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Everyday dehumanization: Negative contact, humiliation, and the lived experience of being treated as ‘less than human’

Abstract

Developing work on the nature and consequences of negative intergroup contact, this study explores its potential role in sustaining everyday experiences of dehumanisation; that is, experiences in which participants report feeling deprived of full human status. As a case study, we explore domestic service relations in a neighbourhood of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, analysing interviews (n=22) conducted with Black domestic workers and their families (n=64 participants in total) about their day-to-day interactions with Indian employers. Drawing on thematic analysis of accounts of paid domestic labour and food-sharing practices, we argue that negative contact experiences may cumulatively engender a sense of dehumanization and associated feelings of humiliation: a response marked by intertwined constructions of shame and injustice. Implications for understanding wider problems of intergroup conflict and political solidarity are discussed and avenues for future research proposed.

Introduction

The contact hypothesis (Allport, 1954) proposes that regular interaction between members of different groups tends to improve intergroup attitudes, particularly when such interaction occurs under facilitating conditions (e.g., when it involves participants of equal status interacting cooperatively). This in turn may help to address societal problems such as discrimination, intergroup conflict, and inequality (see Dovidio et al., 2017; Vezzali & Stathi, 2017).

Since Allport's (1954) influential synopsis of early work, research on this hypothesis has rapidly grown. The field now comprises many hundreds of studies that address an ever-widening variety of intergroup relations. Based on their metanalytic reviews of the field, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006, 2013) concluded that the accumulated evidence now strongly supports the effectiveness of contact as an instrument of social change, qualifying earlier and more guarded assessments (e.g., Amir, 1969; Reicher, 1986; Dixon et al., 2005). Among other findings, they reported that: (1) contact is associated with reductions in intergroup prejudice in the vast majority of research; (2) even in absence of Allport's (1954) facilitating conditions, contact often has beneficial effects; and (3) such effects tend to generalise beyond the immediacy of specific interactions to shape broader patterns of intergroup attitudes, perceptions and behaviours. Indeed, via processes of so-called 'secondary transfer' (Pettigrew, 2009) contact may even improve participants' relations with members of groups not directly involved in such contact.

Based on such work, the value of promoting intergroup contact in historically divided and unequal societies is now widely supported. Indeed, variants of the contact hypothesis have informed interventions to desegregate institutions of education, employment, and housing in many societies. At the same time, 'if belatedly' (Dovidio et al., 2017, p.5), researchers

have also increasingly emphasized the importance of contact valence in determining the consequences of intergroup contact (Barlow et al., 2012; Hayward et al., 2017; Paolini et al., 2014; Schäfer et al., 2021). That is, they have recognized that not all contact is experienced as positive by participants and that negative contact, whilst comparatively rarer, may nevertheless powerfully shape intergroup relations. Arguably, this is particularly true for members of historically disadvantaged communities who experience social interactions from a position of lower status (BLINDED).

The present paper extends emerging work on negative contact by exploring a neglected theme, namely that such contact may be interrelated with routine practices of dehumanization and related experiences of personal and collective humiliation. Developing this theme, we present a qualitative case study rooted in a specific institutional context; that is, paid domestic labour relations in South Africa.

Negative contact experiences and their consequences

Although researchers have long recognised that negative experiences of contact may lead to a deterioration rather than improvement in intergroup relations (e.g., Allport, 1954; Amir, 1969), systematic research on the nature and consequences of negative contact has only emerged relatively recently in the contact literature, very little of which is qualitative. Directly relevant research has mainly been published within the past decade and still comprises a small proportion of work in the field (e.g., Aberson, 2015; Barlow et al., 2012; Graf et al., 2014; Hayward et al., 2017; Paolini et al., 2014; Schäfer et al., 2021).

In part, this neglect expresses the influence of the so-called ‘optimal contact strategy’ (Dixon et al., 2005), i.e., researchers’ tendency to prioritize contact experiences in contexts that are relatively devoid of negativity. In most experimental work, for example, intergroup

“contact” has consisted of “...relatively benign, short-term exchanges unfolding between undergraduate students in situations that are largely stripped of less palatable hallmarks of intergroup relations in historically divided societies.” (McKeown & Dixon, 2017, p.2).

Similarly, in field studies designed to promote contact, negative contact experiences have typically been minimized by the very nature of such interventions, which have tended to suppress uncomfortable issues of discrimination, disadvantage, and division (e.g., see Maoz, 2011, for a discussion of this issue in the context of Arab-Israeli planned encounter programs in Israel). As such, the nature and consequences of negative contact have rarely been the focus of such research.

It is important to recognize that negative contact is characterised not simply by the absence of positive contact. Perhaps counterintuitively, studies have shown that measures of negative and positive contact are only modestly correlated and therefore cannot be treated as simple poles of unidimensional continuum (Árnadóttir, et al., 2018; Richard, Bond Jr., & Stokes-Zoota, 2003). Rather, negative contact may comprise a variety of qualitatively distinct kinds of interactions. Research suggests that such interactions typically heighten the salience of intergroup categories, intensify realistic and symbolic threat, and foster varying forms of prejudice, including homophobia, racism, and xenophobia (e.g., Graf et al., 2014; Hayward et al., 2017; Paolini et al., 2014). However, their emotional, cognitive, and behavioural specificity remains poorly understood.

