

It's only human

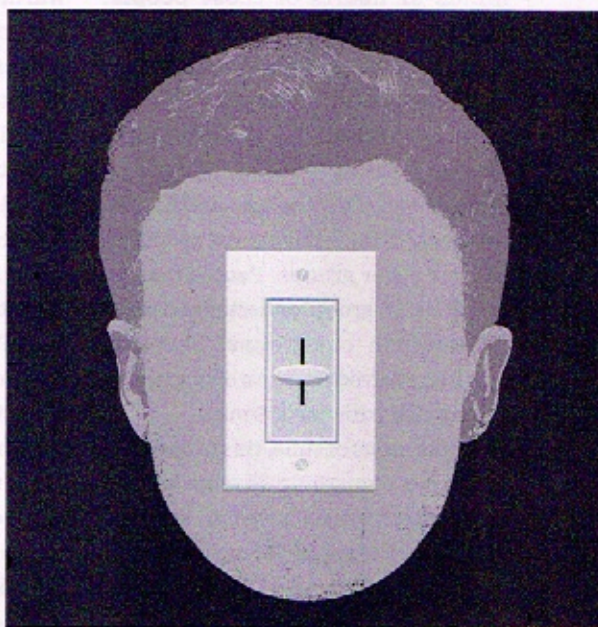
The tendency to dehumanize other people is in our nature.
How can we avoid it?

by FRANK BURES

One day recently, I was driving down a narrow street near my home. In front of me, two cyclists were taking up most of the lane, going — as cyclists tend to do — well below the speed limit. As we rolled along, I got angrier and angrier. Why didn't they get on the bike path next to the road? Why didn't they move over a little so we could pass? *Who were these people?*

Eventually I got around them and cooled off. But I was surprised by my reaction. After all, I'm a cyclist myself, and I have been on the receiving end of drivers' abuse. But at that moment, I did not see myself in those riders. I couldn't imagine what was going on in their heads. They were like an alien species on two wheels. It was as if I had drawn a line between people like me and people like them.

This is a thought process known as "dehumanization," which sounds like something that only happens at Nazi death camps, in Cambodian killing fields, or at roadblocks in Rwanda. But in fact, we draw these kinds of lines



every day, often without any idea that we're doing it.

Nick Haslam, a professor of psychology at the University of Melbourne in Australia, is one of the leading thinkers on dehumanization. To measure how drivers dehumanize cyclists, Haslam and his colleagues surveyed more than 400 people. In one typical result, 55 percent of noncyclists saw cyclists as "less than 100 percent human." (So did 30 percent of cyclists.)

"Some drivers are more willing than others to say that cyclists are more

primitive, less evolved, or more animal-like than other people," Haslam says.

In the early days of research into dehumanization, in an effort to understand how people are able to do horrible things to other people, much of the focus was on ethnic groups. More recent research has shown that dehumanizing attitudes can be aimed at anyone: women, medical patients, immigrants, the mentally ill, homeless people.

Researchers have also established that dehumanization is not an all-or-nothing prospect. There are degrees, even kinds, of dehumanization. What Haslam calls "animalistic" dehumanization is the feeling that members of another group are not as human as we are. We see them as having basic emotions such as joy, anger, fear, and surprise — but not more complicated ones such as pride, admiration, and remorse. We see them as lacking "human essence," or as being a kind of animal that needs to be overseen by those of us who are more evolved.

In Haslam's model, the second

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major form of dehumanization is called “mechanistic” dehumanization, in which we see people as lacking not merely human essence, but human nature itself. We see them not as a lesser version of us, but as something completely different, like a machine or a robot or an empty vessel acting out of cold self-interest.

