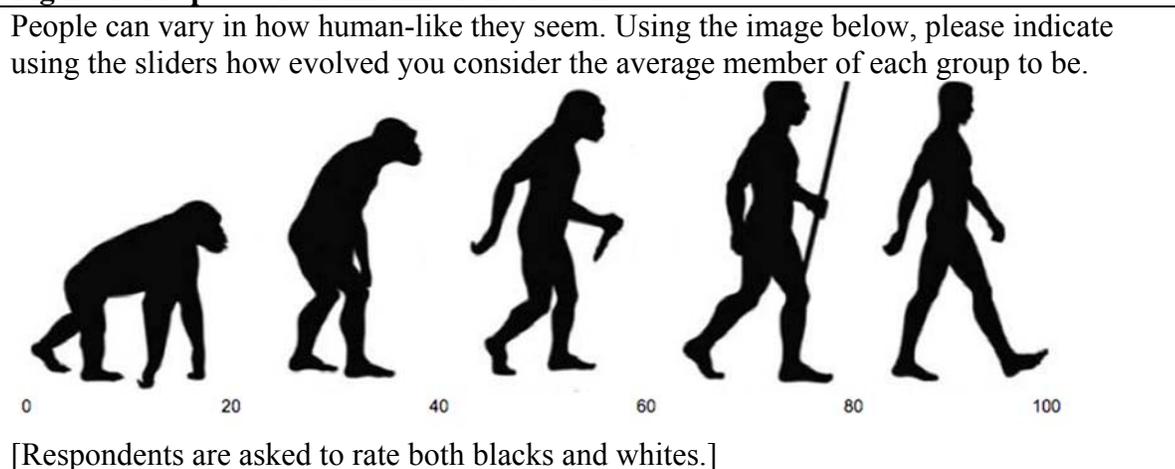
Overview: Research on racial attitudes is rife with disagreement. Scholars debate the very nature of contemporary racial attitudes, the way in which they are measured, and the extent to which they are implicit or explicit. At the same time, however, as Hutchings (2015) writes, there is a “near consensus among scholars that more modern forms of prejudice have generally displaced ‘old-fashioned’ forms of racial bias.” We propose a two-question battery, which measures a concept that challenges this conventional wisdom: items that capture white *dehumanization* of blacks. Specifically, these questions measure an individual level propensity among whites to view blacks as less than fully human – a phenomenon that we argue is widespread and has significant implications for our broader understanding of racial conflict in the U.S. In support of this proposal, we present analyses from a pilot study of a convenience sample of white Americans. These analyses show that (1) substantial proportions of whites rate blacks as less evolved than they rate whites; (2) that dehumanized attitudes are correlated with traditional factors in ways we should expect, suggesting that this measure has high construct validity); and, (3) even after controlling for standard measures of prejudice against blacks, dehumanization of blacks is powerfully associated with a wide range of white political preferences, including approval of Obama’s performance as president, support for punitive criminal justice policies, and opposition to policies intended to aid blacks. The dehumanization measure proposed here therefore promises to inform not only the study of core topics in political science, such as candidate evaluation and public opinion, but also research across the social sciences examining the nature and consequences of racial attitudes in the contemporary United States.

Theory: The practice of whites dehumanizing blacks, not surprisingly, has its origins in American slavery. Not only did the system inherently treat blacks as less than human, but the legacy of slavery is wrought with images and descriptions of blacks that compare them to animals, describing black men in particular as savages, brutes, and beasts. Today, the dehumanization of blacks has taken additional

forms. We know that African American boys as young as ten are less likely to be viewed as children than equally young white children (Goff et al. 2014). Furthermore, associations of blacks with apes, chimps, and monkeys are pervasive and quite apparent in historical and present-day popular discourse. In the mid-19th century, depictions of blacks as apes went hand in hand with scientific racism, where blacks were viewed as “less evolved” than whites. Despite the consensus that racism of this flavor has nearly disappeared, we see similar associations made constantly in the present day. Most recently, for example, the hashtag “#chimpout” began trending on twitter as tweeters used it to describe the black individuals who were protesting the grand jury decision involving Darren Wilson.

