



Mind & Life Podcast Transcript

Lasana Harris - Flexible Social Cognition

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Opening Quote – Lasana Harris (00:00:04): *The problem, I think, starts with the self in that many people have difficulty with self-compassion. And if you can't get the self-compassion, then the other kinds of compassion don't stand a chance. And I think it's something that I struggled with, especially during the pandemic, where you're so stretched and overburdened. So allowing people space for self-compassion is step one. Then it's possible I think to start expanding it to people I know, people I don't know, all human beings, the planet. We need to get to that level of compassion before we're out of the woods.*

Intro – Wendy Hasenkamp (00:00:45): Welcome to Mind & Life. I'm Wendy Hasenkamp. Today, I'm speaking with social neuroscientist, Lasana Harris. Lasana is based at University College London, where he studies the fascinating topic of flexible social cognition. He explains what that is in our conversation, but basically it's about the way we understand others, and it takes us into the realms of person perception, prejudice, dehumanization, empathy, and more. I first met Lasana when he joined us for the Mind & Life Summer Research Institute in 2018. And he'll be joining us again in a few weeks for this year's meeting on Othering, Belonging, and Becoming. I remember being drawn not only to the critically important topic of dehumanization that he studies, but also as you'll hear, the nuanced lens through which he views it.

(00:01:38) In our conversation, we start off with the story of Lasana's accidental entry into psychology, and then we get into the details of flexible social cognition. Lasana describes two processes that are involved in how we perceive others—schemas or the mental categories we have about people, and then inferences or predictions we make about others' minds. This last part is what's known as social cognition, and this cognition is flexible because we don't always engage in it. We don't always interpret what other people's minds are like. So this leads us into a conversation about why we sometimes don't, or maybe can't, see the full humanity of others. This is what's known as dehumanization. These mental processes have lots of implications. We talk about the war in Ukraine and the role of propaganda, and bias and prejudice in society and how threat and safety are key elements there. Along the way, we discuss how these processes can scale up from individual minds to societal structures and norms. And we also touch on the inseparability of cognition and emotion. Then Lasana reflects on how contemplative practice might help reduce dehumanization. And he also shares some thoughts on information overload and echo chambers in today's world, and also looking at the concept of self to change social bias.

(00:03:07) I'm so glad Lasana was able to join us for this conversation. I think it's really important that we all understand more about how our minds work in social relationships, especially in today's divided and polarized world. As always, there's more in the show notes, including a podcast extra, where Lasana

and I explore the construct of introversion and extroversion as it relates to social cognition. Okay, I hope this episode sheds some new light for you on the way your own mind works when you encounter others. It's my great pleasure to share with you Lasana Harris.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:03:47](#)): Welcome Lasana, it's so great to be with you.

Lasana Harris ([00:03:51](#)): Thanks, thanks for inviting me.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:03:52](#)): So I'm really looking forward to chatting about your work on flexible social cognition, but first I'd like to get a little bit of a more personal story and background. Just curious how you got interested in psychology, and the way that we think about other people's minds.

Lasana Harris ([00:04:10](#)): Completely by accident, which is how I think most good things happen. As an undergraduate, I was a journalism major, studying radio/TV/film. I wanted to make movies and tell stories that way. And in high school, I had interned with an advertising studio so I had a little bit of experience with film already. And when I got to university, I realized that everything we were doing just repeated the practical experiences that I had. So I didn't feel like I was doing anything challenging, and so I decided maybe I should find something else to do. And it just so happened that psychology sat in the communications building.

([00:04:56](#)) So psychology in the US started as the study of communication. A lot of it came out of World War II with Jewish researchers fleeing Nazi Germany, and they came to study propaganda, and how do we convince people to conform and be obedient, et cetera. And so at my undergraduate, they were still in that building and they hadn't left. And so as I was stumbling through speech therapy, oratory studies, psychology was just another one in the building. And that's basically how I ended up in psychology.

([00:05:29](#)) Now, studying person perception, I think that happened as well by accident. Initially, I wanted to study test anxiety and emotions. But then I started learning about a lot of the basic social cognition research from cognitive and developmental psychology, where people were bringing things that aren't even human to life, and seeing people where they were none. And that seemed really fascinating to me. And then of course the flip side of that is looking at a person and not seeing them, which is what we've called dehumanization, not seeing them as a full human being. And dehumanization fit my interest as well. It was something that was meaningful and relevant in the real world, certainly relevant to my own experiences. So I thought this would be something fun to study. So no big plan, all by accident.

Wendy Hasenkamp ([00:06:24](#)): Well, a happy accident then. So yeah. Can you unpack for us a little bit more about flexible social cognition and how it works?

Lasana Harris ([00:06:33](#)): Sure. So when we encounter other people, there are two concurrent processes that are happening in our brain. The first is what we call feature space mapping. So it's basically using basic sensory information to figure out what it is that you are encountering. So if you're looking at a person, you're assessing their height and their weight, you get information about gender and ethnicity. All of that is coming through primarily visual information. (There's some auditory information as well, what the person sounds like. There's some olfactory information, what they smell like and chemical transference, but the bulk of it is visual.) And what you're doing in your head is you're matching the visual images from your retina to ideas or schemas about what different types of people

look like and what different things in the world look like. And so eventually you can determine that's a tall Mexican male standing in front of me, because it matches your schema.