In the present paper, developing emerging qualitative work on negative contact, we explore its relationship to everyday experiences of humiliation and dehumanization through a contextually specific study of these experiences and processes within South African paid domestic labour. We explore, too, the broader implications of such experiences for

intergroup relations, both via our empirical analysis and via our concluding discussion, which proposes an agenda for future work.

Negative contact as dehumanization and humiliation

Dehumanization is a process through which we deprive others of full human status. This process may assume different forms (Haslam, 2006; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). *Animalistic dehumanization* involves denying the uniquely human characteristics of others (e.g., the capacity for higher level moral reasoning), thereby likening them to animals. *Mechanistic dehumanization* involves treating others as objects or 'cogs in a machine', thereby denying them qualities such as individuality, identity, warmth, fallibility, creativity and the full human capacity for suffering and fatigue. This type of dehumanization is very common in workplace contexts, especially when mundane or devalued work is being conducted (Baldissarri, et al., 2017). A more subtle extension of these forms of dehumanization is *infracumanization* (Leyens, et al., 2000), which deprives others of uniquely human emotions that are associated with civilization and moral reasoning. Social psychological research on these forms of dehumanization has evinced their links to cruelty, discrimination, servitude, exclusion, and other extreme forms of interpersonal and intergroup violence (e.g., Goff et al., 2008; Rudman & Mescher, 2012).

Research on positive contact suggests that regular interaction with others tends to diminish dehumanization (see Capozza et al., 2014 for a review). Even in societies marked by a history of intergroup conflict, such contact may help to reduce participants' readiness to deny others their full humanity. For example, Tam and colleagues (2007, 2008) found that both Protestant and Catholic students in Northern Ireland attributed more uniquely human

emotions to their ingroup than to their outgroup, but that this tendency was moderated by experiences of frequent positive intergroup contact. More recently, Bruneau and colleagues (2020) explored the association between contact and dehumanization in 16 independent samples drawn from five countries and using a range of methods (cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys and quasi-experiments). From a more complex set of results, two key findings are worth noting. First, positive contact was consistently associated with lower levels of outgroup dehumanization (e.g., Americans' dehumanization of Muslims). Second, such contact was associated with reduced perceptions of meta-dehumanization, i.e., perceptions that outgroup members view ingroup members as less than human.

Whereas the relationship between positive contact experiences and dehumanization is relatively well-established, to our knowledge its relationship with negative contact experiences has not been directly examined in the contact literature. On a general level, of course, dehumanization *by definition* implicates negative contact experiences; after all, dehumanization has often been a historical precursor of slavery, exploitation, exclusion and even genocide, a process grimly documented in Livingstone-Smith's (2011) book 'Less Than Human: Why We Demean, Enslave, and Exterminate Others.' In popular consciousness, dehumanization is often associated with extreme, isolated events and identities, such as the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, the Atlantic slave trade, and Soviet Union gulags. In the past twenty years, dehumanization has been the focus within more mundane settings, often arguing that dehumanization is implicit or subtle within everyday contexts (Haslam, Loughnan, Reynolds, & Wilson, 2007; Leyens, et al., 2000). Following the thinking of Kteily and Bruneau (2017), we argue for the importance of conducting research that explores how, and with what consequences, dehumanization is explicitly enacted through more mundane, everyday interactions with members of other groups.

This makes the paid domestic labour relationship a particularly potent site for studying humiliation. Although it is not uncommon for workers to experience dehumanization (Baldissarri, Andrighetto, Volpato, 2021, Valtorta, Baldissarri, Andrighetto, & Volpato, 2019), paid domestic labour is often a site of blatant and everyday dehumanization based on race, gender, class, citizenship, sexuality and informal labour forces. These embodied positionalities make it a relationship that has both a history of and ongoing possibilities for injustice, exploitation, and explicit dehumanization within everyday interactions. Because domestic labour has so many features and processes that predispose it to negative contact, it is a rich context to study aspects of negative contact such as humiliation and dehumanization. The aim of the present research is to explore everyday explicit dehumanization in terms of experiences and its social functions.

The main contribution of the article is to the contact literature, in which little attention has been paid to the lived experience of dehumanization within everyday interactions. As a stark opening example, consider the following infamous video of gendered street harassment enacted through cat calls, “compliments” and requests for contact details or the reciprocation of greetings (10 Hours of walking in NYC as a woman, 2014, October 28). Such everyday experiences of blatant dehumanising forms of negative contact – i.e., interactions in which participants feel they are being objectified, treated like animals or in other ways stripped of full human status - are significant because they may cue emotional responses that combine feelings of shame and anger. These feelings pervade the comments section of the video, which conveys a mixture of anger, fear, outrage, humour and empathy.

