Causes and Consequences of Delegitimization: Models of Conflict and Ethnocentrism

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Delegitimization is the process of categorizing groups into extremely negative social categories and excluding them from acceptability. This paper analyzes the causes and consequences of delegitimization and suggests two models that describe the role of conflict in delegitimization and of ethnocentrism in delegitimization. During conflict, when the ingroup perceives the negative goal(s) of an outgroup as far-reaching and evil, feelings of threat become intensified and delegitimization may be used to explain the conflict. Then, to prevent danger, the ingroup may harm the threatening group and justify the harm by delegitimization, which in turn increases perceived threat and intensifies harmful behavior toward the other group. Even mild conflicts can escalate, become violent, and lead to delegitimization as an explanation, and later, as justification. Ethnocentrism is related to this process because groups that are perceived as very different and devalued arouse feelings of fear and contempt. Their delegitimization leads to harm, and later, to intensified delegitimization to justify the harm.

The concept, delegitimization, describes a specific case of group categorization—categorization of a group or groups into extremely negative social categories that are excluded from the realm of acceptable norms and/or values (Bar-Tal, 1988, 1989a). Delegitimization is a fundamental process that permits moral exclusion. The most common means of delegitimization, which are not mutually exclusive, are as follows:

1. Dehumanization: labeling a group as inhuman by characterizing members as different from the human race—using either categories of subhuman creatures, such as “inferior races” and animals, or categories of

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negatively valued superhuman creatures, such as demons, monsters, and satans.

2. **Trait characterization**: describing a group as possessing extremely negative traits that are unacceptable in a given society, such as aggressors, idios, or parasites.

3. **Outcasting**: categorizing members of a group as transgressors of such pivotal social norms that they should be excluded from society and/or institutionalized—e.g., murderers, thieves, psychopaths, or maniacs.

4. **Use of political labels**: describing a group as a political entity that threatens the basic values of the given society, is a danger to its system, and is therefore totally unacceptable—e.g., Nazis, fascists, communists, or imperialists.

5. **Group comparison**: labeling with the name of a group that is negatively perceived, such as "Vandals" or "Huns." Each society has a cultural repertoire of groups that serve as symbols of malice, evil, or wickedness.

Although delegitimization is a category of stereotyping and prejudice, the latter terms refer to a wider range of cognitive and affective reactions. Delegitimization has distinct features: (a) it utilizes extremely negative, salient, and atypical bases for categorization; (b) it denies the humanity of the delegitimized group; (c) it is accompanied by intense, negative emotions of rejection, such as hatred, contempt, fear, or disgust; (d) it implies that the delegitimized group has the potential to endanger one's own group; and (e) it implies that the delegitimized group does not deserve human treatment and therefore harming it is justified.

The present paper explores the phenomenon of delegitimization by analyzing its causes and consequences. Two models are described—the conflict model and the ethnocentric model—each of which has certain specific conditions that elicit and maintain delegitimization.

**Conflict Model**

Every intergroup conflict begins with the perception that one group's goals are incompatible with the goals of another group (Bar-Tal, Kruglanski, & Klar, 1989; Pruitt & Rubin, 1986). The perception that a conflict exists means that a group finds itself blocked because the attainment of its goal or goals is precluded by another group. This situation is a common one—an inseparable part of intergroup relations. Because groups have many goals and in relations with many groups, it is unavoidable that some goals may be contradicted by goals of other groups, so conflicts are an inherent part of normal group life.

Conflicts can be of different types and intensity, and not all conflicts involve delegitimization. Therefore, it is important to ask: What conditions of conflict provoke extreme negative labeling? Two conditions in a conflict most frequently incite delegitimization: perception of the outgroup's goals as contradictory, far-reaching, and sinister; and the occurrence of extreme violence. Although these conditions can appear together, I will describe them separately.

**Threat and Delegitimization: Explanation and Derivation**

An ingroup experiences threat when it perceives that it cannot easily achieve its goals because of outgroup opposition (see Fig. 1). Since groups frequently experience conflict in the course of their intergroup relations, the crucial questions in explaining the appearance of delegitimization in the early phase of conflict are as follows: (a) How are the goals of the opponent perceived? (b) What is the nature of one's own goals that are perceived as blocked?

