PREVENTION OF DEHUMANIZATION IN (CLASSROOM) EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTORY NOTE: This paper introduces a new method in teaching about wars and conflicts, organized violence, prejudice, oppression, etc. It can be readily applied by even a single individual classroom teacher with no need for any institutionalized decision and for no extra cost. The claim attached to it is, that by its application even a single educator could effectively prevent or arrest the development of dehumanized orientation in her or his students. As I know not of any other method that could claim that, I see my primary responsibility in addressing schoolteachers directly on a practical application level even before the Theory of Dehumanization has been recognized or accepted by the mainstream of academic research. I invite all who have interest in the evolution of the theory, the underlying approach, methodology, research processes and results, references, etc., to contact me. I promise to respond; there is nothing more urgent in my life.

Introducing Dehumanization to self awareness

Dehumanization is a system of orientation in one's world by which people of other groups or categories are not perceived as human as one's own. When children are old enough to learn that there are, and always have been, WE and THEM, wars, villains and heroes, slavers and slaves, perpetrators and victims of genocide, etc., they'd be probably old enough to learn that there has always been, and still is, Dehumanization (you could help suggesting an appropriately simple English word that is not normally applied to individual crimes and misdemeanors, perhaps "Evil"). Learners should learn the truth-- relative to the best knowledge of their teachers—about politically-ideologically-religiously motivated human irrational and destructive behavior, by the same logic they learn the truth about sex, evolution, history, and whatever is considered to be the truth to be passed on to the next generation. They should be alerted to the danger that we could become unfair when we judge, hate, condemn and fight people of other groups, or could do unto others that which we hate to be done to us (Private Lynndie England had her schoolteachers too…). Children as adults should become actively aware of the inherent dangers of patriotism.

Posing the Problem in a classroom

It has been universally ascertained, that no matter how absurd and evil in my or your view their cause is, the willing perpetrators of violence in conflict must feel being right in what they believe and what they do, same as you and I. The 9/11 guys did it in absolute faith that they are doing the right thing with God on their side. They would not have done it otherwise, would they? *How exactly does it happen, that normal human beings like us, endowed with conscience and awareness of their individual responsibility for their judgment and choice of truth over untruth, reason over irrationality, justice over injustice and morality over sin, – manage to justify in their own eyes even the most inhuman atrocities and acts of self and others mass-destruction they either perpetrate or support or don't care about? How are they different from us?*

What exactly, if anything, is wrong with them? What mental devices allow them to do wrong and feel right? How does it happen? When?

The Theory of Dehumanization embodies answers to all these questions. It would allow teachers to pose the problem, provide satisfactory answers, and apply it in the classroom toward preventing and healing dehumanized feeling and thinking patterns.

The Rationale for doing it

Posing the above questions implies that the causes of wars and of any irrational and destructive intergroup behavior are in people who do it consciously and believe in doing it. These are the *direct* causes. The Theory of Dehumanization applies to the *direct* causes that make it possible for normal people to think and feel inhumanly. It provides teachers with ways to intervene *directly* with the mental devices that justify inhuman orientation (comparable to virus or germs inside us). Interfering with their Orientation System would be analogous to immunization and healing; whilst all other known methods of prevention of intergroup prejudice and enmity (improving political, geopolitical, social, economic, or educational conditions) manipulate factors that *indirectly* affect the beliefs and actions of people and therefore could have, at best, the effect of preventive hygiene and sanitation measures.

The inner mechanism of Dehumanization

The "virus" of dehumanization is a mental bug that people catch while learning the language of their social universe. It forms a conceptual map, a tightly integrated belief-system that, no matter what, represents political reality as "WE ALWAYS GOOD/RIGHT—THEM ALWAYS BAD/GUILTY". It manages to guide people in face of contrary evidence by using two mental mechanisms: censorship that blocks perception and forms "**Blind Areas**" on the orientation system ("cognitive map"); and an automatic mechanism of "**Patterned Beliefs**" that molds whatever reaches awareness into patterns that agree with dehumanized orientation. Between them, the two mechanisms would normally iron out any "cognitive dissonance".

The mental mechanism of Blind Areas should be seen as the deadly "virus" of Dehumanization, its elimination as the most important goal of healing. It effectively neutralizes morality and conscience in otherwise normally moral people, as became evident with terrible regularity and consistency in analysis of texts by political leaders and common people in arenas of conflict all over the world, past and present.