Experiences of negative contact may evoke a powerful sense of individual and collective *humiliation* (McCauley, 2017). The feelings of shame invoked by dehumanization (see also

Bastion & Haslam, 2011) are marked by a sense of debasement and lowered self-worth (e.g., the feelings experienced by a homeless person when someone does not maintain normal eye contact or regards her clothing with evident disgust). Feelings of anger are provoked by the unjust denial of full human status and are typically experienced by members of lower status groups (e.g., the feelings experienced by Arabs at Israeli Checkpoints; Albzour, 2020). McCauley (2017) has recently highlighted that the role of humiliation in intergroup relations has been neglected by psychologists, even though humiliation is central to understanding problems of intergroup division and conflict. The same point applies to research on intergroup contact.

Overview and rationale of the present research

To sum up, the present research aims to extend emerging work on negative contact in three ways. First, building on a call for a more nuanced understanding of the subjective, situated experience of negative contact (BLINDED), we present a qualitative case study rooted in a specific institutional context, namely paid domestic labour relations in South Africa, which is a paradigm of intimate but unequal intergroup contact (Durrheim et al., 2014). Second, we focus on a particular dimension of this experience, namely its association with routinized practices of dehumanization and related feelings of personal and collective humiliation. Finally, unlike most research on negative contact, we focus not on so-called 'majority-minority' relations but on relations between communities that have shared - and continue to share - a history of disadvantage, namely Indian and Black residents living in post-apartheid South Africa. We contextualise our case study and methodology in the next section.

Methodology

Research context

This paper is based on a qualitative study conducted in a suburb of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. It focuses on contact between Indian residents of a formally established neighbourhood and Black African residents of an informal settlement (see Figure 1)¹ located on vacated land within the neighbourhood. These two communities experienced a great deal of conflict at the time of data collection as informal residents had been reported to local authorities by formal residents for stealing electricity from them. Subsequently, informal residents engaged in various forms of protest in the streets of the formal settlement, demanding electricity from the municipal government. These tensions received considerable attention from the local media and community leaders.

However, contact between these groups was not confined to intergroup protests about electricity theft. Since its inception, Black African residents of the informal settlement have also been routinely employed by the formal residents as workers in their businesses and within their households as domestic labourers. In both contexts, relations between the two communities have arguably been hierarchical. Because of the inegalitarian structures of paid domestic labour specifically and the tensions between these two communities more broadly, our case study thus represents an instructive context in which to study negative contact. To that end, our paper explores accounts of negative contact through thematic analysis of interviews conducted with Black domestic workers and their families.

Figure 1 Formal residences with informal dwellings in the background.

Participants

The data for the present study is drawn from 22 household interviews that were conducted with Black African residents of the informal settlement. There were 64 participants in total: 26 females and 38 males. The interviews were conducted in *isiZulu* by two postgraduate students under the supervision of the second author. Research assistants received training in qualitative interview methods. The interviews were roughly an hour long on average, with the number of participants ranging from two to eleven, although there were usually two or three participants per household interview. Each household had at least one female participant who had worked (or was working) as a domestic labourer. All participants were over the age of 18. The research was approved by the Social Science Research Ethics Committee of the University (blinded).

Data collection

Before beginning the data collection process, the Ward Councillor for the area was approached to request her permission to conduct the research among both the formal and informal residents. Having received her written approval, data collection began. In addition to gaining this political backing, a community leader from the informal settlement was requested to accompany the research assistants in the informal settlement to introduce them to households and to voice his support of the project.

Households were approached by the interviewers and were invited to participate in group interviews at their homes. With the approval of the Ward Councillor, households were approached as a follow-up interview based on their participation in a prior quantitative survey. Many eligible households were not willing to participate in the interviews because tensions were particularly high between groups at the time of data collection and

households were cautious about speaking with outsiders, even with the presence of an accompanying community representative. The household interviews focused on issues connected to place attachment and detachment; levels and quality of intergroup contact; and the possibilities for solidarity between the historically marginalised groups of people who are represented by the formal and informal residents. All participants were guided through the details of informed consent and gave their permission for the interview to be audio-recorded prior to the commencement of each interview. Participants were offered a small monetary incentive per household at the conclusion of the interview.

The interviews were conducted in *isiZulu* and were transcribed by the interviewers. They were then translated by a trained, bilingual, mother tongue *isiZulu*-speaker into English. The transcription process captured verbatim core content but did not attempt to capture more detailed linguistic features (e.g., the subtle intonational and prosodic features that Jeffersonian or similar transcription methods would seek capture). The resulting transcripts were then subjected to thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis broadly followed the steps advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006), using a combination of deductive and inductive forms of thematic coding. We approached the analysis with a general theoretical and empirical focus. Namely, we sought to explore the nature and consequences of negative contact experiences in the context of domestic service relations. However, in the course data analysis, we also identified some emerging themes based more specifically around interviewees' recounted experiences of humiliation and dehumanization. We treated such themes not simply as individual expressions or as simple reflections of the objective realities of negative contact during domestic labour

relations, but also as social constructions. That is, we treated them as situated and collectively shared ways of making sense of such contact, of giving it meaning and value and, indeed, as we shall see, of constructing its outcomes as problematic and unfair.