The first proposition is that when a group perceives that the negating goal(s) of an outgroup is (are) far-reaching, especially unjustified, and threatening to the basic goals of the ingroup, then the ingroup uses delegitimization to explain the conflict. In principle, these aspects are closely linked; when the goals of the outgroup are perceived as outrageous, farfetched, irrational, and malevolent, they are also seen as negating fundamental ingroup goals and therefore as threatening.

Usually this is a zero-sum type of conflict. The perception that the outgroup will achieve its goals poses a danger to the very existence of the ingroup. The danger can be economic (e.g., the group can be left without raw materials for industry), political (e.g., the political system is challenged), or military (e.g., the country, or part of it, is in danger of being conquered).

These beliefs about dangers anticipate impending, serious harm. Group members, thus threatened, believe the danger will occur, the cohesion of their group will be damaged, and its existence will be jeopardized. Whether the beliefs are based on "reality" or "imagination" does not matter; it is the perception of threat that leads to action and reaction (Bar-Tal et al., 1989; Pruitt, 1965). When threat is perceived, it is real for the perceivers (Cohen, 1979; Knorr, 1976).

Threat perception in general, and especially in situations of severe threat, is accompanied by stress, uncertainty, vulnerability, and fear (Lieberman, 1964;
Milburn, 1977; Singer, 1958; Tedeschi, 1970). These feelings arouse the need to understand and structure the situation quickly, thus allowing explanation and prediction (Y. Bar-Tal, 1989). Delegitimization fulfills this function. On one hand, it explains why the other group threatens, and on the other hand, it predicts what the other group will do in the future (see Fig. 1). Delegitimization thus enables parsimonious understanding—fast, unequivocal, and simple—and it is particularly likely to occur when high threat decreases ambiguity, narrows the range of considered alternatives, and leads to antagonism (Holsti, 1971; Hornstein, 1965; Smock, 1955; Tedeschi, 1970).

Figure 1 illustrates this situation where the ingroup uses delegitimization to explain the outgroup’s enraging aspirations and demands. As examples, delegitimating labels provide an explanation to Poles about why German Nazis decided to occupy their country, or to Americans about why the Soviet Union strives to dominate the world. Who else would do such things other than a group that is imperialistic, satanic, or fascist? These and other delegitimating labels indicate that a group has extremely negative characteristics, and by implication, extremely negative behaviors that they can execute.

Once employed, delegitimization leads to inferences of threat from the delegitimizing category (see Fig. 1). Thus, the labels “aggressive,” “ruthless,” “devious,” or “oppressive” indicate that the outgroup is capable of destruction, violence, or brutality, and this further disrupts the ingroup’s sense of security. In this way, the explanation, together with its derivation, form a vicious cycle in which the perception of severe threat and delegitimization feed each other.

The conflict between Americans and Soviets, which reached a peak during the cold war and only recently leveled out, provides an example of delegitimization based on absolute negating goals. From the American perspective, the Soviet goals expressed in communism contradict the American system. Most Americans believed, and many still do, that the Soviet communists are expansionists, seek dominance in the world, threaten American religious and moral values, endanger the American social and economic order, and oppose the underlying American political ideology (e.g., Bialer, 1985; English & Halperin, 1987; Frei & Cantil, 1967; Frei, 1986; Stouffer, 1966; Welch, 1970). Over the years, Soviet acts in Poland, Finland, the Baltic States, Iran, Berlin, East Germany, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan, and even within the Soviet Union itself have provided evidence that their goals are contradictory to those of the U.S. Moreover, until recently, the Soviets themselves continuously communicated that the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in an ideological, political, economic, scientific, and cultural competition. This was often presented as a zero-sum conflict, indicating that only one system would survive the competition.

