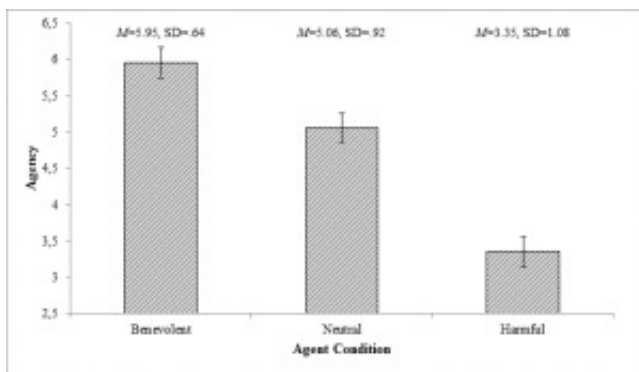


## People and companies who do harm are dehumanized, not typecasted

It is clear that people who do harm are disliked and often find themselves the targets of severe condemnation. They may be shunned, actively avoided, or at times even harshly punished. Remember the outrage directed at Bernie Madoff? But might the very act of harming change the way we think about people?

New research from our lab suggests that when people or agents cause harm to others they are often denied fundamental humanlike qualities, like rationality, self-control, and the capacity to feel and imagine (we use “agent” here as philosophers do, simply to denote entities, like people and animals, that have goals and mental states; agents are, in short, *things with minds*). We found that people who do harm are “dehumanized”—they are seen as *less than human* in a number of essential ways. This is particularly true of individuals who cause harm without good justifications for doing so, and those who cause harm to people that one personally cares about.



Attributions of agency to the human target by agent condition (Study 1). Error bars  $\pm 1$  SE.

The idea that harmful agents are dehumanized may not sound like news but it actually runs contrary to what is predicted by a popular perspective in psychology, known as “moral typecasting theory.” Moral typecasting theory argues that agents who act in morally relevant ways—whether by harming or helping those around them—are “typecasted” as agents, that is, as things with minds, goals, rationality, and so on. This process is thought to be akin to the way movie stars are often typecasted for a certain role after one particularly successful acting debut (think Alan Rickman or Al Pacino as the iconic Hollywood villain). Once the actor is typecasted for a particular part it may be difficult for the actor to change people’s conceptualization of them. When applied to people who do harm, moral typecasting theory predicts that harmful agents are typecasted as agents (i.e., things with minds) and this conception of the person as agentive endures over time.

As provocative as this theory is, one problem with it is that it directly conflicts with another important theory in psychology—called dehumanization theory, associated with the famous social psychologist, Albert Bandura—which argues that people need to justify the harm they do to or wish upon others, either to feel good about themselves or to make sense of their own actions and feelings. From this perspective, we might suspect that harmful agents, because they are targets of venom and hatred, are dehumanized either as a way for people to make sense of the agent's actions, or to justify how they feel toward them.

Indeed, our findings were much more consistent with a dehumanization perspective. Rather than being typecasted as “agents”, we found that people and companies who did harm, compared to non-offenders or those who behaved in morally positive ways, were repeatedly dehumanized—they were denied fundamental human traits, like rationality, thought, imagination, self-control, emotionality, communicative skills, and empathy. They were even seen as less tenacious and goal-oriented than neutral and benevolent agents. Harmful agents were stripped of their status as “mind-having” entities. We found this to be true across a number of studies, with various human targets and even with companies.

Furthermore, our studies showed that harmful agents are denied full humanity as a means for people to make sense of the violence and harm they caused. When people cause harm, those around them need to make sense of their behavior, and as a result of this process, they are denied the essential ingredients that make humans human.

## **Publication**

[Perceiving the agency of harmful agents: A test of dehumanization versus moral typecasting accounts.](#)

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