(00:07:33) At the same time, we are running a separate psychological process that's an inference process, where presumably we're aggregating a lot of information about that person, and our previous experiences with the situation that we're in. So if I encounter this tall Mexican man in a bodega in New York City, information about being in bodegas, all of my life history is relevant, information about that particular bodega, as well as information about stereotypes that I may trigger based on the way I categorize that human being as a Mexican tall male. So all of that gets integrated and I make a prediction or an inference about what's in the mind of that person. So I may think that they're bored, they look like they're bored with sort of sitting here all day—that's probably why they're ignoring me. So these two processes are constantly happening at the same time. That latter process, the inference process is what we call social cognition. And what our research has done over the last few years or so is demonstrate that sometimes we encounter people, but we fail to trigger that second process.

(00:08:48) Now, that's significant for a couple of reasons. First, we tend to trigger it even for things that aren't human beings. So like I said, you can bring lots of stuff to life, from things that are part of your family, like your pets, all the way through to moving objects on the screen, cartoons, if you will. You bring all of that stuff to life and you think about the intentions of Mickey Mouse who doesn't really exist. And so it's striking that you wouldn't do that with actual people. And secondly, there's this idea that it's spontaneously engaged. Even if I take you and I stick you in an MRI machine without anything to look at or any specific tasks, you'll start mind wandering. And your mind wandering is filled with thinking about people's mental lives. So you're exploring people's intentions. You're wondering, what does my roommate really think of me? Is that girl in the corridor the same person I saw last week? She must think I'm following her. You're coming up with all of these ideas about social relationships and your place in social hierarchies. And that's really the stuff of social cognition.

(00:09:57) So even when you don't have instructions to think about people's minds, we tend to spontaneously do. So this failure of social cognition in the presence of others was striking for those reasons. And so that ability we have to disengage social cognition from human beings, but also extend it to things that aren't human is really what makes it flexible. So that's flexible social cognition in a nutshell. However, that flexibility I just described is just one kind of flexibility. Recently, we've been theorizing about other types of flexibility as well, that I'm sure we'll get into.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:10:34): Great. So a lot of your work has been on this process, which you mentioned, of dehumanization when you don't infer the mind of another person. So can you talk about under what circumstances or why is it—especially since you just said it's such a normal thing that we do, even to inanimate objects sometimes—when and why would we not do that for someone else?

Lasana Harris (00:10:57): Great question. I think the answer lies in the social context, and then the goals people have. So those are the two big reasons. So let's take goals for the first instance. I might have a goal during my interaction with someone where thinking about their mind gets in the way of that goal. This is probably the case if I have some nefarious intention, but it doesn't have to be.

(00:11:24) So recently, we've been doing a lot of work with medical professionals. And we think that they have to dehumanize their patients in order to mete out good healthcare. So if, for instance, I am a surgeon about to operate, and I start thinking about how much the patient is suffering and how much the patient's family is worried about the outcome of the surgery. That's a lot of cognitive information

that might overburden my system or at a minimum, distract me from the task at hand, which is fixing this human being. So in some senses, it's better to think of that person as a broken machine than as a full human being. And by shutting out their minds, I can actually do a better job with the surgery. So that's a really nice example of how the goals we have, to perform surgery or to fix this human being, can get in the way of thinking about their mind.

(00:12:20) The other reason I think is contextual. So there are often cues in our social context that tell us, don't pay attention to that particular person's mind. One example is the case of homeless people, for instance. As we're moving through society, if you live in a multicultural, humongous city, like I do in London, you'll encounter hundreds of homeless people every day. It's probably not possible for you to stop and display compassion and empathy for each and every homeless person you would encounter. The vast amount of human suffering would be overwhelming. So there's one argument that says, well, you can shut out their minds as a proactive emotion regulation strategy—I don't have to think about all of the suffering. And that allows me to get through my day, to get from point A to point B. And we describe that as more of a contextual effect because over time we come to learn to have these responses.

(00:13:19) So maybe I'm going to be more compassionate to the homeless person in a small town that I encounter because it's such a rare site, versus one in a big city and that city therefore is a cue for me to close my mind off from other minds, for instance. So we think about the context and the goals people have as two of the reasons that could trigger this flexibility.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:13:43): Yeah. That's really interesting. It makes me think, too, of when you have a goal, it's almost like you're regulating your energy resources, right? Like, you mentioned kind of a cognitive load in the case of the surgeon. So does that play into it too—literally how much energy you have in a given situation?

Lasana Harris (00:14:01): Yeah, exactly. So very early theories of social cognition said, well, one of the reasons that we do things like stereotype for instance, is because we're cognitive misers. So it takes a lot of effort to get inside of somebody's head. And so sometimes we just want a shortcut. And that's what stereotypes are good for because they give you information that would allow you to predict and explain the person's behavior without having to think about their minds. And it turns out that isn't entirely false. So if you look in the brain, there's a huge neocortical system that supports social cognition. By neocortical, I mean it involves the more recently evolved parts of the brain. These are the cognitive heavy lifters, and they're also the parts of the brain that are phylogenically newer and different from other species.

(00:14:53) And so thinking about other people is, in some level, akin to doing math problems. Now, it doesn't seem as effortful to most of us because we're experts, we're doing it all of the time. But as most of us can attest, if you've been to a dinner party, you're usually exhausted at the end of it. Not because you've been running a lot, but because having to have all of those different engaging conversations for such an extended period of time, does place a burden in your cognitive resources—what I think you're calling energy, right? And so it is an energy saving tactic to shut out the mind.