Given this framework, it is not surprising that Americans, as a defense against perceived attempts to dominate them, characterized the U.S.A.—

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U.S.S.R. conflict as a struggle between good and evil, morality and immorality. These beliefs nourished the feelings of threat that permeated all sectors of American society (Smith, 1983). On the basis of these perceptions, delegitimization evolved. On one hand, it explained the existing threat; on the other hand, it intensified the perception of threat. President Reagan expressed delegitimating beliefs in a widely quoted speech on March 8, 1983, saying:

They are the focus of evil in the modern world. [It is a mistake] to ignore the facts of history and the aggressive impulses of an evil empire, to simply call the arms race a giant misunderstanding and thereby remove yourself from the struggle between right and wrong, good and evil.

Although delegitimating labels were placed on Soviet communists, reference was also made to Russians, or Soviets, in general. Consequently the label “communist” has itself become a delegitimating term in the United States, implying that a person or group is attempting to overturn the accepted norms and values of American society. In addition, Russians were delegitimized with descriptions such as “brutal,” “primitive,” “aggressive,” “sadistic,” “cold-blooded,” “ruthless,” “cruel,” and “devious.” The Soviet Union was described as striving for dominance in all parts of the world, and being committed to destroying capitalism and democratic political institutions; it was delegitimized with labels such as “oppressive,” “troublemaker,” “without respect for human life or human rights,” “totalitarian,” “militaristic,” “deceptive,” “adventurist,” and “offensive” (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1961; Cohen, 1986; Dallin, 1973; Stein, 1985; Ugolnik, 1983; White, 1984).

Although serious conflicts involving far-reaching incompatibility usually end with direct violent confrontation or war, this is not a necessary outcome. In spite of the entrenched conflict between Americans and Soviets, the two superpowers have not yet engaged in direct warfare. Recent developments that have eased the U.S.A.—U.S.S.R. conflict will continue to modify mutual perceptions. Nevertheless, in spite of the easing of tensions in this case, violent confrontation is a more frequent outcome of serious conflicts that lead to delegitimization through the perception of high threat (see Fig. 1).

Delegitimization and Harm: Prevention and Justification

In most instances of serious conflicts, delegitimization leads to violence and harm. Once the ingroup delegitimizes the outgroup with labels that imply threat and evil—“imperialists,” “fascists,” “terrorists”—acts for preventing danger usually follow. By their nature, these acts cause harm to the outgroup. Because the outgroup is delegitimized, preventive measures can be severe, for delegitimized groups are perceived as not deserving human treatment. The denial of their humanity often leads to acts of extreme violence by the delegitimizing
group. Deportations, destruction, and mass killings of civil populations are not unusual in these cases. An example of this phenomenon was provided in an insightful statement by an American soldier in the Vietnam War:

When you go into basic training you are taught that the Vietnamese are not people. You are taught they are gooks, and all you hear is “gook, gook, gook, gook...” The Asian serviceman in Vietnam is the brunt of the same racism because the GIs over there do not distinguish one Asian from another... You are trained “gook, gook, gook” and once the military has got the idea implanted in your mind that these people are not humans, they are subhumans, it makes it a little bit easier to kill “em. (Boyle, 1972, p. 141)

Exceptionally violent and harmful actions by the ingroup augment the process of delegitimization because they seem to justify further actions that exceed normative behavior (see Fig. 1). The more violent the behavior, the more delegitimization occurs because more justification is needed to explain the harm done. In addition, violent acts of the delegitimized group during confrontation reinforce delegitimization because they explain the deviant and extreme behavior of the delegitimizing group. Thus, the second proposition states that a violent conflict leads to delegitimization to justify and explain it.

A current example of delegitimization based on far-reaching incompatibility of goals exists in the Middle East. Israeli Jews and Palestinians persistently delegitimize each other to explain the threat that each group poses to the other and to justify the harm that they inflict on each other (Bar-Tal, 1988, in press a). Both groups have struggled for the same land over the present century, and today, despite attempts to bridge the irreconcilable goals, the protracted conflict continues.