The tool to work with

The Theory of Dehumanization organizes the identified Blind Areas and Patterned Beliefs in the Dehumanization Syndrome, a list of symptoms representing dehumanized responses to various aspects of any political conflict. The Syndrome would be the point of reference in teaching and learning, the most simple classroom activity being an analysis of a historical or contemporary text (or of what students had written or said) with the goal of identifying in it dehumanized Patterned Beliefs and, in

higher grades, identifying evidence of awareness of any of the Blind Areas. Please introduce yourself to the Dehumanization Syndrome now, and then this text will continue the presentation of methods of educational application.

[The Dehumanization Syndrome tool is available free from the author]

Application

1. In teaching historical, literary, and relevant contemporary texts at schools, an analysis with the purpose of identifying the Patterned Beliefs may be introduced. For example, students may be asked to identify the expressions that fit the pattern "THEM Are the Cause of Our Troubles"; or the racist "THEM Are Inferior/Bad by Nature". The teacher could move gradually from analyzing texts of other cultures to one's own, to contemporary texts, and to students' own opinions and beliefs. The goal of content-analyzing texts, using items of the Dehumanization Syndrome, would be to make the students aware of each one's personal relation to the Blind Areas and the Patterned Beliefs common in their culture.

2. When responding to personal views one of the strongest habits of personal politics, disagreeing and arguing, <u>must be avoided</u> at the first symptom of Dehumanization. The same applies to one of the strongest habits of teaching, "teaching him/her a lesson". We need to keep in mind, that when it comes to issues involving WE and THEM, the dehumanized mind is not free to respond to reason and to form its views on the basis of own perception of truth and own application of values in any given situation. It is captive of its orientation system, blindfolded by its Blind Areas and programmed to mold all that reaches awareness into a Patterned Belief. Reasoning with a person affected with Dehumanization would be like arguing with a well-programmed computer. The result is fully predictable: the person's responses will be limited to any of the Patterned Beliefs of the Dehumanization Syndrome.

3. Rather than disagreeing, judging, or evaluating the student, educators may provide feedback about the student's specific behavior or expression by fitting the behavior into the corresponding Patterned Belief. The Patterned Beliefs would serve as the common evaluating measure once the students had learned to identify them in language. For example, the child had learnt in his or her history lessons that one symptomatic belief of dehumanized people about the conflict is "They Understand Nothing but Force" (Blind Area no.1 in STRATEGY and Patterned Belief no.5 in the THEM heading of the Syndrome). If the student has expressed an idea in conformity to that Patterned Belief, the educator would respond, "<u>What you just said fits the dehumanized pattern 'They Understand Nothing but Force'. Would you like to respond to that?</u>" - Such feedback suffices for making the person aware of her or his personal attitude to a known aspect of Dehumanization. The potential effectiveness of this teaching technique is viewed in light of two findings: that unawareness is the food of Dehumanization and that,

in psychological counseling and Applied Behavioral Science, personal feedback here-and-now is considered a most powerful tool of personal growth and change.

4. Bringing Blind Areas to awareness

Keep in mind, that the main problem is Blind Areas. **It is not what people argue, but what they do not see, perceive or think of, that molds their thinking and feeling**. Bringing the reality buried in Blind Areas to the person's awareness is, in our view, the single most important and useful technique for helping heal Dehumanization. This technique circumvents resistance, since we do not challenge the dehumanized beliefs directly. Instead, we intentionally guide persons to see the realities that they do not see, because on their mental maps of social orientation those realities are buried in Blind Areas.

Confronted with an opinion that seems to conform to one of the Patterned Beliefs, we avoid communicating a message that would be decoded as a disagreement, we avoid as much as we can talking back our mind. Instead, we bring to attention something we point at in the Territory in terms as free of judgment as possible, and on the lowest level of abstraction. The open question technique follows the pattern of, "Look out there... what you make of it?" - When we direct dehumanized persons to look into the realities hidden in one of their Blind Areas—first and foremost areas of blindness about themselves--we provide them with the opportunity to fill in the human void on the conceptual maps of their social orientation.

PROGNOSIS

If, beginning at the age of identity-forming, Dehumanization were integrated into the basic coordinates of people's identity and social orientation -- to what extent the society would be freed from prejudices and ethnic discrimination? To what extent would war be regarded as an option for resolving conflicts in a society well informed and used to detect the characteristic Blind Areas and Patterned Beliefs of dehumanized irrationality? - For now we can only claim, that if our description of the organic inner structure and function Dehumanization is true, bringing it to the awareness of humanity will make a significant difference. Would application of the Dehumanization Theory in education affect politics and society? – The claim that a significant change would follow needs to be validated by teachers and educators who would go ahead and apply it.

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