(00:15:31) In fact, the phenomenon I'm describing has been known by many different names over the decades. One of the ways it was called in cognitive psychology in the 1970s was cognitive disregard. And so in those studies (and this is pre smartphone), what they would do is take a participant, walk them down a busy city street, and then give them a surprise memory test at the end and say, "How many of

these faces do you remember seeing?" Now most of us, when we're walking down the street, we're looking at the faces that are coming at us. Again, pre smartphone days. These days, we look at our phones and walk into people. *[laughter]* But participants still didn't remember any of the faces, unless of course they thought one of the people was highly attractive, then it sort of captured their attention. So even since the '70s, people have been cognitively disregarding other people. It makes sense because it takes so much effort to process just one person; you might as well save it.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:16:33): Yeah. I really appreciate your perspective on this, that it's balanced with... It can be a benefit to do this kind of dehumanization process. Normally, we would think of that as a terrible thing to do to another human, or not being able to see someone in their fullness, which of course does lead to a whole lot of problems in society. So I guess I'm curious... Well, first, how you think about that balance and is there a goal, or would it be better if we could not dehumanize so much? I guess first, yeah, let's take that question.

Lasana Harris (00:17:09): Yeah. That's a really interesting question. So as a psychologist, I tend not to think about psychological variables as positive or negative. So I tend not to see dehumanization as good or bad. I think anything can be good or bad if it's used inappropriately. So I like to talk about appropriate use, and I think that's what we need to get to with a lot of these concepts. So things like stereotypes—stereotypes have a very important function. They give us information about groups of people. Do we use stereotypes all of the time? Obviously not, that can lead to problems. Love is a very powerful and wonderful emotion. It's something we should display to complete strangers as well as to close others. But love can sometimes allow people to discount information that suggests they need to change their behavior, for instance. So people stay in abusive relationships.

(00:18:06) So psychological concepts on their own aren't good or bad. But of course, we describe these concepts with words from our everyday language. And in everyday language, these words have very strong valence attached to them, right? So dehumanization is a bad thing. That's what happens in genocide. And a lot of legal thinking for instance, relies on these folk psychological definitions without even testing them.

(00:18:32) So one of the things that we've done is tried to explore the question, is dehumanization causal for some human atrocities? Because in the legal code, that's how it's written. Dehumanization in the propaganda causes violence. And so if they try to convict somebody for a war crime, they're looking for causal evidence that dehumanization led to the atrocity. It turns out that's near impossible to find. And in the studies we've done, we haven't seen that relationship. If you talk to people who've been in death squads, for instance, they will tell you nothing about dehumanization. They'll talk about threat. They'll talk about the threat that this group posed to us and our existence and our way of life. Dehumanization, therefore, serves a different function in that context. It serves a more justificatory function. So we've done this horrible thing to you; if we don't think about your suffering, then it's easier to continue doing this horrible thing to you. So it's a mechanism we think that can keep violence going, and that's the focus we think it has in propaganda research. Of course, it's really hard to study these things ethically, so we could be wrong about that, but at least my belief is that it's not causal in that way. And then I've already described the instances, for instance, in medical care where dehumanization can lead to positive outcomes.

(00:19:54) So I think we shouldn't be trying to get people not to dehumanize. Evolution kept it for a reason, there are benefits. But we should think about when is it appropriate to do so. So if we're considering aid, for instance, to refugees, thinking about them as refugees and thinking about them as a

group, and thinking about them as large numbers of suffering people is going to push us towards dehumanization, where they become statistics rather than actual people. Here, we want to reverse that, and we want you to consider the actual people—think about their experiences, their stories. That's going to motivate more pro-social behavior from you. But in other instances, thinking about the individual humans might be to a disadvantage. For instance, raising kids. If I didn't dehumanize my kids, they would eat snacks all day, nothing but treats! *[laughter]* Because you'd worry about the suffering you're causing when you say no. So again, evolution has given us this mechanism, which is useful, but it should be used appropriately depending on the outcomes you're trying to achieve.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:20:58): That's really helpful. Yeah, and that was going to be my next question, which you were just speaking to, about the ways that it can go towards dangerous and negative outcomes, interpersonally and socially. We're recording this, we're speaking about a month into the war in Ukraine, so I'm thinking about that too. How are you thinking about these processes in a situation like that?

Lasana Harris (00:21:20): It's very eerie because as I mentioned earlier, social psychology as a discipline grew out of World War II, in sort of a way of combating the propaganda. And I think that we failed as a discipline because—not just with this war in Ukraine, but even with things like Brexit here in the UK, or the Trump election in the US—propaganda has still been playing such a prominent role, where people are closing themselves out from alternate explanations and really buying into a story that's consistent with their identity. So the war in Ukraine really makes me think about propaganda and the failings of us as a discipline coming out of World War II, because we haven't been able to stop it being used as a weapon. And it has been weaponized in these circumstances.

(00:22:10) And thank goodness Ukraine is being run by a president who has been in the media, so understands the importance of communication. And his propaganda campaign has been excellent. It's really, I think, generated the support that we've seen. But there's one happening on the Russian side as well, that's targeted towards Russians, that's closing them off from reality, and that is going to cause little resistance to the things that are happening in Ukraine. And really the Russian people are playing a crucial role in ending this as well. They can put pressure on their government. Some are, but those are small numbers of people.