Scholars have also provided significant evidence that this type of animalistic dehumanization occurs readily and implicitly. A number of studies have used implicit association tests to demonstrate that whites subconsciously associate blacks with apes (Goff et al. 2008). These associations have profound consequences; when primed with ape words, whites seem more likely to condone violence against blacks. Whites are also more likely to attribute superhuman qualities to blacks, yet another way of denying their humanity. And such attributions are not necessarily positive, like when they lead whites to believe that black people experience less pain than whites (Waytz, Hoffman, and Trawalter 2011).

Figure 1. Proposed Dehumanization Measure



Pilot Study Design: On August 18-26, 2015, we conducted a pilot survey on a convenience sample of non-Hispanic white adults recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk (MTurk; $N = 770$). It is worth

noting that our sample is far younger, identifies as less politically conservative, and is much less racially resentful than is the average nationally—precisely the types of whites we would least expect to dehumanize blacks.¹ Thus, we submit that any evidence of dehumanization we find here is likely an *under*-estimation of the distribution and relationships we ought to observe among a nationally representative sample. Subjects were first asked a series of questions about their political preferences which serve as the dependent variables in the analyses. The first set of political preferences consists of questions about criminal justice policies or policy proposals: the death penalty and the extension of voting rights to all felons. Next, subjects were asked their opinions about two redistributive policies: government aid to blacks and affirmative action for blacks. Subjects were also asked whether they approved or disapproved of Obama’s performance as president.

Next subjects were asked a series of racial attitude questions. The first of these is the key independent variable of interest, blatant dehumanization, adapted from Kteily et al. (2015) and seen in the figure above. Subjects view a graphical depiction of the “Ascent of Man,” in which various silhouettes reflect popular perceptions of the evolution of humans, beginning with a distant ancestor reminiscent of an ape, moving to a Neanderthal-type figure holding a spear, and concluding with a modern human. Under this figure is an instruction asking subjects to rate blacks and whites with respect to “how evolved” each group is.

Additional racial attitude questions followed the dehumanization measure, including a standard four-item “racial resentment” battery (Kinder and Dale-Riddle 2012) and “old-fashioned racism” as measured by opposition to interracial marriage (Tesler 2013). Following a measure of “self-monitoring,” which is trait propensity to conform to social desirability pressures (Berinsky and Lavine 2012), partisanship and ideological self-identification were measured. The survey concluded by asking

¹ The mean age of our respondents is 36 (compared to 45-49 among 2012 ANES respondents and 49 according to the 2014 Census). 23% of our respondents lean or identify as strongly conservative (compared to 44% among the 2012 ANES sample and 48% according to the 2014 Census). The average score on the racial resentment scale (rescaled to range from zero to one) among our MTurk sample is .52, compared to a mean score of .69 among whites on the ANES.

about demographics: race, ethnicity, age, and gender. Due to a technical error in the survey, three common demographic variables, education, income, and region, were not measured.

Pilot Study Results: While the *most common* response for both whites and blacks is “100,” at the most evolved end of the scale, whites and blacks are not rated equally: 70.05% of our respondents rate whites at 100 and 62.7% of our respondents rate blacks at 100. The mean rating of whites is 95.2 (95% confidence interval: 94.4 – 96.0), while the mean rating of blacks is 88.84 (95% confidence interval: 87.3 – 90.4); a t-test reveals that these means differ statistically at a $p < 0.00$ threshold of significance. On average, that is, our respondents rate whites as more evolved than they rate blacks.

We construct the key independent variable of interest, blatant dehumanization, through a difference measure, following previous research in political science examining racial stereotypes (Hutchings 2009; Kinder and Mendelberg 1995; Krupnikov and Piston 2015). We subtract the score the respondent gave blacks from the score the respondent gave whites, in order to account for respondent characteristics such as a tendency to rate *any* group positively (or negatively) on the scale. The difference measure controls for this tendency, allowing us to measure whether, and the extent to which, the respondent views blacks to be less evolved than whites.

The modal value of this variable is an equivalent rating for both whites and blacks; 71.5% of respondents rate these two groups identically on the evolution scale. That said, 25.2% of respondents rate whites as more evolved than they rate blacks, while the remaining 3.3% of respondents rate blacks as more evolved than they rate whites. This finding runs in direct contradiction to pronouncements of the death of biological racism; even in a sample that is skewed so young and liberal that it scores on average at the neutral point on the racial resentment scale, a full quarter of whites rate blacks as less evolved than whites. We also see substantial variation in *how much less* evolved blacks are perceived to be than whites.

