

PERSONHOOD VERSUS DEHUMANIZATION: THE DILEMMA OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

The focus of the study is to critically analyze personhood and the influence that obstructs the natural human drive to affirm oneself as a human being. In order to carry out the work, a qualitative method was employed. In this method, descriptive analytical tool was used to analyze the data collected. The work was effectively handled in the following heading: conceptualization of personhood, human worth as the source of human rights, forms of dehumanization, and the factors that facilitates dehumanization. It was discovered that has internal drive to attain self-fulfillment which can be frustrated within the social context.

Key words: Personhood, Dehumanization, Society, Dilemma, Contemporary.

INTRODUCTION

The status of being a person is the recognition and respects for the unique combination of characteristics, qualities and patterns of thought, feeling and behaviour that distinct an individual from another. This involves a wide range of psychological and behavioural attributes that shape how a person perceives, thinks, feels, and behaves in various situations. However, personhood cannot be equated to human dignity or rights. Personhood is achieved state of growth, development, which can be acquired individually and socially. This intrinsically implies that personhood can be acquired and anything that can be acquired can be lost. It is not so with human dignity, that is inherent in man's nature. It cannot be taken by anyone nor can it be destroyed. Hence, it is common to hear people speak about human being as behaving in an undignified manner.

It is impossible, especially within the context of the study, to analyze personhood without delving into the act or process of dehumanization. For dehumanization negatively affect the condition that makes human being a 'person' in an ideal sense. As the degree of personhood depends on individual and society attributes, so as dehumanization can be either self-impose or influence by the society one belongs. Dehumanization is any act that causes one to become less human. It is also any act that physically or mentally injures human beings, turns them into objects, or any other process that puts obstacles in people's path as they attempt to articulate and pursue their own dreams (Barbara 2008)). Extrinsically speaking, the denial of individuality or self worth is specially dehumanizing for the poor and marginalized in the society. It is against this background that prompted the study: personhood versus dehumanization: the dilemma of contemporary society.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

Personhood: A person is a comprehensive name given to man's being, a name expressing his entire reality in a precise and unequivocal way. This term is uniquely attributed to man, and can never be used for plants or animals. Personhood is the quality or status of being a person (Isaac 2023).

Dehumanization: It refers to any act that causes one literally to become less human. Dehumanization, in other words, is any act that physically or mentally injures human beings, turns them into objects, or any other process that puts obstacles in people's path as they attempt to articulate and pursue their own dreams (Barbara 2008).

Society: Individuals in groups do not exist in isolation, but exist and interact with other members of the group, and these interactions follow some laid-down patterns of behavior that are acceptable to the group. All these interacting individuals and groups, and their activities exist in a larger set-up called society. Society, therefore, refers to the whole range of social relationships within the set-up. In other words, society embraces human beings, their activities and relationships to one another and in relation to their natural and social environment (Ezewu 1982).

Dilemma: A situation in which it is very difficult to decide what to do, because all the choices seem equally good or equally bad.

Cotemporary: Belonging to the present time. Happening or done in the same period of time (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 2003).

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF PERSONHOOD

Historically speaking, there was no word for a 'person' in existence to fully express the concept 'person'. The only similar Latin word is 'persona' which commonly means that of 'disguising'. Disguising literally means a masquerade, which logically implies that, a person is the man behind the mask (Mondin 1991). As such, there is no generally acceptable concept for a 'person', though some scholars based the absolute value of a person essentially on class, rank, wealth and race. Hence, the concept 'person' has different meaning to different groups. The different in the conception of 'person' is sometimes contradictory and naturally attracts a puzzle about the wholeness of a person.

However, a person is a comprehensive name given to man's being, a name expressing his entire reality in a precise and unequivocal way. This term is uniquely attributed to human being, and can never be used for objects, things or animals. Personhood is the quality or status of being a person. Nevertheless, personhood strikes a balance between man's collective identity as a member of society and his personal identity as a unique individual. From man's collective identity, Mnyandu (1997) asserts that personhood is a state attained by fulfilling certain society expectations which are conceived to define personhood. For Michael (2011), these society expectations are basically prescribed obligations, norms, and achievements which are socially recognized as pertinent to the conception of personhood.