(00:22:48) So I go directly to propaganda, which is where a lot of dehumanization lives, because it gives you the justifications for why these horrible things need to happen. It tells you why what we're doing is morally right from our point of view, because they're not really people. And so I wonder a lot about that.

(00:23:08) I also wonder about the refugees. Not because they haven't been treated warmly, but because it brings into stark contrast how we've treated other refugees. So there have been, at least in Europe, a stream of refugees coming from Syria and the Middle East for quite some time—again, due to Russian bombings, which are now more in clear focus. And they haven't been meted the same kind of treatment that the Ukrainians have. And so it also highlights differences in the role dehumanization plays. At least for us here in the UK, one of the big arguments in favor of the Brexit vote, which is the separation from the EU, was about the refugees streaming in, and how EU policies welcomed them in, but we didn't want to do that. And you would look at media coverage on it and you'd see cartoons depicting them as vermin and rats, coming over the border.

(00:24:03) So this dehumanizing rhetoric is still very present. And it's gone away thus far—I'm worried about it coming back for the Ukrainians, to be quite honest. And so it's worth monitoring. But yeah, I've been worried about propaganda since the war.

(00:24:17) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:24:40): I'm wondering how you think about this process of dehumanization, which as you said, can be useful or not useful or good or bad, and how that can—you were starting to speak to this, I think already somewhat—but how that can go from an individual process that a person would employ interacting with another person or group of people, leveling up to institutions and societal structures and norms and things like that. How do you think about that evolution?

Lasana Harris (00:25:10): That's a great question. I think on the level of institutions—and this is a drum I've been beating for a really long time—I think because dehumanization can be encouraged by the context, institutions bear responsibility to create scenarios and situations that don't promote dehumanization. So I think within institutions, dehumanization happens a lot simply because of basic things like diffusion of responsibility. There are so many decision makers, they all know that there are many decision makers, none of us therefore feels directly responsible. It's more likely we ignore somebody's suffering.

(00:25:48) There are also different types of professional rules that promote dehumanization as well. There's a cottage industry of research in the last few years, looking at how workers are dehumanized by virtue of being workers. And a lot of this grew out of the old Marxist ideas about the proletariat and factory workers being mechanized for efficiency. But you don't have to be performing a monotonous task to be dehumanized by your company. Many people have had that experience over the pandemic. Similarly, with your government, once you become a statistic as we put it, and you're one of many, dehumanization is a natural outpouring from that type of context. So I think about dehumanization and institutions quite a lot, and how institutions help dehumanize us.

(00:26:41) Dehumanization on the level of groups however, I've always thought of as a slightly different phenomena to what I'm describing, because I see that a lot more like attitude and bias research. So let me draw a distinction to help make it clear. So in psychology, we talk a lot about bias and bias research and that usually refers to stereotyping and prejudice, which has a lot to do with emotional responses that people have towards groups. And so bias tends to capture those emotional responses—dislike, threat, feeling of nervousness, feeling of inferiority. These are different kinds of emotional responses to groups. Dehumanization, the way I've described it, is a cognitive phenomenon. It doesn't have a big affective component per se, but it's about how you think about other people. So it's much more cognitive.

(00:27:37) As a result, they're very separate. So sometimes you have instances of bias where they come together. For instance, racial bias. And in racial bias, you have this historical dehumanization where there was a lot of junk scientific research to demonstrate these people belong to a different species. And those historical ideas have persisted, and that gets tied in with feelings of threat and prejudice. And so you get a mix there. In gender bias, you have something similar. There's this sexual objectification of women, where their bodies and their sexual abilities are more valued than their minds. And that gets tied in with this sort of paternalistic prejudice about women needing to be protected because they're weaker and inferior and they should be at home. So you get blends of them, but they're still very distinct things.

(00:28:32) So on the group level, I tend to think of that kind of dehumanization a lot more like bias research, and the things that will help bias will help that type of dehumanization. Whereas these other forms of dehumanization—in the workplace, from the institutions, from your government to the homeless people in the medical capacity—they're somewhat separate in terms of mechanisms, as well as how they manifest in the real world. So it's a much more complicated picture than I think most people realize.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:29:05): Yeah. You might have basically just answered this, but I'm thinking about, you'll be joining us for the Summer Research Institute this June, which is on othering and belonging. So would you view it that way, that this process of othering is more of that kind of bias/prejudice as opposed to a dehumanization process per se? Or I guess they feel like they're related...

Lasana Harris (00:29:28): Yeah. So that's an interesting question. I think they are, because you tend to have multiple mechanisms happening within a very narrow time span. So again, in psychology, we've done a poor job of talking about time course. So let's assume I am conducting an interview for a job and you come to me as the candidate. There's a time course that happens where prejudice gets sprinkled in at different places and dehumanization gets sprinkled in, but they're not exactly all relevant at all times. So initially when I meet you, stereotypes may kick in and I may start thinking about you as a woman, and I have ideas about what women can't and can do. And so I have some paternalistic prejudice that comes along, but I might not necessarily dehumanize you in that moment.