We now analyze the convergent validity of the measure; if it accurately captures dehumanization of blacks, it ought to be associated with standard measures of well-known variables in

predictable ways. Blatant dehumanization should be related to – but, if we are correct, also distinct from – other measures of racial prejudice: here we examine measures of both “new” racism (racial resentment) and “old-fashioned” racism (opposition to interracial marriage). We also expect that white Republicans and conservatives will be more likely than white Democrats and liberals to dehumanize blacks, given the racial agendas of the two major parties and given existing findings that white prejudice against blacks is more common on the right of the political spectrum (e.g., Piston 2010). High self-monitors ought to be less likely to self-report dehumanizing attitudes toward blacks, especially given that existing findings indicate that such folks are less likely to report prejudice using standard measures (Berinsky and Lavine 2012). Finally, it is possible that older whites are more racially prejudiced (Nteta and Greenlee 2013; but see Hutchings 2009) and therefore more likely to dehumanize blacks, and white men may be more likely than white women to dehumanize blacks as well, given their relative susceptibility to explicit forms of prejudice (Hutchings, Walton, and Benjamin 2010).

Table 1. Associations between Dehumanization of Blacks and Standard Variables

	Pairwise correlation coefficient	Significance level
Racial Resentment	0.39	$p < 0.00$
Opposition to Interracial Marriage	0.48	$p < 0.00$
Party ID (Republican)	0.17	$p < 0.00$
Ideological Self-ID (Conservative)	0.23	$p < 0.00$
Self-monitoring	-0.10	$p < 0.01$
Age	-0.01	$p < 0.71$
Gender (Male)	0.12	$p < 0.00$

The results, presented in Table 1, indicate that consistent with expectations, dehumanization is more common among those whites who are: racially prejudiced (according to standard measures), Republican, conservative, less likely to monitor their survey responses, and male. However, dehumanization of blacks is no more common among older whites than among younger whites. These correlations suggest that the measure presented here indeed captures a form of racial prejudice that is only moderately related to prejudice captured by existing measures. Furthermore, while these analyses show that dehumanization of blacks is more common among some social groups than others, it is also

important to note that dehumanization occurs across the social strata in our sample. For example, t-tests indicate that the mean rating on the evolutionary scale for whites is statistically higher than it is for blacks even when we limit our analysis to white Democrats, or white liberals, or white women.

White dehumanization of blacks is important in and of itself, but our primary concern is how it plays out in public life. Here we examine three possible effects; dehumanization may underpin mass support for punitive criminal justice policy, opposition to government efforts to ameliorate racial inequality, and opposition to Barack Obama's presidency. To assess these possibilities, we conduct a series of ordered logistic regressions, which are appropriate since our dependent variables are ordered and categorical. The dependent variables are: (1) opinion about the two criminal justice policies: the death penalty and the extension of voting rights to all felons; (2) opinion about three redistributive policies: affirmative action for blacks, government aid to blacks, and welfare; (3) approval of Obama's presidential performance.

We control for two standard measures of prejudice, racial resentment and opposition to interracial marriage, and we also control for additional variables plausibly correlated with both dehumanization of blacks and our outcome variables: party identification, ideological self-identification, self-monitoring, age, and gender. Given concerns about "garbage can" regressions (Achen 2005), it is important to note that all of the following associations between dehumanization and our dependent variables are sustained – heightened, actually – when specifications are more parsimonious, as in the case of specifications without control variables. Coefficient estimates resulting from these regressions are displayed in Table 2; all statistical tests are one-tailed and all variables are coded from 0 to 1.

Consistent with our expectations, blatant dehumanization of blacks is powerfully associated with a wide range of political preferences. The belief that blacks are less evolved than whites is positively associated with support for the death penalty, opposition to the extension of voting rights for felons, opposition to increased aid to blacks, and disapproval of Obama's presidential performance. No

association is found between dehumanization and opinion about affirmative action, and while the coefficient on dehumanization is in the expected direction in the model of opinion on welfare, it falls short of conventional standards of statistical significance ($p < 0.10$). Even after accounting for typical covariates such as standard conceptions of racial prejudice, party identification, ideology, and demographics, white opinion about race-relevant policy in the United States is tightly bound up with the dehumanization of blacks.