An individual as a unique person deserves respect and recognition of his qualities, worth, dignity, rights and motivated by particular needs and ambitions. Thus, the emphasis upon a person's individuality and freedom is always balanced against the entire social context. That simply implies that human rights, dignity or worth is nonsensical outside a given society. It is the society that provides the vacuum for recognition or dehumanization of a person. What makes a person 'who he is' can only be achieved through a process, and the society serves as a guide. Thus, the notion of personhood only makes meaning through social determinants. The society directly

confers personhood on its individuals based on certain personal achievements that are accorded social importance (Michael 2011). Even though, all human beings are 'human', the society assumes that the degree of personhood depends upon some distinguished characteristics or traits. These social assumptions gave room to social class, connection and status in the society.

HUMAN WORTH AS THE SOURCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Every human person possesses inherent worth of being human. Humanness is a gift from God. Human being, unlike other animal species, has inestimable worth; for man is not a thing or animal that can be estimated. This intrinsically implies that, the worth of man is infinite by nature. It is impossible for anyone to categorically measure the worth of man with certainty. Hence, the worth of man transcends the comprehensiveness of humans. Since human worth is intrinsically part of human personality, then, every individual should act in ways that promotes, improves, exalts, respects, uplifts, or dignifies the worth of man, it is called humanization. In the contrary, when opponents act in ways that disgrace, corrupt, demean, debase, pervert, animalize, objectify, or mechanize other individuals, it is called dehumanization.

According to Grieger as quoted by Agbo (2008) dehumanization mainly deals with the loss or diminishment of four basic human qualities namely; the inherent worth in being human, the uniqueness of the individual, the freedom to act and the ability to make decisions, and the equality of status. This implicit loss of human worth is dehumanizing, especially for the poor and marginalized in society. The diminishment of the worth of man by man is not a strange experience as long as human existence is concerned. Even though, dehumanization is a process that may be noticeable or not noticeable. .

Human being is worthy of human rights as originally ascribed to him/her by God and nature. Thus, human rights are derived from the basic aspects of human worth. Human rights are not subjective, racial, religious, political, or regional rights that discriminates humanity at diverse grounds, but universal rights. These rights place man as a global citizenship of the physical world. Hence, human worth is a direct source of human rights. What are human rights?

Among the basic contents of human rights, these rights are identified as follows:

- i. The right to life and means of livelihood;
- ii. The right to respect as a being with personal dignity;
- iii. The right to education and to participate in the cultural heritage of one's society for the development of one's personality;
- iv. The right to marry and establish a home;
- v. The right to freedom of association and political participation;
- vi. The right to worship God according the dictates of one's conscience and to religious liberty;
- vii. The right to freedom of thought, of speech, of information, of movement and assembly;
- viii The right to equality before the law and to equal protection of the law;
- ix. The right to self determination and free choice of state of life- profession
- x. The right to work and express oneself creatively;
- xi. The right to social services and security;
- xii. The right to be recognized as a person at all times and everywhere.

A global view of the itemized articles of human rights and a quick reflection on the nature of the

human personality already portrayed easily convinces one that human rights are indeed the natural and befitting prerogatives of the human person, a being endowed with the power of reasoning and free will, a creative being in whose hands lie his future and destiny (Iwe 2000). Agbo (2008) quotes Maiese Michelle that, dehumanization as a psychological process whereby opponents view each other as less than human and thus not deserving of moral consideration. Everyone has some basic human rights that should not be violated. When these rights are violated, it is said to be dehumanizing. Thus human rights violation paves the way for human dehumanization.

FORMS OF DEHUMANIZATION

Traditionally, dehumanization has been understood as an extreme form of prejudice that enables violence and cruelty. It can also take subtle and everyday forms. However, there are three form of dehumanization as follows:

1. *Objectification form of Dehumanization:* Dehumanization in this context is the process of depriving a person human attributes such as compassion, dignity, individuality etc. According to Ashley Montagu and Floyd Matson as quoted by Agbo (2008) that dehumanization might well be considered “the fifth horse men of the apocalypse” because of the inestimable damage it has dealt to society. When people are likened to objects, the logic follows, they become dispensable; and any atrocity can be justified. A good example is the Japanese, who are in constant warfare with their enemies called '*maruta*' meaning logs. [Yoshio Shinozuka](#) the Japanese army said, we called the victims 'logs.' We didn't want to think of them as people. We didn't want to admit that we were taking lives. So we convinced ourselves that what we were doing was like cutting down a tree (Dybbro 2017).