Analysis

The analysis presented below explores participants' accounts of negative contact and, more specifically, the forms of humiliation and dehumanization enacted through such contact. The chosen extracts both narrate experiences and show the social functions of humiliation and dehumanization. The extracts presented here capture experiences of humiliation that recurred throughout the data. The analysis focuses on humiliation and dehumanization, which are interconnected and sometimes interchangeable. Sometimes the exact type of dehumanization is clear (as when a participant states "A person can turn you into a dog") and sometimes the type of dehumanization is implied or more nuanced, perhaps including multiple types at once. However, what is clear is that the speaker is aware of having experienced humiliating interactions that explicitly included dehumanization. The analysis focuses on three interrelated themes: (1) humiliation and dehumanization within the everyday performance and devaluation of domestic labour; (2) humiliation and dehumanization within everyday food sharing practices; and (3) agency, resistance and structural disadvantage. In each case, we select exemplary extracts to illustrate experiences that were common throughout the data.

Humiliation and dehumanization within the everyday performance and devaluation of domestic labour

We focus in this section on accounts of negative contact that satisfy a definition of humiliation drawn from the literature, namely the fusion of a sense of debasement and a sense of injustice (cf. McCauley, 2017). We show how humiliation was linked by our respondents both to the nature of the domestic labour they performed and to the devaluation of that labour by their employers, which in turn was connected to a sense of dehumanization.

Extract 1

Buhle: I quit working. I'm just staying unemployed because I just realised the kind of life I was to live there. Being enslaved, the Indian will enslave you then give you R50

Dudu: A person can turn you into a dog

Buhle: Since you arrived in the morning

Dudu: But you clean for this person

Buhle: You clean for her, you wash, you iron

Dudu: She wears the clothes washed by you

Buhle: There's nothing you don't do!

Dudu: I didn't study but I vowed that I'll never work for her

Buhle: You wash for her, you clean but only to find out that she's not satisfied. You do by all means, yet you are lacking

Extract 2

Sindi: Indian people treat us like slaves and instead of buying machines, you find that an Indian will make you wash one load in the washing machine and two loads you will

hand wash them. But you find that there is a washing machine and you turn into a machine, you see that.

Extracts 1 and 2 present forms of negative contact that clearly go beyond the mere delegation of 'dirty work' to domestic labourers. The kinds of routine interactions reported here are constructed as humiliating, and by implication, as dehumanizing. In Extract 1, Buhle speaks about "being enslaved", to which Dudu adds that one can be turned "into a dog" by an Indian employer. The latter account was repeatedly expressed throughout the data, with references to being "treated like a dog" present in nine of the household interviews. For example, Thandi complained about how her employers speak to her, saying "They do not have that that you are a human and talk to you [...] You want another human to respect you and not treat you like a dog" and Zinhle says, " , they toss you out like a dog because they have more". These quotes resonate with wider research on animalistic dehumanization (Haslam, 2006) and, to anticipate a theme developed later in our analysis, they provide the grounds for Buhle's resistance (i.e., her resignation from, and refusal to do, further domestic work). Buhle and Dudu go on to explain that the injustices of her work make unemployment preferable to working as a domestic worker. The types and volume of work expected by employers are constructed as palpably unreasonable and unfair, a claim reinforced by Buhle's three-part list: "You clean for her, you wash, you iron"; and her further exclamation that "there's nothing you don't do".

Similarly, in Extract 2, Sindi complains that Indian employers can "turn you into a machine". She relates an example of how she is required to wash clothes by hand, even though the employer owns a washing machine. It conveys how her expected workload has turned her into a less-than-human worker who must cope with the same workload as a

machine. The link to experiences of mechanistic dehumanization is self-evident here (Haslam, 2006). Although the work described is not certainly beyond the expected scope of domestic labour in a South African context, the notion that she must manually perform tasks instead of using a machine suggests that the employer sees Sindi and a washing machine as interchangeable.

Another feature of extracts 1 and 2 is worth noting. While humiliation is often studied in public domains where group membership is made salient, the negative contact explored here is constructed as *both* interpersonal and intergroup in nature, even within the private domain of the home. Indeed, as later extracts will confirm, when describing how humiliation and dehumanization were enacted via negative contact experiences, our interviewees often blurred the distinction between their personal relations with employers and wider intergroup dynamics between Indian and Black African communities (e.g. "...I just realised the kind of life I was to live there. Being enslaved, *the Indian* will enslave you then give you R50"; our emphasis).

Extract 3 presents a different kind of example of how negative contact became associated with humiliation and dehumanization in our interview accounts. In this case, negative contact relates to the provision of childcare.

Extract 3

Mr B: It started in [19]49 and that's all. And it is there even now and I think it will be like this for generations and generations.

Mrs B: Yes it will not end. Because I would come when their child is small or not even born when I start to work. But once the child is 10 or 11 years, it will start avoiding me.

Yet that child grew in my own hands.

Int: That means the child becomes aware of how the parents treat you.

Mrs B: You will see that child, even if he used to enjoy being with me, when coming from school, he would say “hey hey”. And then, before you know the child has grown. When arriving home, he will just sneak in and put down the books without even saying hello. He doesn’t care about me. Then I will ask myself “what changed this child because we stayed well together.” He was born under my care.

