



DEHUMANIZATION – MALADAPTIVE OR ADAPTIVE REACTION OF THE COMBATANTS?

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Abstract

The phenomenon of dehumanization has been neglected by philosophers while psychologists consider it as maladaptive reaction. In this paper, we introduce dehumanization as an aspect of mythical thought which occurs when a person is facing danger or crises. Next, we relate dehumanization to Klein's psychoanalytical concept of paranoid-schizoid position and to a process of splitting. This paper comes from series of interviews with war veterans from various conflicts and of different nations and present dehumanization as an obvious prerequisite for killing of the enemies. We illuminate that dehumanization is an adaptive process helping soldiers to solve some inner conflicts and moral dilemmas associated with their role of those, who might be killing the enemy. Instead of moral condemnation, we offer a brief sketch of a more satisfactory approach to understanding dehumanization.

Key words: Dehumanization, killing, soldier

American psychologist Lawrence LeShan demonstrates that, during the war, members of the involved groups have a different perception of reality. If an individual experiences the nearness and reality of war, we may observe a significant shift in the concept of the outside world, of oneself and of society with which he/she identifies with. This shift can be called from rational to mythical thought (LeShan, 2002). In peacetime, most of us are able to see the surroundings reasonably pragmatically or critically and avoid definite judgments. In crises, the ability to cope the internal conflict is disappearing within the general population. It is disadvantageous for a conflict management. At that time, we see how the enemy is completely dehumanized, damned, and there is no possibility that his/her motives might be like ours. The enemy is always unambiguously bad, fierce, cruel, wrong in everything, and his demands are unjustified.

DEFENSE MECHANISM TO SOLVE THE INNER CONFLICT

The inner conflict means that our information, knowledge or motives are contradictory and we experience opposing, often confusing feelings and the resulting attitudes. The ability to cope an inner conflict is one of the signs of a mentally mature individual and imposes considerable demands on the psyche. In crises, the capacity to bear the inner conflict is reduced. The externalization of the conflict, i.e. the definite rejection of unsatisfactory feelings and their projection into the external object, means relief, putting of the difficult burden of responsibility aside and the feeling of liberation. From a psychological point of view, the externalization of the conflict involves a regressive return to the pre-Oedipal period. Melanie Klein (2002) introduced a paranoid-schizoid position for this phase and dates it approximately to the first

four months of the child's life. What she describes is the result of early defense mechanisms, which, like Anna Freud (1992), serve primarily to control anxiety.

The main defense mechanism to cope the paranoid-schizoid position is splitting. According to Klein, a child soon discovers that there is an object, which he/she experiences delightful experiences with. At the same time, however, an infant does not understand that the object that represents pleasure is the same as the one, which sometimes hurts and disappoints him. A child of such an early age is not yet able to bear the mother as a whole object, so he/she splits off those hurting features. In this way, the parent object falls apart into so-called partial objects that are either good or bad depending on whether they represent pleasure or trauma. An infant tries to throw away the bad experiences. This process becomes defensive mechanism called projection lately. On the contrary, the child incorporates or devours the good experiences, which leads to various forms of introjection. The projection serves to preserve an idealized self-image. The Self transfers its wrong sides to other objects.

The Self, which is split into good and bad is in a paranoid-schizoid position. Its world is sharply black and white and it also experiences itself in black and white. Considering this ability, such self is omnipotent - it feels that it can do everything because it can destroy any object through splitting.

Splitting as a defense mechanism can be observed as one of the distinctive features of psychotics or borderline individuals. Among adults, it is generally understood as a pathological process demanding therapeutic treatment. However, healthy people use it as well as a tool to cope a crisis or a great deal of stress, threatening both our physical and mental existence. I will try to prove that this instrument, in a certain sense and at specific moments, can be understood as an adaptive response that increases the chances of survival.