The majority of Israeli Jews believe the ultimate objective of Palestinians is the annihilation of Israel and the establishment of a Palestinian state (Bar-Tal, 1989b). This belief is reinforced by the central tenet of the Palestinian National Covenant, which declares “a total repudiation of the existence of Israel and institutionalizes this stand and the theoretical and practical implications that derive from it in an ideological system” (Harkabi, 1979, p. 11). Even recent conciliatory statements by Yasser Arafat are perceived by many Israelis, including Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, as tactical moves to achieve the ultimate goal of establishing a Palestinian state on the ruins of the State of Israel. Violent acts by Palestinians in the present century provide evidence of Palestinian objectives to Israeli Jews. Violent objection to the establishment of the Jewish State, the pogroms against Jews in the 1920s and 1930s, Palestinians’ active participation in the Independence War, the continuous terrorist activities against the Jewish population within Israel and outside it that have caused hundreds of casualties, and recently, the uprising against Israeli rule in the West Bank and Gaza Strip—in Israeli eyes, all of these are expressions of Palestinian intransigence and irreconcilability (Bar-Tal, in press a; Herzog, 1978; Katz, 1973; Lorch, 1976, Schiff & Rothstein, 1972; Shamir, 1982; Yaari, 1970).

Simultaneously, Palestinians believe Israeli Jews disregard the existence of the Palestinian people, neglect their national aspirations, and forcefully take the land (e.g., Jirjis, 1976; Zogby, 1981). Presently, they are especially threatened by what they perceive as the Israeli desire to expand by annexing the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and possible consequent expulsion of the Palestinian population. This perceived threat is based on the past acts of the Jews who immigrated to Israel (previously Palestine), and later expropriated Arab-owned land, expelled hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, confiscated Arab property, and discriminated against Arab citizens of Palestinian origin (Bishuti, 1969; Hadawi, 1969; Kayyali, 1974). The perceived threat is supported by violent acts that Israeli Jews have committed against Palestinians throughout the decades. Recently, in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, hundreds have been killed, thousands have been wounded, and there have been mass arrests, deportation, limitation of civil rights, imposition of curfews, and humiliation (e.g., Al-Abid, 1973; Bar-Tal, in press a; Zogby, 1981; Zureik, 1979).

The protracted conflict intensified the perception of threat and caused mutual attempts to exclude the other group from the community of nations through delegitimization. The continuing mutual harm and violence has only strengthened the delegitimization process. The Palestinians label Israeli Jews as “colonialists,” “racists,” “aggressors,” “Nazis,” “imperialists,” “fascists,” and “oppressors” (e.g., Hussein, 1970; Khistainy, 1970; Said, 1980; Sayegh, 1965). They call them “Zionists,” and they consider Zionism a “colonialist movement in its inception, aggressive and expansionist in its goals, racist and segregationist in its configurations, and fascist in its means and aims” (Article 19 in the National Covenant of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—Harkabi, 1979).

The Israeli Jews, from the beginning of their encounters with Palestinians, viewed them as primitive, bandits, cruel mobs, and failed to recognize their national identity. Later, with the eruption of violence, they delegitimized Palestinians with labels such as “robbers,” “criminals,” “gangs,” “anti-Semites,” “terrorists,” and “neo-Nazis.” In the last decades, special efforts have been made to delegitimize members and sympathizers of the PLO, which represents the national aspirations of the Palestinians (e.g., Kelman & Weiner, undated; Landau, 1971; PLO, 1982). On September 1, 1977, the Knesset of Israel adopted a resolution by a vote of 92–4 saying that

The organization called the PLO aspires, as stated in its Covenant, to destroy and exterminate the State of Israel. The murder of women and children, and terror, are part of this organization’s ideology, which it is implementing in practice.

Another example of violent intergroup conflict that involved delegitimization was the Vietnam War. In this case, the government of South Vietnam, supported by the United States, perceived the goals of the Viet Cong, backed by
North Vietnam, as completely contradictory. It was a struggle between two opposing ideologies, in which only one could win.