In Extract 3, Mrs B contrasts interactions with a young Indian child in her care, which comprise positive contact, mutual enjoyment, and warm greetings (“hey, hey”), with interactions since that child became older, which comprise avoidance, distant relations, and a lack of greetings. This is interpreted by Mrs B as a sign that the child “doesn’t care” about the very woman who has looked after him from a young age. She links this to the interactional details of social contact. To greet someone, for example, is to acknowledge their existence, their presence, and their value. To purposefully avoid doing so (e.g., by “sneaking in” from school “without even saying hello”) is to withdraw such acknowledgement and thus also to withdraw full human recognition.

We can also see that Mrs B. constructs this situation as unjust. She expresses indignation, for instance, over the change in the relationship through utterances such as “Yet that child grew in my own hands” and “She was born under my care”. Such observations convey her expectation that she should be treated better and her offence at the changes that occur between herself and her charge. In addition, her rejection is interpreted as a sign that the child has ‘matured’ and will enter soon the next generation of her unjust treatment by her employers and neighbours. This is humiliating contact at its most basic and poignant: it

combines an account of everyday degradation with a powerful sense of injustice (McCauley, 2017).

Humiliation and dehumanization within everyday food sharing practices in the home

The theme of food sharing practices captured another, more specific, set of accounts of negative contact experiences. Social interactions in which employers provided inadequate, expired, or left-over food provision or sought to regulate the utensils used by domestic workers, for example, were associated with strong experiences of humiliation among participants and were central to associated constructions of dehumanization.

Extract 4

Buhle: Maybe they'll take a crust and retain it.

Lungi: They'll give you crusts.

Buhle: They'll retain them until you come and they'll say "eat" because you are a dog to them. You find that what they give you has expired already. You see something rotten, but they take it and give it to you because you are a Black person.

Int: Mm.

Buhle: They know that you are struggling, you are poor. They even say that maybe if you refuse, they say "give it to others who are poor where you stay because people from there, they are unemployed."

Extract 5

Xoli You are not given food on a plate used by an Indian. They don't mind dishing your food in a plastic. You know the plastic bag used for bread?

Int: Yes.

Xoli: They will pour curry, bryani, bread, meat and every mixture for you to carry home.
Do you see that you are a dog?

In Extract 4, Buhle describes being given food that is “expired” and “rotten” by her employer. The substandard food is not given haphazardly but is instead kept especially for her (“they’ll take a crust and retain it”). Similarly, in Extract 5, Xoli describes being provided with a variety of food mixed together in a plastic bag. On a general level, such practices are constructed by the interviewees as expressing racialised hierarchies in the home. That is, they signal workers’ low racial status in the eyes of their Indian employers, e.g., “you are a Black person” and “you are struggling, you are poor”; and “you are a dog”. Similar stories surfaced repeatedly across the interviews, with participants complaining of being given cold tea, oily chicken skin, bread crusts, and food that had been in the fridge for a prolonged period. This idea resonates with wider research on how food provision can be used to reproduce space boundaries and power differences (e.g., see Archer, 2011).

More specifically, perhaps because routines of food provision are part of the daily interactions between domestic workers and their employers, their cumulative effect is also humiliating and dehumanising. In both extracts, for example, interviewees make explicit links to experiences of animalistic dehumanization. Buhle asserts that both the nature of her employer’s communication surrounding food provision (“they’ll say “eat”) and the quality of food provided (stale “crusts”) deprives her of full human status by signalling “you are a dog to them”. It is important to emphasize how this process is dynamically enacted through negative contact experiences rather than reflecting an already existing psychological state. Our participants did not speak of themselves as feeling inherently or naturally less than human. Imagine, for instance, the difference between the hypothetical utterance “you are a

dog” as opposed to the utterance in Extract 4 of “you are a dog *to them*”. In the latter, participants are stripped of their value through their treatment by others in everyday interactions in the home.

In our data, this process also occurred through the enactment of social rules about the use of utensils in the home. Having specific utensils set aside for specific people can generally communicate relative status and worth. Yet it may also communicate dehumanisation by constructing domestic labourers as sources of potential contamination and disgust and as inherently dirty and not worthy of hygiene (i.e. washing utensils with soap as opposed to just rinsing with water). Further examples are provided in Extracts 6 to 8.

Extract 6

Buhle: She is disgusted by you, although she likes you to work for her, but you can see that you disgust her.

Lungi: Even the plate you are using, it stays outdoors.

Buhle: You find out that you work for them. Your plate after you have finished eating, you need to leave it outdoors, never take it inside with other plates. [...] Why? Because you are a Black person. You are unlike them.

Extract 6 broaches a fundamental tension in the relationship between domestic workers and their employers. In order to provide their labour, workers must inhabit the intimate space of the home and the family and yet, in so doing, they become a source of potential contamination. As Buhle notes: “although she likes you to work for her, but you can see that you disgust her”. Exemplifying this disgust reaction, she highlights how she is expected to

leave her plate outside rather having it washed with the utensils used by the rest of the family. On the one hand, this practice again sharpens the categorical boundaries between insiders and outsiders, us and them, communicating to the worker where she stands in relation to the rest of the household: “you are a Black person. You are unlike them”. On the other hand, by enacting a ritual of ‘purification’, such practices are humiliating because they symbolically designate the domestic worker as someone who defiles the domestic realm and who thus becomes an object of disgust.