People who experience the conflict rationally and are not subject to mythical reality and splitting, are without illusions and do not regress to a paranoid-schizoid position, but it is a disadvantageous setting for real combat. If a soldier perceive the enemy as someone who is basically the same as he is, he will may not be able to kill him. However, the other party does not have to have such a mature approach and fires first. We can assume that people who do not regress to a paranoid-schizoid position in combat, although proofed their moral integrity, but from a biological point of view, it is a failure of their defense mechanisms. They were unable to adapt to the situation and their lives were threatened or even ended prematurely. Therefore, soldiers' shift to paranoid-schizoid position should be understood as an adaptive response. On the other hand, during all conflicts, there are cases where soldiers on both sides did not succumb to the deception of splitting and kept the image of their enemies unburdened by their projections. One of the best-known examples of keeping the image of the enemy in real terms, even strongly resembling identification, is the Christmas truce in 1914, when British and German soldiers did not only fight for several days but also even met and played football game.

DEHUMANIZATION AS THE SPLITTING

One of the obvious manifestations of splitting among the soldiers is the dehumanization of the enemy. It is about reducing the value of a person, a group of people, members of a particular nation, race, religion or ethnic group. Dehumanization means the designation of others either as inhuman (monsters, demons, etc.) or subhuman (animals, bacteria, parasites, etc.) beings. Dehumanization is doing better the more the target group is different - race, ethnicity, obvious religious differences. As a rule, the process itself has two phases. In the first, the victim is incorporated into a specific group, while in the second stage the entire group is separated from the "human family". We have seen this process many times in the past. For example, for many European Jews, their belonging to this nation or religion until the 1930s was an entirely irrelevant detail with which they did not associate their identity. Where the so-called

Nuremberg Laws came into force, for many Jews it was the first shock that they were seen as Jews. Until then, these people were mostly Germans, Czechs, Austrians, etc., and suddenly they had to associate their identity with something they had not had a relationship with. In the second phase, they were confronted with anti-Semite attitudes. Being a Jew was something disgusting or inhuman and that, as members of this nation, they no longer belong to humans.

Dehumanization closely relates to the issue of identity and relationship. The optimum relationship could be expressed as me-you where "you" means the same as "me". Conversely, the dehumanized attitude is me-it. Erik Erikson (in Hall, 1983) wrote: "People lose the sense of being one species and try to make other kinds of people into a different and mortally dangerous species, one that doesn't count, one that isn't human. . . . You can kill them without feeling that you have killed your own kind."

Dehumanization manifests in a specific language. Nazis labeled Jews as parasites, lice, rats, something to be exterminated. It was not only a derogatory designation, but also an intentional calculus. There was a significant shift in the perception of the nation in Germany before the war. It was described as a living organism to which medical and hygiene standards must be applied. Thus, a nation can be poisoned by bad blood (meaning inferior nations and ethnicities), infested by parasites, or weakened its genetic fund. At the same time, another nation can be a source of contagion, and so all its members are deadly dangerous, regardless of whether they are healthy men or women and children. From this idea, it was only a small step to "heal" the nation by eliminating everything that could harm it and cleansing and healing the nation. We cannot, therefore, be surprised by the answer a prisoner doctor received on her question of how participation of her Nazi fellow doctor in the murder of the Jews follows the Hippocratic Oath: "Of course I am a doctor and I want to protect life. And it is from respect for human life that I remove the gangrenous appendix from the sick body. The Jew is a gangrenous appendix in the body of humanity." (Lifton, 1998)

The Japanese labeled the allied prisoners as *maruta* - logs during the Second World War. Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan in the 1980s called their enemies ghosts., The Huts in Rwanda during the genocide in 1994 spoke of the Tutsi tribesmen as *inyenzi* - cockroaches (Waller, 2007). In Czech anti-Islamic websites, Muslims are commonly called "slugs", while in English-speaking environments we find the nickname goatfucker.

DEHUMANIZATION AMONG COMBATANTS

In recent years, I have been making a series of interviews with war veterans who have killed in combat. I spoke with US Vietnam veterans, Croatian veterans of independence war in the 1990s, and Czech veterans and soldiers who have fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. I can say straight away that all of them showed symptoms of dehumanization of the opponent at least during their deployment. Let me share few examples.

One of the Croatian war veterans said he perceived the Serbs he was shooting on as "*wax figurines*." Another said: "*Today I think of them differently, but then I thought - what kind of people are they if they are doing what they do? And are they people at all? Whoever would see Serb then would kill him immediately. At that time, we did not think of them as people*".