White (1970) described the perceptions of supporters of the Viet Cong and of the Americans during the violent conflict. Both sides committed violent and brutal acts. On the one side, President Johnson called the violent confrontation "a war of unparalleled brutality. Simple farmers are the targets of assassination and kidnapping. Women and children are strangled in the night because their men are loyal to their government." On the other side, the Viet Cong claimed that U.S. imperialists and their lackeys "killed about 170,000 people, wounded and crippled through torture about 800,000 people, detained more than 400,000 people in more than 20,000 prisons, raped more than 40,000 women." The cruel and vicious acts performed were fueled by delegitimization reinforced by negative categorizations. In one study, White (1970) found that 100% of the 377 communist characterizations of Americans appearing in Vietnamese communist statements were stated in terms of evil. They were labeled "imperialists," "aggressors," "international gendarme," "cruel enemy," "racist colonialists," and so on. At the same time, out of 130 characterizations contained in statements by President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, 127 (over 97%) were negative. They used such terms as "terrorism," "aggression," "sabotage," or "assassination" to describe the acts of Vietnamese communists.

Not all conflicts begin with far-reaching incompatibility between the goals of the parties involved. Conflicts may also begin with less incompatibility that does not involve a high level of threat. Although such a situation can continue as a stalemate for a long time, this type of conflict can also escalate into violent confrontations.

Deterioration of conflict can lead to mutual harm and violence. As Fig. 2 shows, delegitimization emerges from violence because an ingroup needs to justify and explain harm perpetrated by its members, as well as explain similar acts performed by the members of the outgroup.

An example of conflict that evolved into bloody and violent confrontation was the Iran–Iraq war, which ended in 1989 with heavy losses on both sides. The principal dispute between Iran and Iraq centered around the demarcation of a border on the Shatt al-Arab waterway and its administration, originating from a 1937 treaty. The conflict emerged at the end of 1959, when Iran began to demand a resolution to the disagreement. Through the following years, the conflict between these two countries was managed through diplomatic channels, with only a few minor confrontations (Chubin & Zabih, 1974; Pipes, 1983). But in September 1980, a war erupted that very quickly became one of the bloodiest confrontations since World War II and claimed hundreds of thousands of casualties, including civilians.

During eight years of the war, the Iranians and Iraqis delegitimized each other to explain the brutality of the other side and to justify the harm they themselves committed. The Daily Report of the Foreign Broadcast Information, which reported radio speeches and interviews of the political and military leaders of Iran and Iraq, provided illustrations of mutual delegitimization. In 1984, Iranians labeled Iraqis "Saddamist mercenaries," "criminals," "aggressive Ba'athist forces," "Zionist protectors," "terrorists," "archenemies," "imperialists," "reactionaries," and described their acts as "inhuman" and "diabolical." Similarly, the Iraqis labeled Iranians "criminals," "aggressors," "deceitful diabolic entity," "neofascists," "agents of Zionism," "illiterates," and "expansionists." In a publicized statement to Iraq's President, Saddam Hussein, a military commander graphically reported:

We gladly inform you of the annihilation of thousands of harmful magi insects. . . . We . . . will turn what is left of these harmful insects into food for the birds of the wilderness and the fishes of the marshes. (Bengio, 1986, p. 475)

**Ethnocentric Model**

Delegitimization does not occur only in conflict. A group may also attribute delegitimization labels to another group as a result of ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism, a term originally introduced by Sumner (1906), denotes a tendency to accept the ingroup and reject outgroups. Delegitimization can serve this tendency. Using delegitimization, ingroup members see themselves as virtuous and superior, and the outgroup as contemptible and inferior (LeVine & Campbell, 1972).

The model in Fig. 3 illustrates how the ethnocentric tendency to devalue the other group and perceive them as different can foster delegitimization. Nevertheless, a necessary mediating condition for delegitimization is feelings of fear and/or contempt toward the outgroup. Subsequently, delegitimization can engender harm when the ingroup attempts to prevent the danger implied by the delegitimating label, or to treat the outgroup inhumanely, "as deserved."

![Fig. 3. Ethnocentric model](image_url)
Delegitimization is used in extreme cases of ethnocentrism because it maximizes intergroup differences and totally excludes the delegitimized group from commonly accepted groups, implying a total superiority of the ingroup. It not only differentiates between the groups by placing a definite boundary between them, but also denies the humanity of the outgroup.

Not every case of ethnocentrism ends with delegitimization. A mere perception of difference and devaluation does not lead necessarily to exclusion, for arousal of fear and/or contempt for the outgroup is also necessary (see Fig. 3). The third proposition states that delegitimization is used when a group perceives another group as different and devalued, and feels fear of it and/or contempt for it.