When we draw these lines between ourselves and others, sometimes we draw them lightly; other times we construct them like an impenetrable wall. It’s as if we had an internal dimmer switch for turning down the humanity of others. The further it is turned down, the harder it is to imagine the minds or hearts of those people. Haslam says there are many reasons we do this. “Sometimes we dehumanize people to make it easier to harm them, but I don’t think this is the most common reason,” he says. “More often it is just one aspect of a general human tendency to favor the groups we belong to over other groups. People tend to see their ‘in-group’ as better and more human than ‘out-groups.’ This may serve an evolved function of promoting strong ties with one’s group.”

In the mists of time, this propensity to see our own group as more human than others would have had survival benefits to a small tribe trying to survive in a hostile world. We don’t live in small tribes anymore, but part of us still wants to find the border of our group, to defend it, to see those inside it as more human than those outside it — even if we know intellectually that this is not the case.

Our ability to dehumanize runs so deep that it can be observed in our brains. In 2006, Princeton University scientists Susan Fiske and Lasana Harris published a study in which they put 22 students into a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machine, which allowed them to view blood flow to and activation of parts of the brain. While the students were in

the imager, they were shown either objects or photos of people who appear to fit certain social stereotypes, such as middle class, rich, elderly, disabled, and homeless.

Most of the photos activated the parts of the brain we use for social cognition. This is what happens when we think about another person. But two groups — homeless people and drug addicts — triggered no activation. They were not being perceived as human.

Fiske had anticipated this. She had been developing a theory of dehumanization called the Stereotype Content Model, in which there are two criteria by which we measure people we meet: warmth and competence. “What do you need to know about people who are unfamiliar to you?” she says. “First you need to know their intentions — good or ill. If their intentions are benign, you trust them more. If they’re malignant, you don’t. Then you need to know whether they can act on their intentions. Because if they can’t act on their intentions, they don’t really matter to you. That’s competence.”

These two measures form a square with four quadrants into which we sort the people we meet. Those we consider to be like us are both warm and competent. People we envy are those we see as competent but not warm (think Wall Street bankers). We see people we pity or sympathize with as warm but not competent (disabled or elderly people). And people who are neither competent nor warm we see as something else entirely.

Fiske’s groups correspond roughly to Haslam’s mechanistic dehumanization (cold/competent) and animalistic dehumanization (warm/incompetent). But she adds a category for the more fully dehumanized group about whom we feel nothing but disgust.

This landscape of lines we draw between ourselves and others is far from simple, but researchers are starting to map it out. The next step is to figure

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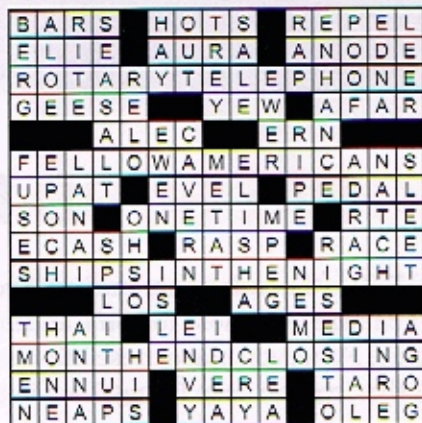


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out how to blur the lines or erase them, and thereby expand the circle of humanity. To rehumanize people.

Some of this work was done in the 20th century with the rise of internationalism, out of which grew Rotary, along with the United Nations, the Red Cross, and other organizations urging an expanded understanding of humanity. As Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." We aspire to this, even if we don't always practice it. And we have come a long way since the world of small, struggling tribes. But there is always more progress to be made.

Fiske has found one method of reversing dehumanization. The idea behind it is simple: to force yourself to see things from the other person's perspective. To do this, she conducted a study in which she simply asked subjects in the imaging machine whether the dehumanized person likes to eat a particular vegetable. This strange question had a profound effect: The social cognition areas of the brain lit up again. It turns out you can't imagine what someone likes without seeing them as a person.

"If you think about what's going on inside someone's head," Fiske says, "they become a human being again." ■

Frank Bures is the author of The Geography of Madness and a frequent contributor to The Rotarian.