As has already been suggested, there was often a slippage between interpersonal and intergroup category constructions within our interviewees’ accounts of negative contact and humiliation. Extract 6 serves as a prime example by showing how quickly pronouns can shift from the singular to the plural. In Buhle’s first turn, she speaks in singular pronouns such as “you” and “she”. These imply interpersonal forms of negative contact with her employer. In her following turn, Buhle moves from speaking about “her” to speaking about “them”. The salience of intergroup contact further emphasized by reference to otherness and race when Buhle ultimately states that “you are a Black person. You are unlike them.” This categorical shift is interesting not only because it fits with idea that negative contact is particularly likely to be understood in terms of intergroup categories and differences (e.g., Paolini et al., 2010). It also indicates how interviewees treated such contact, and associated unjust experiences of humiliation, as the product of collective racial and not simply personal discrimination.

Agency, resistance and structural disadvantage

In this section, we briefly qualify the main arguments offered in our thematic analysis by exploring accounts of how respondents resisted or challenged humiliating and

dehumanizing contact experiences. Such accounts are important because they show that our respondents should not be regarded simply as passive victims in their relationships with their employers.

Extracts 7 and 8 provide concrete examples of resistance in the context of food sharing practices. Both extracts reiterate the theme explored in the previous section, namely the link between the provision of utensils to domestic workers and experiences of dehumanization. In both cases, the eating vessels used, or potentially used, by animals is rejected. Fikile's sister is describing as bringing her own bowl rather than eating from a bowl labelled "dog", while Dudu prefers to skip lunch and eat later at home than to eat with a plate potentially 'smelled by a dog'. Revealingly, this decision is framed as a refusal to accept dehumanizing food practices and thus to reclaim her full humanity: "I am human. No never, forget it".

Extract 7

Fikile: My sister says that the bowl she was eating with had "dog" written on the outside. She ended going back with her own bowl.

Int: Oh Lord!

Fikile: You cannot eat in a dog's bowl because if you are not around at work the dog eats with that bowl.

Extract 8

Dudu: Knowing that I'll eat at home in the afternoon.

Int: Mm.

Dudu: I won't eat with a plate smelled by dogs outdoors. I am human. No never, forget it!

Extracts 7 and 8 illustrate dehumanization *in extremis*. In the face of experiences, one might ask why respondents did not simply withdraw their labour and exit the employment relationship. In some cases, they indeed reported doing so. As we have seen in extract 1, for example, Buhle noted that negative experiences of contact had led her to resign from her role as domestic labourer on the grounds that “I just realised the kind of life I was to live there. Being enslaved...”. This choice was taken, she added, even in the face of her educational disadvantage, i.e. “I didn’t study but I vowed that I’ll never work for her”.

However, as other earlier extracts have implied, the possibility of exiting dehumanizing relationships was for other respondents constrained by factors related to systemic inequality, including socioeconomic hierarchies (Extract 4), unemployment (Extract 4), and access to education (Extract 5). As another of our interviewees explained, such factors limited the choices available to domestic labourers and thus “...we’ve become used to the situation and made them our friends because we have no alternative.”

The limits to agency in face of the structural disadvantage are poignantly captured in our final extract. Here Mrs Z explains why she accepts mistreatment by her employers.

Extract 9

Mrs Z: I sometimes do experience that [poor treatment by employers] but there’s nothing I can do because I won’t let my children go to sleep on an empty stomach, you see?

Int: Mm.

Mrs Z: Because she can come from school and say she wants food. Look at who? Looking at me. She doesn’t have a father. I do experience that indeed.

Mrs Z articulates the powerlessness and desperation that she endures because of the basic, physical needs that she must meet for her family. She underlines the necessity of providing for her children (“I won’t let my children go to sleep on an empty stomach”) and notes that this is a responsibility that she alone can fulfil. This is powerfully captured in her description of her child coming home from school hungry. The weight of her responsibility is captured by her description of an embodied moment of accountability: “Looking at who? Looking at me”. Mrs Z cites such moments as the reason that she accepts poor treatment by her employers. She must work to make a wage to feed her children. Constrained from exiting the relationship, negative contact is a routine and ineluctable experience she must endure.

Discussion

Dehumanisation is typically associated with extreme forms of intergroup violence such as slavery, torture, human trafficking, and genocide. Building on recent social psychological research (Haslam et al., 2007, Kteily & Bruneau, 2017), our study suggests that dehumanization and humiliation may also unfold in more mundane ways – hence our use of the term ‘everyday dehumanization’ – arising through more ordinary forms of mistreatment that explicitly serve, insidiously and cumulatively, to foster a perceived loss of humanity. Furthermore, the humiliation evident in the analysis is not implicit or subtle, but is instead blatant and explicit. The combination of being both blatant and everyday might make this form of humiliation and dehumanization particularly powerful. Everyday contact across group lines is one mechanism through which process this unfolds. Whereas positive intergroup contact has been found to diminish the dehumanization of others (e.g., Tam et

al., 2008; Capozza et al., 2014; Bruneau et al., 2020), negative contact may work in the opposite direction.