The more the two groups differ, the easier it is to delegitimize. As Brewer (1979) indicated, perception of salient differences between the ingroup and outgroup facilitates the development of negative attitudes and reactions toward the outgroup. Salient differences clearly demarcate the ingroup boundary and allow easy identification of outgroup members. They signify that the delegitimating label cannot be generalized to the ingroup.

The most salient differences are based on physical appearance because they enable a clear distinction and an easy identification. Thus, characteristics such as skin color, physiognomic features, hair color, body structure, or even dress permit unmistakable differentiation between groups. Throughout human history, these differences were most often the bases for differentiation and delegitimization. Other cues, including invisible ones, are obviously possible; people also differentiate and delegitimize on the basis of such hidden criteria as religion or ideology. In these cases, however, external identification may be impossible, and the delegitimating group needs other cues for simple identification.

In addition to intergroup differences, devaluation is necessary for delegitimization to occur. Devaluation results from the basic ethnocentric tendency (Brewer & Campbell, 1976) for ingroup members to feel positive about their own group and attribute favorable characteristics to it, while feeling antipathy toward outgroups and attributing unfavorable characteristics to them (see Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950).

The final necessary condition, which not only evokes delegitimization but directly causes it, is arousal of fear and/or contempt. Fear is elicited when the different and devalued group presents a threat or a mysterious aspect. In this case, the ingroup uses delegitimization as an attribution to explain their fear (see Fig. 3). Feelings of contempt can accompany feelings of fear or appear separately. They emerge when the outgroup is perceived as absolutely inferior, based on perceived cultural, economic, military, scientific, and/or political achievements. The ingroup usually evaluates these achievements on the basis of superior and visible cues, such as clothing, working tools, weapons, housing, or religious practices.

There are two main reasons for ethnocentric delegitimization: first, the desire to completely differentiate the outgroup from the ingroup in order to exclude it from humanity; second, the desire to exploit the outgroup. Although in many cases these two reasons complement each other, they do not necessarily appear together.

An example of ethnocentric delegitimization occurred in the first encounters between Europeans and American Indians, in which perceptions of difference and inferiority combined with feelings of contempt underlay delegitimization of the American Indians. Original writings by Europeans provide illustrations of this phenomenon. American Indians were described as follows:

- Without religion or government, [having] nothing more than diverse superstitions and a type of democracy similar to that of ants.
- Indians are so free and live so like animals.
- Viewed in the most favorable manner, these poor creatures are miserably brutish and degraded.
- The indigenous population of America present man under many aspects, and society in various stages, from regular but limited civilization of Mexico and Peru, to savage life in this most brutal state of abasement.
- Indians as a race are, of course, far inferior to white men in intellectual capacity. (Forbes, 1964, pp. 16–17)

In these first impressions of American Indians, delegitimization initially served the motive of differentiation and exclusion. With time, another function emerged: exploitation.

In the case of American Indians, the Europeans' economic needs for land and other resources led to further delegitimization and abuse. An outgroup perceived as greatly different and inferior is a suitable target for exploitation, which almost always involves inhumane treatment.

A prime example of delegitimization used to rationalize exploitation is the enslavement of Black people by White people. Delegitimization was, perhaps, the most important justification for slavery. Otherwise, how could the moral, deeply religious, and gallant Southerners have treated these people so inhumanly? Black people differed from Whites in physical appearance, folkways and mores, religion, language, and culture, and these characteristics were also greatly devalued, so that Black people were a perfect target for exploitation.

As the preamble to South Carolina's code of 1712 declared. Blacks had "barbarous, wild savage natures, . . . wholly unqualified to be governed by the laws, customs, and practices of this province." In a similar vein, Stampp (1956) pointed to three beliefs that undergirded slavery: (a) the "all wise Creator" had designed Black people for labor in the South; (b) being inferior in intellect and having a particular temperament, Blacks were the natural slaves of White people,
and (c) Black people were barbarians who needed rigid discipline and severe control. Black people’s enslavement, thus, was seen as natural and essential for their own good and for the preservation of White civilization (see also Bancroft, 1931; Genovese, 1969; Sellers, 1950). These perceptions legitimized the slavery of Black people in the Southern states. Being “inferior” and “subhuman,” they were considered as property that could be used to satisfy the economic needs of the South (Genovese, 1966).