The magnitude of these associations is difficult to ascertain from the table, because ordered logistic regression coefficients are not easily interpreted under any circumstances and also because the distribution of the dehumanization measure is highly skewed. We therefore generate predicted probabilities (plots not shown here) in which control variables are set to their means. Beginning with the death penalty: at the neutral point on the dehumanization scale, at which whites and blacks are rated equally, the predicted probability of the respondent strongly supporting the death penalty is 0.11. At the far end, however, at which whites are rated as fully evolved and blacks are rated as not evolved at all, this predicted probability is nearly tripled, at 0.30. Similarly, movement from the neutral point to the highest possible value of dehumanization is associated with than double the probability of strongly opposing voting rights for felons (from 0.15 to 0.30) and more than double the probability of responding that government should greatly decrease aid to blacks (from 0.10 to 0.23). Finally, the probability of strongly disapproving of Obama's performance as president is also substantially lower for those whites at the neutral point (0.17) than for those at the high end of the dehumanization measure (0.33). In sum, the relationship between dehumanization of blacks and a wide range of white political preferences is not only statistically significant but also large in magnitude.

Table 2. Associations Between Dehumanization of Blacks and White Political Preferences

	Death Penalty	Voting Rights for Felons	Affirmative Action	Aid to Blacks	Welfare	Obama Approval
Dehumanization	3.08*** (0.86)	-1.98** (0.81)	-0.05 (1.05)	-3.00*** (0.96)	-1.20+ (0.87)	-2.96*** (0.92)
Racial Resentment	2.64*** (0.31)	-1.51*** (0.29)	-5.49*** (0.36)	-6.21*** (0.40)	-3.57*** (0.32)	-0.54* (0.32)
Old-Fashioned Racism	-0.20 (0.25)	0.35 (0.24)	-0.18 (0.27)	-0.36 (0.27)	0.20 (0.25)	-0.30 (0.28)
Party ID (Rep.)	0.82** (0.33)	0.12 (0.32)	-0.80* (0.35)	0.61* (0.36)	0.23 (0.33)	-3.67*** (0.37)
Ideology (Cons.)	1.31*** (0.41)	-1.75*** (0.40)	-0.11 (0.43)	-2.81*** (0.45)	-3.92*** (0.43)	-2.53*** (0.44)
Self-Monitoring	-0.25 (0.29)	-0.05 (0.28)	-0.09 (0.31)	-0.54* (0.31)	-0.28 (0.29)	-0.26 (0.31)
Age	-0.08 (0.35)	-0.16 (0.34)	-0.03 (0.36)	-0.46 (0.36)	0.34 (0.34)	0.09 (0.36)
Male	-0.10 (0.13)	0.16 (0.13)	-0.37** (0.14)	-0.04 (0.14)	0.11 (0.14)	0.38** (0.14)
N	764	764	763	764	763	764
Log-likelihood	-1272.49	-1402.77	-1057.76	-921.89	-1132.41	-881.20

*** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; + $p < 0.10$; cell entries are ordered logistic regression coefficients (standard errors in parentheses). Cut points suppressed. All variables are coded from 0 to 1. White respondents only. The column headings indicate dependent variables: higher values indicate greater support for the policy or higher approval for Obama.

Conclusion: The addition of these proposed measures of dehumanization has the potential to add important nuance to our understanding of whites' racial attitudes. Even among our highly skewed convenience sample, we find that our proposed measure captures the concept of dehumanization quite well and among a sizeable portion of respondents: approximately one-quarter of our respondents rate blacks as less evolved than they rate whites. Importantly, this blatant form of dehumanization is strongly associated with opinion about criminal justice policy: those whites who believe blacks to be less evolved are disproportionately likely to support the death penalty, to deny felons the right to vote, and to oppose government measures to aid blacks. They are also less likely to approve of the nation's first black president, Barack Obama. Notably, these relationships between blatant dehumanization and political preferences are sustained even after controlling for standard measures of racial prejudice, including racial resentment, stereotypes, and intolerance for interracial marriage, as well as other typical covariates such as party identification, ideology, and demographics.

The proposed findings have somber and profound implications for scholars' understanding of white prejudice against blacks and its effects in the contemporary United States. We argue that for substantial proportions of whites, prejudice against blacks is more fundamental than scholars typically realize: it is the belief that blacks are not fully human in the first place. And it is precisely these whites who dehumanize blacks who are not only especially likely to deny that blacks deserve government assistance but also especially likely to support state violence against them in the form of the death penalty. After all, these whites perceive state violence against blacks to victimize a lower life form.

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