As our study shows, for example, dehumanisation may result when a child for whom a domestic worker has cared no longer greets that worker when entering the home, rendering her invisible as a full human being. It may occur when a domestic worker is not offered the utensils used by other members of a household, thereby being treated implicitly as a source of contamination or even disgust. It may occur when she is offered out-of-date food that other members of the household do not consume, thus being placed beyond the threshold of full personhood. It may occur when she is asked to do demeaning work yet denied adequate cleaning equipment or due acknowledgement of the physical discomfort that this causes (or even of the value of the associated form of domestic labour). The boundaries between the categories of dehumanization our study has explored can become blurred or interconnected in practice, as in the case of paid domestic workers. This is especially the case when dehumanization involves interactions and activities that mimic servitude because servants in colonial contexts were treated simultaneously like animals and soulless machines. In short, negative contact experiences may sustain the forms of animalistic and mechanical (or a combination thereof) dehumanization extensively documented in the recent social psychological literature (see Haslam, 2006; Haslam & Loughnan, 2014).

The accumulation of such experiences, we have argued, may engender a sense of humiliation (see also McCauley, 2017); that is, a sense of shame intertwined with a sense of injustice. Although seldom researched in the contact literature, humiliation is a significant affective response for several reasons. First, as our interview accounts powerfully testify, humiliation engenders suffering – a sense of rejection, abjection, loss of human dignity, and

being likened to animals. Second, as Crowley (2014) finds in her study of workplace relational processes, by flagging the injustice of existing status relations between groups, humiliation heightens the salience of categories such as race, prompting both anger and resistance. It thus sustains intergroup as well as interpersonal divisions.

It is worth reiterating here that their individual experiences of humiliation were typically constructed by our interviewees in starkly racialised terms (i.e., as a symptom of wider status relations between Indian and Black residents). Like other forms of negative contact (see Paolini, Harwood & Rubin, 2010), such experiences sharpened the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Moreover, they prompted acts of defiance, as expressed, for example, by a refusal to eat lunch using second rate utensils or to consume food past its ‘sell by’ date.

At the same time, another central theme of our analysis was that dehumanising experiences of contact were constructed as routine, blatant, and often inescapable by our interviewees. They were routine in that they were a recurring feature of interactions between domestic labourers and their employers, as illustrated by daily rituals of food sharing and the allocation of labour. They were blatant in that they were not subtle, implicit or ambiguous. They were inescapable in that many of our interviewees reported feeling trapped in relationships of economic dependency with their employers. Avoiding dehumanisation by exiting such relationships, they argued, was a difficult choice to make – a choice, for example, that might lead to unemployment, food insecurity and other hardship.

Such findings qualify a recent theme in the contact literature. Drawing mainly on survey data, several commentators have argued that negative contact experiences occur far less frequently than positive contact experiences (e.g., Barlow et al., 2012; Graf et al., 2014), even if they have equally, if not more, important consequences for intergroup relations.

Indeed, this is a central point made in the most up to date review of the literature (Schäfer et al., 2021). Whilst it may be true of intergroup relations in many contexts, we believe it should not blind us to important exceptions. Within domestic labour relations in South Africa, for example, the economic dependency of domestic labourers on their employers, the power differences between them, and the strongly racialised nature of their everyday interactions, mean that negative contact experiences, and associated feelings of dehumanisation and humiliation, are far from rare occurrences. They are endemic features of participants' everyday reality in these contexts of servitude. Recognition of this fact has implications for promoting social change.

Interventions to promote positive contact are often undermined by enduring practices of segregation (e.g., McKeown & Dixon, 2017), and this has led researchers to explore ways of breaking down barriers to interaction, e.g. by promoting indirect forms of contact as an intermediary step to face to face encounters or increasing participants' contact 'confidence' or 'readiness' (e.g. see Turner & Cameron, 2016). In some ways, the challenge presented by the kinds of interaction on which we have focused is precisely the opposite. How can we reduce negative contact experiences in which the denial of full human status to others has become routinized or even part of an institutional system (e.g., the organisation of domestic labour relations)? What kinds of interventions might weaken the relationship between contact, dehumanization and humiliation?

Limitations and future directions

The present research has four limitations that must be acknowledged. First, we have presented a case study focused on a clearly hierarchical and institutionalised form of

negative contact, namely interactions between domestic servants and their employers in post-apartheid South Africa. Generalization from this case study to other forms of contact in South Africa or more widely should be made with due caution. After all, the social organization of the domestic labour system is arguably in itself conducive to humiliation. Such labour is a product of deep structural inequalities and carries racialized and colonial echoes of the master-servant relationship.

Second and related, we have focused on relations between Black residents of an informal settlement and Indian residents of a more established, formal, neighbourhood, with both groups being embedded in a context of neighbourhood conflict (see our context section). Again, this warrants caution in terms of generalisation to other local or international contexts.