(00:30:21) As we're starting to have the conversation and you're telling me about the difficulties you faced in graduating from university because you were one of a few women in your career, or in your speciality. Now that might upset me because I feel a member of that group, and now I feel a little bit threatened or hurt by that point that you're raising. And that may cause me to shut out your mind, to stop thinking about your suffering and the suffering that caused you. So now dehumanization becomes relevant, and that process plays in for that piece of the interview. And then something else happens and something else kicks in. Maybe you point out that we grew up in the same hometown, and now I feel an affinity towards you. And there's this overwhelming familiarity, and now I'm humanizing you and getting in your head. And so there's this real cascade of processes that we don't quite understand because oftentimes in psychology, we don't study interactions. We study very brief exchanges, people looking at things on the screen. And so I think all of these processes are playing out.

(00:31:29) So who do you blame when I don't give you the job as a woman? Is it because I stereotyped you? I dehumanized you? Probably they all played a role, but it's really hard to disentangle which specific one is responsible. Which is why I talk about it in terms of general bias approaches, when dehumanization is rubbing up against group boundaries. When it's not rubbing up against group boundaries, I think you need other strategies, other approaches to combat it or encourage it, depending. But in the group context, you have to address the relationship between the groups, the power dynamics between the groups, all of the stuff that sociologists and social psychologists have been yelling for decades.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:32:11): Yeah. That's making me think of something you mentioned before about... I appreciate your shining a light on all of this nuance. You were saying that dehumanization is more of a cognitive process. It's not so involved in emotion, whereas bias or prejudice is kind of more emotional. But also I feel like that must blur pretty quickly too, in some of the ways you were just saying. Like, as soon as you think about someone else's mind or their experience as a human, it seems like

emotion kind of quickly gets mixed in, right? And so maybe that speaks to also how we can't really fully separate cognition and emotion, like historically has been done.

Lasana Harris (00:32:48): That's exactly right. Yeah, psychologists think of them separately so we can better study them. But in reality, they're not separable. So you don't get emotion without cognition. Like, you can't have an emotional response without an appraisal. Well, an appraisal is a thought, "Oh, that's a snake," right? That's going to trigger the emotional response.

(00:33:09) So they really are inseparable. And then there's the argument, every thought brings with it emotion. And in the case of dehumanization, what it does is it short circuits emotion like empathy and compassion. So if I don't get in your head, I don't even know you're suffering, I can't then resonate with that suffering and be motivated to help you overcome that suffering.

(00:33:30) So you're absolutely right. It's really a false distinction, but it's what we do as psychologist to be able to study these things. But one is going to trigger the next. And so yes, if I'm walking down a dark alley and I see an African American male approaches me, I'm going to have a learned response, which is a bit of fear and a threat response. That's because I grew up in a society that overwhelmingly told me these people are threatening, and they did so explicitly and implicitly by mere associations. Every time there was a news story in local news about a crime, I saw an African American face. So I have that built-in, learned affective response. That's going to trigger thoughts in my head. If I'm egalitarian, I may think, "Oh, I feel a little bit threatened. Why am I feeling threatened? Could it be that I'm just doing this stereotypical thing, or maybe I misattribute the fear to something else? Or I really hate being out at night—it's the night that has me feeling threatened." And so there's always going to be this interplay between the two as we go along.

(00:34:34) The reason for breaking them up and studying them is, we get different strategies if we take the different approaches. So you can think about emotion regulation strategies to help you regulate your biased responses, so that you don't display them. It doesn't stop you from having them, but it doesn't lead to your influences and your behavior. Or you can think of cognitive strategies where you don't even get to saying "that's a snake" in the first place. You don't categorize the guy approaching you as African American male in the first place; categorize them as human being. And that leads to different emotional responses. So even though it's a false distinction, studying them separately, lets us get novel strategies, I think, for dealing with them.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:35:18): Yeah, sure. Several times it's come up, the idea of threat and safety in all of these processes. And that feels like a really central, just from a biological standpoint, that's one of the core experiences that we're monitoring at all times. So if we are going to try to shift towards situations where there's more ability to humanize others, safety seems like such an important element. And safety of course, is really linked in with having more energetic resources as well, it feels like. So I don't know, I'm just curious your thoughts about all of that.

Lasana Harris (00:35:58): Yeah. It's an interesting idea. So I do think threat is super relevant to prejudice. In fact, the brain activity when you're experiencing prejudice is your threat detection mechanism. It's amygdala dependent, which is this subcortical structure that sits deep inside of your head; it's the burglar alarm in your brain. Every species has one. It's what keeps you alive. So definitely threat matters for our survival. And of course, people who are different from us or who are strangers can be potential threats. But they can also be potential allies. So I've had this debate now quite a few times with a variety

of people about whether we think about human beings as being by default good or bad. It really depends.

(00:36:47) So if I'm at home in my neighborhood, I may think most human beings I encounter are pretty good. If I go to work, I may have the same idea. Even if it's a complete stranger I encounter in work, they're probably going to be nice towards me. Maybe they're a new employee. Or maybe it's a neighbor I just haven't met yet, or someone who's visiting a neighbor, and that's why they're in my neighborhood.

(00:37:13) That safety signal that we get from thinking of humans as fundamentally good, is really, really important because it makes it, I think like you're suggesting, less likely that we experience prejudices, because prejudice suggests that threat response. And so if I'm in a situation where I think, "Oh, most people are not going to be threatening." It's easier now for me to get inside people's heads because threat is going to move you away from the threatening stimulus. It's going to make it less likely you think about them.