Delegitimization and Harm: Intention and Justification

Once invoked, delegitimization can—but does not necessarily have to—open the way to harm. Delegitimizing labels may indicate either that the delegitimized group is inhuman and therefore harming it is allowed, or that it is threatening and therefore, to prevent the danger, harm should be carried out. In addition, delegitimization may lead to intergroup conflicts. The goals of the ingroup and the outgroup may clash because of the superior and imperialistic feelings of the ingroup. Then, when harms are committed, delegitimization serves to justify inhumane treatment of the outgroup (see Fig. 3).

The delegitimization of the American Indians facilitated cruel behavior toward them and had far-reaching negative effects on the fate of these people. Once they were labeled “savage,” “inferior,” or “animals,” it was but a short distance to harm. Because “inferior” and “savage” men do not deserve human treatment, Europeans did not hesitate to destroy, to enslave, to drive them away, or to kill them. Illustrating this logic, one of the first English settlers of Virginia proposed the following:

It is more easy to civilize them by conquest than by faire means; for the one may be made at once, but their civilizing will require a long time and much history. The manner how to suppress them is so often related and approved, I omit it here, and you have twenty examples of the Spaniards how they got the West Indies, and forced the treacherous and rebellious indians to do all manner of drudgery work and slavery for them. (Vogel, 1972, p. 40)

The strengthening of delegitimization after harming others is illustrated in the development of defenses by White people to justify their enslavement of Black people (e.g., McKitrick, 1963). Doctors, scientists, and phrenologists in the South searched for physiological differences to substantiate the assumed temperamental and intellectual differences:

Dr. Samuel W. Cartwright of Louisiana argued that the visible differences in skin pigmentation is also extended to “the membranes, the muscles, the tendons, and...not all the fluids and secretions. Even the Negro’s brain and nerves...are tinted with a shade of the prevailing darkness” and Dr. Joseph C. Nott of Mobile proposed that Negro and Whites do not belong to the same species. (Stampp, 1956, p. 8)

One of the striking cases of ethnocentric delegitimization that led to tragic consequences is the treatment of Jews in Germany between 1933–1945 (Bar-Tal, in press b). This case combines all the elements of the proposed model (see 3). Jews, perceived as different and devalued, incited fear and contempt; as this progressed they were excluded, exploited, and murdered.

During the Nazi era, Germans grew to accept the belief that Jews were responsible for the alienation from humanity from the natural order and were the main obstacle to human redemption. Therefore, many of them agreed that it was necessary to exclude Jews from the economic, political, societal, and cultural aspects of life, and to deny their humanity. Official anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany is one of the few cases in modern times in which delegitimization was legally enforced. Individuals who violated the delegitimating laws were arrested and even executed (Dawidowicz, 1975; Wistrich, 1985). The background for delegitimization of Jews can be located in German ethnocentrism embedded in their racist ideology, which asserted Aryan superiority over other races, especially Jews (Mosse, 1964; Pulzer, 1964). The major proponent of racial ideology, Hans F. K. Gunther, suggested that Jews were an inferior race, a mixture of Oriental or interratic races; Aryans, in contrast, were at the peak of racial superiority. In line with this view, Jews were portrayed as ugly, dirty, perverted, corrupt, and most important, inferior and inhuman (Mosse, 1964; Wistrich, 1985; Zeman, 1964). For example, in the best-known Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda film, “Wer ewige Jude” (The Eternal Jew), Jews were pictured as physically repellent, greasy, fat, hook-nosed, black-haired, and wearing traditional Jewish clothes. More important, this film portrayed Jews as greedy, sneaky, and exploiting other Germans. The narrator stated:

Jews have no indigenous civilization; they are unclean; they are not poor, they simply prefer to live in a state of squalor; their community life is on the streets; they hardly ever make anything for themselves; they do not want to work. Their only desire is to trade; their pride lies in haggling over a price. They have no ideals; their divine law teaches them to be selfish to cheat any non-Jew. (Richards, 1973, p. 345)

During the Nazi regime the delegitimizing beliefs about Jews were extensive, including all the previously mentioned aspects. A partial list includes descriptions of Jews as “satanic,” “devils,” “the incarnation of destructive drive,” “destroyers of civilization,” “parasites,” “demons,” “bacteria, vermin, and pests,” “degeneration of mankind,” “international maggots and bedbugs,” “spiders that slowly suck the people’s blood at their pores,” and “inspirers and originators of dreadful catastrophes” (Gordon, 1984; Jackel, 1981; Noakes & Pridham, 1984). In addition, Jews were specifically accused of starting World War I, causing Germany’s war defeat, precipitating the Great Depression, polluting the Aryan race, exploiting German people, performing criminal acts, and seeking world domination.

Jews were labeled politically, and viewed as promoters of such diverse evils as bolshevism, capitalism, democracy, and internationalism—all aimed at subverting Aryan racial superiority. These and other delegitimating beliefs became part of the almost daily diet of the German people during the Third Reich. Nazi
propaganda was entirely preoccupied with spreading delegitimizing beliefs. Press, pictures, films, lectures, literature, radio programs, art, and political speeches continuously and repeatedly expressed these beliefs (see, for example, Mosse, 1960). In the totalitarian Nazi regime, all means were used to achieve the end of delegitimizing Jews (Bramstedt, 1965; Gordon, 1984; Zeman, 1964).

There is little doubt that the distance between delegitimizing of this intensity and behavioral harm is very small. It is not surprising that between 1933 and 1945, Jews in Europe were subjected to exclusion, deportation, expropriation, expulsion, pogroms, mass killings, and ultimately genocide on an unprecedented scale, performed in a systematic, organized, and brutal way. During six years, 139–1945, about 6 million Jews perished as a consequence of starvation, deadly epidemics, mass executions, and systematic gassing (Bauer, 1982; Cohn, 1967; Dawidowicz, 1975; Mosse, 1978; Wistrich, 1985). Finally, there is little doubt that as these terrible actions were carried out, Germans justified them with delegitimizing beliefs, which first encouraged the atrocities and later supported and reinforced them.

Conclusion

Delegitimization, the exclusion of an outgroup and denial of its humanity, is a phenomenon with cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects. On the cognitive level, delegitimization involves categorization that enables understanding of the social world. It organizes “reality” by providing an explanation for the perceived characteristics and behaviors of the outgroup and a prediction of potential future events. On the emotional level, delegitimization is a reaction to feelings of fear, threat, and contempt stimulated by another group. Its occurrence not only strengthens these feelings, but also may provoke new negative emotions. On the behavioral level, delegitimization leads to an array of behaviors including malevolent treatment and preventive steps to avert potential danger to the in-group. Delegitimization is also a consequence of brutal and cruel behavior because it serves as a justification mechanism.

Delegitimization, as an extreme case of stereotyping and prejudice, is a widespread phenomenon in intergroup relations. Two related models of the process have focused on situations that elicit delegitimization: conflict and ethnocentrism. Delegitimization occurs in conflicts that involve a perception of far-reaching, outrageous, and incompatible goals between groups and/or a high level of brutal violence. Delegitimization occurs in ethnocentrism when an outgroup is perceived as very different and is devalued. Since delegitimization can lead to the most severe consequences, including genocide, it is vital to understand it better and to attempt to reduce it.

References


Causes and Consequences of Delegitimization


Daniel Bar-Tal received his Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Pittsburgh, and is currently on the faculty in education at Tel Aviv University. During the first part of his career he concentrated on studying prosocial behavior and achievement attributions. In the last decade his interest has focused on knowledge acquisition and change in general, and specifically on political beliefs shared by group members, including conflict, patriotism, siege mentality, security, and delegitimization. He recently authored *Group Beliefs and Coerced The Social Psychology of Knowledge, The Societal Psychology of Intergroup Conflict and Stereotyping and Prejudice*. 

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