Behaviorally, dehumanization describes a [disposition](#) towards others that debases the others' individuality by portraying it as an "individual" object. Individuals in a position of power were more likely to objectify their subordinates, treating them as a means to one's end rather than focusing on their essentially human qualities (Goff et al 2008). However, as a process, dehumanization may be expressed with a figure of speech in which inanimate objects or abstractions are endowed with human qualities; dehumanization then is the disendowment of these same qualities or a reduction to [abstraction](#) (Gordon 2017).

2. *Animalistic form of Dehumanization:* This form of dehumanization happens when people are denied uniquely human attributes and likened to animals. Animalistic dehumanization is employed on a mostly intergroup basis. When people become animal, then any atrocity can be justified. A good example is when the Nazis carried out a successful campaign of anti-Semitic propaganda to dehumanize the Jews in Germany in the 1940s, describing them as 'rats' or 'vermin' and arguing that the threatened the 'racial purity' of Aryans (Agbo 2008).

3. *Mechanistic form of Dehumanization:* The use of machines should augment and humanize humans, not automate and dehumanize humans (Bushwick 2023). Contrary to this, humans have being reduced to machines, and hereby dehumanized. When people are denied uniquely human attributes and likened to machines; then, the logic follows, that any atrocity can be justified. A good example is the relationship that exists between employer and employee. The former has the tendency of dehumanizing the latter, which can lead to social disengagement. That is termination, resignation or abandonment of social contract.

Historically, employees has been subject to dehumanization, when employers treat them as mere machines instead of human that justify dangerous work conditions (Rathod and Nadas

2017). Machines are facilities used by human being to make work easier, faster and efficient. Machines are not humans, and by human dignity and worth, machines should not be a substitute for humans. Thus, when machine is attributed with human attributes is an act of dehumanization. Machine for work are properties own by the employers, while human being (that is the employee) is not properties. The failure to recognize an individual's or group humanity is dehumanization. Moreover, dehumanization can take a process of manipulating an individual to work within the prescribed line of the employer. Besides manipulations of target persons, manipulations of social goals validate this prediction.

However, the contemporary atmosphere automatically places the employers in a social advantageous position. All power, legal status, financial instruments etc are in the powers possession. These can be used either to dehumanize or promote human well being. While the employees, though has inalienable rights, these rights can be denial. In the work place, employers can cunningly dehumanize their employees by creating unfavorable working conditions.

FACTORS THAT FACILITATES DEHUMANIZATION

1. *High Status:* The social status of citizens is basic criterion, particularly when scrutinizing the act or process of dehumanization in our contemporary society. The society is compost of people of diverse social status that occupy various significant hierarchical positions. Of course, the discussion on dehumanization will never be complete without making reference to social status. However, the class of the rich and powerful are closely associated with dehumanization than the poor and less privilege class. Dehumanization is collectively experience among people of diverse social status in the society, the poor and vulnerable that bears the brute more. Thus, this implicit loss of human worth is especially dehumanizing for the poor and marginalized in society. The concept 'dehumanization' is the process of stripping away human qualities, such as denying others their individuality and self-esteem. The unpredictable nature of man makes it possible that man want to strip his fellow of their human qualities. No doubt, man can be threatened or envious of his fellow who prospers and of good qualities. Threat, however, is a form of dehumanization human being experience.

Members of high-status groups more often associate humanity with the in-group than the out-group, while members of low-status groups exhibit no differences in associations with humanity. Thus, having a high status makes one more likely to dehumanize others. Low-status groups are more associated with human nature traits (e.g., warmth, emotionalism) than uniquely human characteristics, implying that they are closer to animals than humans because these traits are typical of humans but can be seen in other species (Harris 2006).

Dehumanization describes a [disposition](#) towards others that debases the others' individuality by portraying it as an "individual" species. Thus, the dehumanizing language follows as: these people are not our class, they are not our type or these people are not our march. Nevertheless, the inappropriate designation of responsibility to individuals without due consideration of their diverse social status can be demoralizing and dehumanizing. In other words, to designate assignment to individual below his/her status is dehumanization in disguise. The Cut (2018) maintains that to march is to assert your humanity, to shove it in the face of those who would try to dehumanize you. Insisting on what befits one, of course is not arrogance, but the way of sustaining humanness. Thus, the equality of status is basic requirement to be considered, if work must be delivered without damage on human personality.