(00:37:44) At the same time, there will be situations where your threat responses are on alert. If you go to a foreign country for the first time, you don't know the culture, you don't know the norms, you don't know how people are likely to behave. And so you may view every person that approaches you as more of a threatening stimulus than if you were somewhere else. If you are out late at night, like the dark alley example, again, you might prepare yourself to expect threats. So the situation matters in terms of your default when you encounter other people.

(00:38:17) So if I'm now in an intergroup context, a place where I expect to see members of my group and members of an out-group, I might prepare for threat. I might put myself on guard right at the beginning where I think, "It's likely this person is going to be a threat." It's certainly the way that people who live in big cities approach the world, right? *[laughter]* City dwellers think everybody's potentially harmful until proven otherwise. So I think there's some flexibility there as well.

(00:38:45) And I don't know what the default is. So in my own theorizing, evolutionarily, I would say maybe we viewed all human beings as positive, as safe signals. And so once I got inside of your head, that marked you as a human being, you were safe. But when we started to encounter out-group members, these are human beings I have no experience with and I haven't seen before, maybe now we started marking them as threats. But not all of them because evolutionarily speaking, we evolved in small groups. There was lots of migration between the groups. So a stranger may be a potential future ally. So if I treated that person with threat and I didn't start thinking about them as a human being, I may miss out an opportunity to make a new friend, essentially. So those are really big philosophical questions people haven't really answered definitively, but they're lots of fun to think about.

(00:39:38) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:40:07): Okay, so I'd love to think with you about contemplative practice and the possibilities for how that might be able to impact processes like dehumanization. So I know it's not your primary expertise, contemplative work, but I know you have some interest in that. So I'm curious how you've been thinking about those kinds of practices.

Lasana Harris (00:40:30): Yeah. It's very fascinating to me. So we did a study many years ago with some clinical psychologists in New York, looking at dehumanization of homeless people. And what they wanted to do was see if a mindfulness meditation intervention could reduce the dehumanization of

homeless people. In our study, participants went out into New York City streets and they would record every time they encountered a homeless person and how it made them feel and their thoughts, so we could track the dehumanization of them. And in between our big data collection visits, we had them engage in these contemplative homework practices, where they engage in some mindfulness meditation and they learned some of the breathing techniques, et cetera. What we found was that it didn't reduce dehumanization, but what it did change was the product of dehumanization.

(00:41:28) So when I dehumanize in the case of the homeless people, it's usually in service of short circuiting my empathy. So I get low getting inside of their heads, but also low sort of empathy. For all participants, they still dehumanize, but somehow they still maintain really high levels of empathy towards the homeless people. And so it seemed like what the intervention did is it made them comfortable with the uncomfortable feelings. And that's really what I think is the secret for contemplative practices. I think because you are now attending to yourself, and so you're engaged in intense interoception, which is what we call it—so you're detecting your own bodily feelings and state, and you're allowing the mind-wandering thoughts in your head to just play out—it allows you to be comfortable with uncomfortableness, is the best way... This is not a very scientific way of putting it.

(00:42:28) So I think people just get practiced at being comfortable with uncomfortableness. And dehumanization is trying to take you away from uncomfortableness, especially in the homeless case. And so if I have practice in mindful meditation and I'm used to that uncomfortable feeling and I don't judge it, and I don't try to escape it, now I'm going to be more willing to engage with it when another human being is eliciting that feeling with me. I think the same thing, it works the same way with biases, with the more sort of emotion-based prejudices, like the threat responses you might get. I'm comfortable with the uncomfortableness because threat is an uncomfortable feeling. And so I'm less likely to lean into it and react the way threat is pushing me to react because I have experience with it. Now, I have no evidence for that. There's just the one study I've told you about. And so I could be completely wrong, but that's the potential I see. And that to me is really fascinating, that we could teach ourselves to be comfortable with the whole variety of experiences and emotions and thoughts that we have as a human being.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:43:41): That's great. And I think, it seems like one of the common elements of contemplative practice is that it helps build our awareness, kind of like you were saying, of our internal states, of our mental states. So that also seems like it could be really useful—not only to be able to sit with discomfort based on any kind of emotional, or even physical experiences, but also maybe we could become more aware when we are dehumanizing. That seems like part of the experience of the participants that you were describing. And then maybe allow a more conscious decision about whether we engage... I don't know, do you think we can stop ourselves from engaging in the actual process of dehumanization? Or if we become aware of it, we can at least act differently despite that tendency?

Lasana Harris (00:44:30): Yeah. Great question. I think you might be able to shut it down before it even gets going, to be quite honest. So I really like your expression that not only are we sort of comfortable, but we're aware. And I think there's a lot of unawareness that's happening with a lot of these biases.

(00:44:48) So it's not that people don't realize they have the threat response; that would be counterintuitive to what a threat response is. But we're often unaware of the source of it. So I believe I'm egalitarian. I get a threat response in the presence of an African American—I don't think it's because I'm biased. That must be coming from something else. So maybe that person actually is a threat, and now I get discriminatory behavior. If I can be more aware of where my feelings are coming from, I think

that could short circuit the dehumanization entirely. And so you don't get to a place where you need to now shut down to regulate. Because you're aware, "Oh, that person makes me feel like I want to be empathic towards them." I don't have the resources to help them, they're lying on the street, but I shouldn't avoid them because it makes me feel uncomfortable. Because I know that's the source of this discomfort. And so maybe if I engaged with it, that might help it go away, or help the person.