"Those were animals. Before the war, I knew a few Serbs, but what they were doing ... That was not what normal people could do."

"I saw the silhouette, so I threw a grenade. It was not human. Just silhouette."

"I think Viet Cong were mostly teenagers. However, they were damned communists too. They were brainwashed completely. Moreover, what they did to their own people, you would not believe it, you bet."

“They were evil. Absolute evil. They killed, burned, raped, tortured - and you know what? They enjoyed it. Until the end of my days, I will blame myself for not being able to kill more of them.”

“I learned quickly to hate gooks with every nerve of my body and all I could do was to kill them as many as possible. They tried to kill me desperately. They hated us more than we hated them.”

“How it was to kill in fight? Just like to shot the angry dog down.”

“My relationship to the enemy was that whenever I saw one I was just about to kill him. They were there just to die. That was my job. To kill them. Even in the barracks, before they sent me to the front, they showed us what they were. I saw what they could do. They raped children, you know. Children! They were not people.”

“The gooks did not stop keep fighting. They were tiny damn bastards. With each I killed, there was one less. That's why I was there. For me, they were just gooks. They also looked like scarecrows to me in the rice fields. But they still did some mess. It also bothered me how they fought. They were damn cowards. Cowards, do you understand?”

“I tell you this. They're fuckers. I trusted none of them. Not even those we trained. . . . They are fucking cowards. At one point, they are laughing at you, and when you turn around, they will cut your throat. Let me tell you something. Now when I see those goat fuckers rolling to our country, I feel like taking a rifle and going to mow it. All into one. We must not let them come, otherwise it is our end.”

However, studying the issue of dehumanization, we encounter some professional difficulties. The more we know the consequences of what dehumanization can do, the worse we keep a professional distance. In this way, instead of being explained and studied, dehumanization is much more frequently judged. Any psychologist who decides to explore, understand, and explain a morally reprehensible process or deed always risks criticism for apologizing. I can agree with Lifton (1998) that psychological research is always a moral matter, just as moral judgments are necessarily based on a psychological opinion. However, this should not prevent us from trying to understand a certain, or even morally reprehensible, phenomenon, as we can help to create such tools in order to reduce their occurrence in the future. Every psychologist must be aware of the implications his exploration can bring. This is true for every science. On the other hand, moral judgments usually obstruct any understanding. Therefore, a psychologist should avoid them and leave them to others. After all, anyone working in the field of clinical psychology and psychotherapy knows what I'm talking about. As soon as we begin to judge our patients, we should stop their treatment immediately and pass it on to an impartial colleague.

Meanwhile, I have talked about dehumanization as an ideological background either to committing atrocities or as a relationship pathology. However, if we look at it etiologically, then it will come out as a (mal) adaptive process. Dehumanization has been a major topic of modern medicine for many years, reducing patients to diagnoses. On the other hand, a surgeon who cuts a scalpel into a human body, or even an ordinary dentist who tears our tooth, must suppress empathy at that moment and forget that he deals with a complex human being. He or she must focus just the problem he/she is facing. Zimbardo (2008) admits, he sees the adaptive level of dehumanization in the work of not only doctors, but also rescuers in disaster. He adds that the same is when a job requires one person to work with a large number of people daily. Such professional gets into a paradoxical position where he is forced to dehumanize his clients to help them or cure them.

Primary task of a soldier is to survive and accomplish the mission, even at the cost to kill the enemy directly. Nevertheless, how to do this if soldier sees the enemy as someone he /she can identify with?

A dehumanization-free attitude is also possible in certain specific military expertise. As an example, pilots of fighter aircrafts. Even in our country in the past, there were several meetings of war pilots from the Second World War with the participation of members of both the Allied units and the Luftwaffe. These men usually did not hate each other during the war and saw their fights as a fair fight. This allowed them to meet each other and have a chat lately. However, as one of the organizers of such event once told me, "it is possible with pilots, but I cannot imagine a meeting of, for example, guards and prisoners from former concentration camps." The pilot does not need to dehumanize because he does not actually shoot the man, but the machine. Former Czechoslovak pilot and a participant of Air Battle of Britain, Major General František Chábera, one told me. "The success of the pilot is not counted in the killed opponents, but in the shoot downed aircrafts". As a result, the pilot could see, with some relief, how his rival jumped out of the falling machine and opened his parachute. However, this does not apply to infantry. They have a living person in the sight. In order to pull the trigger, he must make similarly inanimate object from him as an enemy machine was to the fighter pilot. That is why it can be expected that even where dehumanization is not the content of official ideology and soldiers are not under the influence of propaganda, it is expected that dehumanization will occur. It will make it easier to overcome natural constraints to kill another person and, above all, to protect the individual from burning feelings of guilt.