2. *Power:* According to Hans (1956), power as man's control over the minds and actions of other men, that by power we refer to the mutual relations of control among the holders of public

authority and between the latter and the people at large. Hans went further to contend that power is a psychological relation those who exercise it and those over whom it is exercised; that it gives the former control over certain actions of the latter through the influence which the former exert over the latter's minds. That influence may be exerted through orders, threats, persuasion or a combination of any of these (Mbah 2007). These influential acts of course, are dehumanizing.

Nevertheless, the underlining aspect of human relationship may be for the struggle of power, in a constant and subtle manner. Mbah (2007) quote Shively that power as the ability of one person to cause another to do what the first wishes, by whatever means. He cited an example of Hitler rose to high office by convincing many Germans to vote for him. Power may be exercised by coercion when we force a person to do something he or she did not want to do, as persuasion when we convince someone that that is what he or she really wishes to do, or as construction of incentives, when we make the alternative so unattractive that only one reasonable option remains. The act or process of forcing one against his/her moral principle is dehumanization. Moreover, the ability to exercise any of these forms of power may be based on all sorts of things: money, affection, physical strength, legal status- for example the power in the possession of important information, a winning smile, strong allies, determination e.t.c. Manipulation involves control exercised without threats, typically using resources of information and ideas. Most times people do not realize they are being manipulated and even dehumanized.

From time memorial, man has been in control of his fellow man. Man enslaved to man. Man has lord over his fellow and become god to his fellow. No wonder Nietzsche says, "God is dead, God is dead. Who killed Him? You and I. we all are His murders". Man has become a god in himself by dehumanizing his fellow through oppression, and marginalization of his fellow man. Perhaps, it's the rich and strong that is prone to treat others in the manner that denigrates their humanity.

Dehumanization is a process that oppressors use to prevent human beings from achieving the freedom to understand and change their conditions. In an oppressive society, oppressors use dehumanization to maintain their power over others and prevent them from being more authentically human (Freire 2015). Dehumanization can take the form of manipulation that is to seek to control someone cunningly. It can also take the form of withdrawal of certain benefits, in order to influence one to act within the expected line. All these processes are orchestrated to diminish the inherent worth in being human.

3. *Social Connection:* Human beings are dynamic social species. Social connection is engraved in the nature of man, to relate with others. It is the experience of feeling close and connected to others. It is a core of psychological need, essential to feeling satisfied with life. It begins at birth, in our relationship with our caregiver and the effects of this relationship seem to reverberate throughout our lives. It involves feeling loved, confidence, and cared for, sense of belonging, valued, meaningfulness, understanding, sense of belonging, self-worth, and forms the basis of interpersonal relationships. Stable and supportive relationships give us the support we need to cope with stress, anxiety, depression, mental illness, frustration, suicidal thoughts and behaviours. Thus, social connection is essential for human survival, development and promotes well-being.

Social connection may be based on social factors as education, employment, family influence, and wealth. However, for dehumanization to occur, group distinctions have to be based on some meaningful difference rather than more random assignment to a group. Dehumanization is the denial of humanness to outside group, by reducing human involvement or interaction with them.

Social connection involves thinking about a close other or being in the actual presence of a close other; enables dehumanization by reducing the attribution of human mental states, increasing support for treating targets like animals, and increasing willingness to endorse harsh

interrogation tactics (Harris 2006) This is counter-intuitive because social connection has documented personal health and well-being benefits but appears to impair [intergroup relations](#). Dehumanization is viewed as a central component to intergroup violence because it is frequently the most important precursor to moral exclusion, the process by which stigmatized groups are placed outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply (Livingstone 2011).

CONCLUSION

Every right thinking or reasonable person has the natural drive for self-fulfillment; and acquiring the good things life has in stock. In fact, everyone deserves to have their basic needs met. Moreover, not everyone adheres to the ways of promoting the conditions that makes one who he ought to be. It is through acquiring status that constitutes one as a person, is first a personal adventure. The society acts as guide in the process of attaining personhood. Thus, personhood is achieved through fulfilling those norms, prescriptions, or requirements that the society stipulates for the well-being of citizens. Therefore, asserting the state of personhood and also the degradation of a person can only be carried out within the fabric of society.

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