(00:45:55) And that's really counter to what these emotions are doing. So threat is pushing you away, disgust has been associated with dehumanization, that's also a "push you away" emotion. So to have the opposite action tendency is really not what these psychological mechanisms are trying to get you to do, but with awareness... I always tell everyone, what makes us special as a species is that we have a big old neocortex that can come in and make decisions. We can decide, "That's not right behavior, let me change my behavior." So even in the face of having a strong emotional response, I can make the decision to do something different. But that's going to require awareness and a basic amount of humility to get to that place where you have the awareness, and lots of practice. Because again, we've spent our whole lives doing what the emotions are telling us to do. But I think it's possible. And that's the real hope, I think, for contemplative practices.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:46:58): Yeah. Just something else that came up while you were talking is, I don't know if you've engaged much with these particular kinds of contemplative practices, but lovingkindness and compassion practices tend to generate those loving and warm emotions. And they usually move pretty systematically from close loved ones (or yourself) to increasingly expanding circles of what you would normally consider as others. So I'm thinking back to what you were saying earlier about your own tribe or your own close group, you feel safe. But then if you go to a foreign country, for example, you might view people more as threatening. So I've always been intrigued by these practices and the really explicit way in which they are trying, I think, to expand the circle that we view as "self" by kind of creating these commonalities and imagining the humanity... You actually explicitly do imagine the humanity of these people, so it's almost an intentional practice of humanizing over and over again. So then that just makes me think about the relationship of self and how we construct what we view as self. And then of course other, which gets us back to that conversation about othering. So just wondering if you have thoughts there.

Lasana Harris (00:48:14): Yeah. These are very exciting thoughts to have, I think. What's interesting about humanizing, as you put it, is that it does go beyond other human beings. So the vegan community for a long time has had an intellectual godfather in philosopher Peter Singer, who for years has been saying, "Well, the issue is that we haven't shifted our boundaries of moral protection. One day in the distant future, human beings will look back on us in this time and say what horrible creatures we were. We didn't recognize the suffering of animals." So it's possible to have this extension of humanity to things that aren't even human. And we do it all the time, right? And this is really something that made me decide, this is worth it's studying. If you can extend that level of love and compassion to your pets who belong to a different species, why is it so hard for members of your own species? It goes against evolutionary theorizing, about making sure your genes propagate. So it shows you literally how flexible it is. And loving compassion training is all about, as you said, extending that boundary. And I think it's possible to extend it.

(00:49:32) The problem I think it can run into, and this is one I haven't really solved as yet, starts with the self, in that many people have difficulty with self-compassion. And if you can't get the self-compassion, then the other kinds of compassion don't stand a chance. And so I remember thinking quite deeply about self-compassion and what it means to have compassion for the self. And I think it's

something that I struggled with, especially during the pandemic, where you're so stretched and overburdened. Most people, I don't think, took the time for themselves, especially if you had young kids at home and you were homeschooling and doing all of that. Your day is so completely absorbed with activities that you don't have the self-compassion. So allowing people space for self-compassion is step one. And that I think is perhaps a very difficult step for lots of people. I think the rest of it might come a lot easier if you can teach people to be compassionate to themselves, which I don't believe most people are. Now, it's possible, I think to start expanding it to people I know, people I don't know, all human beings, the planet. We need to get to that level of compassion before we're out of the woods.

[\(00:50:51\)](#) – *musical interlude* –

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:50:51\)](#): One other thing that you touched on a little bit that might be interesting to think about is, you spoke a couple times about the experience of living in a city and having so many people, or so much information to process that you have to allocate your cognitive resources narrowly. And you spoke about the study of passing by all the faces and not even really remembering the faces. So just thinking about our landscape today with the amount of information—social or not, but especially with social media—it feels like the amount of information that we're exposed to even just from 10 years ago is like, orders of magnitude [more]. So I'm wondering your thoughts about the impact of that, just general information overload, on these processes like dehumanization.

Lasana Harris [\(00:52:09\)](#): Yeah. I tend not to think of it as an overload because we're not getting all of the information. And that's part of the problem, right? So these algorithms underlying social media are looking for things that you like, to give you more of it. So you end up creating bubbles where there's a lot of information, but it's the same information. So in a sense, it's more dangerous because it's reinforcing only one point of view, only one set of ideas. So even though we live in the information age, people now I think have a lot less information than they did before. Because they have a lot of one kind of information, nothing else. In the old days, I might hear a radio program while traveling in a taxi that talks about something I would never listen to otherwise. That doesn't happen now. We get to curate... We think we're curating all of our consumption of content. The AI is doing the curation for you.

[\(00:53:06\)](#) So I think we aren't in an information-rich environment. It seems overwhelming because there are all of these sources of content and it's mind boggling to think about digesting them all. So we've become more restricted in the information we consume, which is problematic. So people now live in silos. They have completely different views of reality. There's no shared reality anymore, and people are thinking very different things. And recent events of the last few years really drove that home. Even people that live in the same place, their experiences are completely different because of their sources of information. So I think we need more information, but more diverse—so not quantity wise, but just more diverse information. We need to find a way so that people are exposed to many different things. I think that's a step one. So the overload has made us more insular and that's made things worse, I think.