Dehumanization, however, does not only have to arise as an adaptation to killing. It is also known as a reaction to cultural shock. Erik De Soir, a Belgian military psychologist, once told me about his deployment in Rwanda during the 1994 civil war. When they arrived with trucks and began to evacuate older men, women and children, they were shocked that young men and women were pushed to the front in the first place and some even pushed the weak ones out. This experience had a staggering effect on Belgian soldiers, and many subsequently began to express dehumanizing attitudes to the local ones. Most of them thought they had to be animals. However, Tutsi's behavior was based on completely different values than we Europeans have. The local culture is primarily trying to save the fighting and productive part of the population.

I studied this phenomenon in Czech SFOR units (in Bosnia and Herzegovina) and KFOR (in Kosovo) in 2000–2001. I have to add that these missions were not fighting, soldiers were not expected to have to shoot anybody, and no official hate propaganda, directed against the local population, was, of course, taking place. On the other hand the soldiers knew that they might be threatened by local people. It turned out that if a soldier performed his tasks in an area that was ethnic, religious, or otherwise different from ours, there were signs of dehumanizing attitudes during the six months of mission. At the same time, we found that the prevalence of dehumanizing attitudes was in Bosnia, where the Czechs were mostly surrounded by linguistically and culturally similar Serbs, significantly lower than in Kosovo, which is mostly inhabited by Albanians that are more distant to us. There was also an important influence of education and training. If the soldiers did not receive any information about the local population prior to the mission, the dehumanizing attitudes appeared in one-half of them during the deployment. However, if a preparation aimed at acquainting with the specifics of local people and explaining some sources of possible cultural shock occurred before the mission, the occurrence of dehumanization fell by almost half (Štrobl, 2004).

Based on our findings, we can assume that dehumanization, as an adaptive mechanism, occurs to:

- protect soldiers from feeling of guilty when they kill the enemy
- help soldier to overcome cultural shock
- transfer responsibility of destructive aggression to the enemy
- enhances a sense of belonging to their own troops, nation, ethnicity, religion etc.

Robert Lifton claims that is impossible to kill another human being without active numbness towards the victim (2005). If we consider this postulate deeper, we come to a surprising conclusion that dehumanization is most likely to be present every time when one person kills another.

CONCLUSION

Dehumanization seems to be a necessary condition for killing. If a soldier is to perform his tasks and thus kill enemies, he must dehumanize. He has little choice. Otherwise, he runs the risk of own killing - that is, physical death in a combat, or such a tremendous sense of guilt that can grow to suicide. Here we find ourselves in front of a moral dilemma. On the one hand, the planned, ideologized dehumanization stands behind most of the atrocities not only happening in wars. From a clinical point of view it is a pathological process with its source in the cleavage of the object and thus in the regression to the paranoid-schizoid position. Dehumanization allows soldiers to kill without guilt. On the other hand, this is just a soldier's job, he has not always chosen freely. By dehumanizing, soldiers protect themselves from both cultural shock and, above all, extreme feelings of guilt, which, after killing an adversary, are likely to appear in every healthy person. Therefore, we should understand the spontaneous dehumanization of soldiers as an adaptive process that allows them to be who they are. Then we can hardly take the moral judgment to this process as such. So it is appropriate to start thinking about soldiers in the same way as, for example, doctors, in the sense that a spontaneous, not institutionalized, dehumanization is a logical adaptive mechanism that allows them to do their job that the public expects of them. At the same time, as with doctors and, for example, rescuers, there is a very narrow line between serving dehumanization and, on the contrary, the moment when it begins to reign.

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