COVID-19 restrictions and sense of humanness:

The impact on identification with all humanity and the role of human needs threat

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Background

Dehumanization, the denial of the humanity of individuals or groups, is a pervasive phenomenon, more evident towards extremely stigmatized groups but equally dangerous towards broader social categories (Haslam, 2006; Volpato, 2011). From dehumanization stems **self-dehumanization**, the perception of oneself as less human as a result of internalizing the dehumanizing perspectives and behaviors of others towards oneself (Baldissarri & Andrighetto, 2021; Bastian & Haslam, 2010). Recent research has demonstrated that people tend to experience dehumanization and self-dehumanization also when the conditions of the surrounding environment represent a threat and a significant obstacle to the satisfaction of their **fundamental psychological needs** (Demoulin, 2020). According to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), the satisfaction of fundamental psychological needs allows for the optimal development of innate human potential, enabling effective well-being. Threats to the satisfaction of these needs can undermine such development, hinder self-actualization, and impair the perception of one's full humanity (Demoulin, 2020).

Aim and Hypotheses

Starting from February 2020, many governments have imposed severe **restrictions on personal freedoms** for an extended period to limit the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this study we focused on two inner dimensions that restrictions could have undermined: the satisfaction of **human needs** (e.g., need for control or belongingness) and **self-dehumanization**. We hypothesized that the restrictions introduced during the pandemic increased self-dehumanization and that the **threat to human needs** could explain this relationship. Furthermore, we analyzed the impact of this link on the **connection with other human beings** by considering the two factors of the identification with all humanity scale (Mc Farland et al., 2012), namely **bond with humanity** and **concern for humanity**.

Method

- **Preregistration** on OSF
- 278 Italian participants through Prolific Academic (118 females, age range=18-59, Mage= 27.43, SDage=8.32)
- **Experimental study** with a **recall task**:

  - restrictions condition - participants were asked to think about COVID-19 restrictions, were presented with a list of restrictions during the red zone and asked to write down their feelings and emotions during the lockdown and the red zone period. Then, participants fulfilled a series of self-report measures by thinking about how they felt during that period.

  - control condition - participants were only asked to reply to the same questions by referring to their present feelings.

- **Measures**:

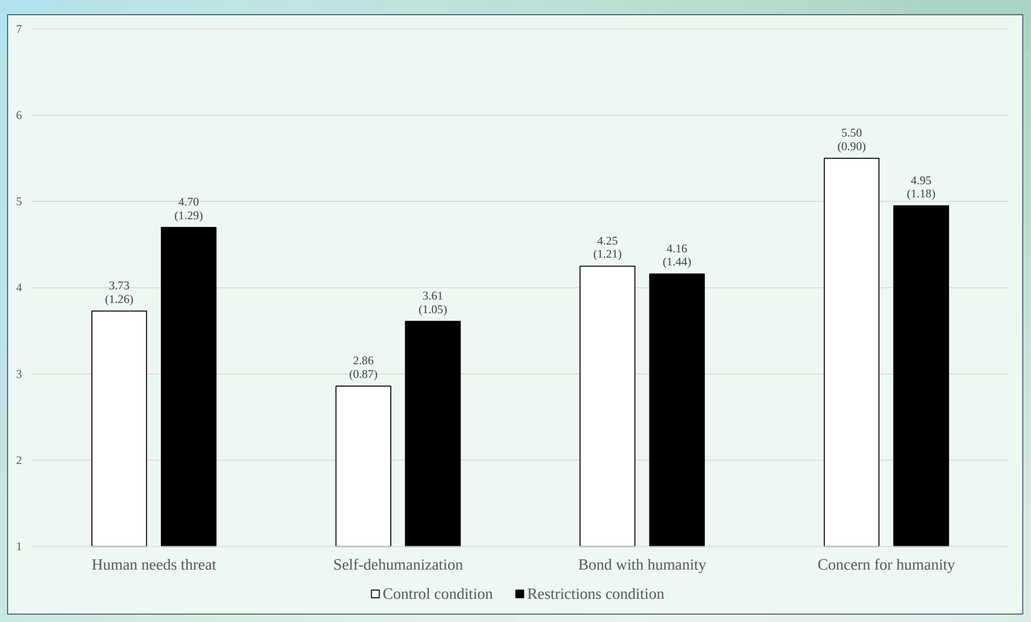
  - Needs threat scale (Williams, 2009)

  - Self-dehumanization (Bastian and colleagues, 2013)

  - Identification with all humanity (IWAH) Scale (Hamer et al., 2021)

Results

Participants who recalled COVID-19 restrictions reported **stronger feelings of human needs threat** and **decreased self-perception as a complete human** than participants in the control condition.



Furthermore, with a serial mediational model we found that **Self-dehumanization** was related to **decreased concern for humanity**, *B*=-.31, *SE*=.08, *t*(274)=-3.99, *p*<.001, that in turn was linked to bond with humanity *B*=.70, *SE*=.06, *t*(273)=14.64, *p*<.001. Crucially, the negative indirect association of condition with bond with humanity via human needs threat, self-dehumanization, and concern for humanity was significant, a*b*c*d=-.09, 95%CI[-.16,-.04]. Interestingly, the condition held a direct and positive association with decreased bond with humanity, *B*=.30, *SE*=.06, *t*(273)=14.64, *p*=.002. Thus, on the one hand, restrictions have a direct positive association with the perception of being tied to humanity. On the other, when the process of human needs threat and self-dehumanization is active, restrictions have an opposite outcome: a **decreased perception** of **being connected** with humanness.



Conclusions

This study analyzed an environmental antecedent of self-dehumanization by demonstrating that **restrictions experienced during the pandemic** in Italy could have **undermined the sense of humanness**. Furthermore, it empirically showed a **relationship between human needs threat and self-dehumanization**. Finally, this study shows that **self-dehumanization due to restrictions is strictly linked to the people's perception of feeling out of the entire human group**. In this way, it was provided further evidence that COVID restrictions undermined not only the feeling of humanness of everyone but also the connection among the entire humanity.

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