Wendy Hasenkamp [\(00:54:08\)](#): Yeah. I feel like that is one of the most alarming and frightening things that's happening in the last several years is this siloing and bubbles, and the construction of completely different realities. I'm wondering if you have thoughts from all of your work about any ways we might be able to push back against that.

Lasana Harris [\(00:54:30\)](#): Yeah, I think you have to do some regulation. So I think governments have to step in. And this is the hilarious thing—governments already do step in, but on the other side. So think about these totalitarian regimes, they restrict the information content. You don't get Twitter in China.

So you get very curated content by governments. I think we actually need something like that—not as complete as in the way they're doing it in these countries, but at least some type of regulatory agency to let you know that all your content is the same. Because people don't think all their content is the same, because they looked on Instagram and then on Twitter. And the sources are different, so they think, oh, and they are different names and so... No, it's the same content.

(00:55:14) So we need to allow people to realize this is happening, I think. And that presumably will at least give us the choice to consume. Because at the moment, we don't even have the choice. If I try to search for something in Google, Google through my browser has locked in an algorithm that's going to show me certain things. It's not even going to show me what's on the other side. I think that's a problem, and regulation needs to come in to work with that. And that's a start.

(00:55:44) I think the other thing that we can do, and I'm a big fan of this approach, is start with kids and teach kids to be more mindful, to be more compassionate, to train those practices in childhood. So that kids do grow up with self-compassion so that it's more easily extended, and they are aware of their feelings more. And I think putting that in for children is very, very necessary and important. Because they haven't acquired a lifetime of knowledge like we have. They're not as far along in the learning process, so it's a better time to try to get them to engage in best practices. Because I'm not advocating that everybody thinks the same way, or has the same opinion, but you have to at least be able to have exposure to different opinions to begin to consider somebody else's point of view.

(00:56:37) And the last thing I think we need to do is we really need to develop more critical thinking skills. We need to be able to evaluate evidence and question it instead of accepting it. And that's perhaps the most difficult thing to figure out how to do. So here's where our education systems have failed us. We're so used to taking tests and preparing for tests. Even at the university level, we rarely push our students to critically think, to say, “Well, hang on a minute. Just because this paper was published in this journal doesn't mean it's true, right? What are the potential problems with it? What could you do different? What are alternative interpretations of these results?” That kind of thinking, I think is really, really important if we are to get past the deleterious effects of things like propaganda and social media bubbles.

(00:57:32) So I don't have an answer for how to do the third one. I think the second one with the compassion, we should just do it. There's some people I know who are doing it now and getting wonderful results. And then yeah, we need better regulations so that the algorithms aren't just geared towards making money for the companies, they're at least giving us some choice. So those would be the three things I would do. It would take some time, but I think it would pay off in the long run.

Wendy Hasenkamp (00:57:57): Well, this has been so great, Lasana. I know we're coming up on our time. Do you want to share any next steps for your work, or take home thoughts for the audience?

Lasana Harris (00:58:09): Yeah, a couple of take homes. I think it's always important that people don't think about psychological concepts as good or bad. That nuanced way of thinking—again, it's part of this critical thinking thing—but it's really going to help us as we think about the different kinds of issues that we care about. These days, we're actually working a lot on extending social cognition to non-humans. So we're doing a lot with how people think about the environment and the planet, as well as artificial intelligence and algorithms. And that stuff is really exciting because it looks like it's a separate mechanism, and so it gives us more insight into how to promote these practices. So when we think about the big existential threats facing humanity, they don't register as a threat for most people. The

warming of the planet doesn't concern many people still. And so finding ways, alternate ways, rather than just trying to terrify people into action, is a big part of what we're doing these days.

(00:59:13) And then the last thing we're looking at is this idea of the self. We've really gotten into the self as a tool that can help us change social bias as well. So there's some new theorizing we have where we're testing out the idea that you can actually use organizations and companies to promote anti-bias by getting people to focus on their ideal professional self. And if they do that, then bias becomes irrelevant. So let's go back to the hiring scenario—if my job is to get the best person for our team, it matters less what gender they belong to. If the best person for my team just happens to be a woman, then they just happen to be a woman. And so getting ways to promote those points of view and prevent the biases from kicking in that would allow me to think there's no way a woman can do this job, for instance.

(01:00:13) So it's a slightly radical approach to bias training, but it does have the potential for producing positive outcomes. And a few collaborators of mine have tried it in education systems. So with sending minority students to the principal's office, and it seems to reduce it there. It's worked with parole offices. We've tried it with marketing executives and they're advertising campaigns, and they've been less stereotypical. So really developing these new approaches to bias training is another big part of what we're working on these days. So, very busy.

Wendy Hasenkamp (01:00:48): Fantastic. Well, this has been so great, and I really love all of the scope of work you're doing. It's so important in the world today. So thank you for your work, and thank you so much for taking the time to chat with us today.

Lasana Harris (01:01:02): Thanks for having me.

Outro – Wendy Hasenkamp (01:01:07): *This season of Mind & Life is supported by the Academy for the Love of Learning, dedicated to awakening the natural love of learning in people of all ages. Episodes are edited and produced by me and Phil Walker, and music on the show is from Blue Dot Sessions and Universal. Show notes and resources for this and other episodes can be found at podcast.mindandlife.org. If you enjoyed this episode, please rate and review us on Apple Podcasts, and share it with a friend. And if something in this conversation sparked insight for you, let us know. You can send an email or voice memo to podcast@mindandlife.org.*

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