

How Ordinary People Become Violent: Frustration and Dehumanization

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ABSTRACT

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Stereotyping dehumanizes others and provides a potential pathway to violence when people are frustrated. Stereotypes vary in content and neural correlates, but systematic patterns emerge across cultures. The first dimension reflects perceived intent—warm and trustworthy (or not)—as when the sentry cries, “Friend or foe?” The second dimension, competence, reflects ability to enact the benign or malign intent.

Warmth and competence combine to produce four validated clusters of outgroups. The stereotypical ingroup, middle-class or citizens, are stereotyped as both warm and competent; they are sources of pride and admiration. The worst outgroups—homeless people, nomads, or undocumented immigrants—are stereotyped as both untrustworthy and incompetent; they evoke disgust. Mixed stereotypes include older or disabled people, viewed as warm but incompetent; they receive pity. Another mixed stereotype targets rich people, who seem competent but cold, and they provoke envy. Distinct forms of dehumanizing discrimination target each cluster, and the emotional prejudices (pride, disgust, pity, envy) best predict behavior.

Each of the three outgroup quadrants shows distinctive neural correlates. Disgusting outgroups fail to activate medial prefrontal cortex, implicated in (not)attributing a mind to another, but disgusting outgroups do activate insula, implicated in disgust. Pitied outgroups also fail to activate theory-of-mind areas, except when perceivers try to sympathize. The most volatile quadrant contains envy: Competent-but-cold outgroups elicit Schadenfreude (malicious pleasure at their misfortune) which correlates with neural reward-area activation and reported harms.

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Frustration underlies these stereotyped intergroup tensions. First, perceived warmth results from cooperation, but competition leads to lack of trust because it aims to block ingroup goals. Competition entails both tangible economic resources and symbolic values. Competition explains distrust of both low-status immigrants and the high-status rich, each seen as exploitative.

Marginalized minorities who feel frustrated with their economic situation, particularly those with success in sight, but just out of reach, should be especially frustrated, given relative deprivation. If they become violent, their first targets would be the competitive envied outgroups, such as outsider bankers and foreign business owners. So, the first dimension, perceived warmth follows from cooperation and competition—inherently frustrating.

Turning to the second dimension, status predicts stereotypical competence, which multiplies the effects of warmth or its lack. Because bankers are not only competitive but also high status, they should be particular targets of frustrated minorities. Other envied, high-status (competent) and competitive (cold) groups include outsider entrepreneurs, a role currently filled by Chinese and Korean business people and formerly filled by Jewish ones. Often, envied outgroups are the targets of mass killing in collective frustration.

Theory, cross-national data, and neural data combine to suggest that dehumanization and frustration are risk factors for violence.



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