Third, our analysis has focused theoretically and empirically on accounts of negative contact experiences. However, this should not be taken to imply the interactions between domestic workers and their employers were invariably negative in character. Indeed, we want to emphasize that some of our interviewees explicitly highlighted positive relations with formal residents that did not make them feel stripped of their humanity. As one put it, “They are not the same. There are those who are better [...] They regard you as a person, that you are one of them.”

Fourth, unlike most psychological research on dehumanization (see also Bastion & Haslam, 2011), we have focused not on the motivations of perpetrators but on the lived experiences and accounts of targets. In so doing, we believe, our analysis has revealed how particular contact experiences may be constructed by their recipients as undermining their humanity and, by implication, fostering a sense of personal and collective humiliation. However, we would equally acknowledge that ‘dehumanizing’ forms of contact may be

constructed quite differently by targets than perpetrators. Indeed, the relativity of such constructions is itself a potential topic of future research.

Future Directions

In conclusion we offer two further suggestions for future research.

Recovering the varying, context specific forms of negative contact and exploring how they accomplish dehumanization

Although positive intergroup contact is often rated as occurring more frequently - based mainly on the evidence of general surveys [BLINDED] - we believe that negative and dehumanizing contact experiences are both more common and more various than the current literature acknowledges, at least within specific contexts. This may be particularly true for members of historically disadvantaged communities, and it is unfortunately not difficult to come up with examples. One thinks, for instance, of experiences of sexual objectification by women in the workplace, of African Americans during 'stop and search' procedures, of homeless people on the street, of immigrants placed in detention centres, of Palestinians at Israeli security checkpoints, of Muslim travellers moving through airport security, of Dalit children in the Indian education system, of people with special mental or physical needs across a range of institutional settings . . . the list could be multiplied and, we would guess, many readers of this paper have already done so with regard to their own communities. Generic questionnaire scales weighing the overall prevalence of 'negative' contact experiences in a 'general population' risk overlooking these more specific, contextualised, ambiguous and varied expressions (BLINDED).

For this reason, we would advocate the use of increased qualitative engagement to explore how participants themselves construct their experience and meaning of negative contact across a range of everyday settings (Durrheim & Dixon 2005, Greenland, 2021) and, more specifically, to investigate the interactional practices through which such contact may accomplish dehumanization. Indeed, with regards to the latter, we would argue that negative contact is not simply correlated with dehumanization but is part of its very construction and reproduction. By routinely offering a domestic worker a coffee cup not used by the rest of the family, for example, an employer *enacts* dehumanization and creates a situation in which she *becomes* humiliated by being treated a source of contamination. This is the one of the main points of our paper. Understanding this kind of interactional process, we believe, looks towards a new theoretical integration of research on contact, dehumanization, and humiliation.

Beyond prejudice

The consequences of dehumanizing forms of negative contact may extend well beyond the outcomes traditionally prioritized in the contact literature, which has tended to focus on intergroup attitudes and stereotyping. Based on our case study, we would highlight two additional outcomes that merit further investigation.

The first concerns the potential health consequences of the kinds of painful and degrading experiences articulated by our interviewees. This issue invites us to integrate research on the contact hypothesis with research on how discrimination impacts upon the mental and physical well-being of its targets (see also Dovidio et al., 2017). In this regard, for example, it may not be incidental that the sense of shame experienced by residents of

informal settlements in South Africa has been associated with various health problems (e.g., see Gibbs, Govender & Jewkes, 2018). We should not be surprised to discover that dehumanization is bad for one's health or that negative intergroup contact experiences help to explain why.

The second outcome concerns the role of intergroup contact in shaping wider political attitudes and behaviours amongst members of different historically disadvantaged communities. Although this form of contact is generally neglected in the literature, which tends to focus on 'majority-minority relations', there is some evidence that positive interactions have the potential to promote political solidarity amongst the disadvantaged. In a directly relevant South African study, for example, Dixon et al. (2015) found that Indian residents who had experienced positive contact with Black neighbours were more likely to support joint collective action and race-targeted policies to improve their neighbours' living conditions.

The present research suggests, however, that negative contact between disadvantaged communities may have the opposite effect. Specifically, contact that dehumanizes others and provokes associated feelings of humiliation may cue powerful perceptions of intergroup injustice (see also McCauley, 2017). It may thereby undermine relations of solidarity between historically disadvantaged communities. As our case study demonstrates, for example, dehumanising contact experiences tended to diminish our interviewees' sense of common political affiliation with local Indian residents, many of whom share a common history of disadvantage under the apartheid system. They did so by heightening the salience of racial distinctions and status differences and fostering a sense of not only personal but also political grievance.

Footnotes

1. Informal settlements are residential areas designated 'illegal' – at least in their initial phases of development - as they are built on private or municipal land. In South Africa, such settlements are home to a sizeable percentage of the country's population, most of whom live in conditions of poverty and disadvantage. The residents of informal settlements typically lack access to adequate amenities (e.g., potable water, health care facilities, sewage, and garbage removal), and this includes access to power. Electricity 'theft' in which residents tap into the local power supply of neighbouring formal settlements is thus a common practice in some communities.

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Figure 1