

**The Role of Dehumanization and Evilness Attributions on the Negative Emotional
Reactions towards Sexual Harassers**

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Abstract

The goal of this study was to examine the underlying mechanisms leading to the emergence of negative emotional reactions, more specifically hate feelings, towards sexual harassers. We examined the effects of dehumanization and the perceived evilness of the transgressor on hate feelings and tested two competing hypotheses and the interaction to see which is a stronger predictor. We conducted an online, self-report study with vignettes describing an event of sexual harassment, measuring the perceived evilness, the dehumanization and the hate feelings towards sexual harassers on a US-based sample ($N=220$). We found that dehumanization plays a significant role in the negative emotional reactions towards sexual harassers, while the attribution of evil characteristics only demonstrated a marginal effect. The two mechanisms do not interact, demonstrating their differing approaches. These findings are relevant for disentangling the complexity of strong negative emotional reactions, such as hate. They can contribute to creating interventions that reduce the stigma that hinders the reintegration of sex offenders.

Keywords: Hate, Dehumanization, Evilness, Sexual Harassments, Moral Transgressions

The Role of Dehumanization and Evilness Attributions on the Negative Emotional Reactions towards Sexual Harassers

Sexual harassment is a problem, that occurs in a large variety of places and involves a diverse range of people. Around 76% of women report experiencing verbal sexual harassment and 58% have experienced physically aggressive sexual harassment (Peterson et al., 2023). These transgressions can occur in public settings (Peterson et al., 2023), professional settings (Graf, 2020) or throughout the internet, for example, through dating platforms (Gewirtz-Meydan et al., 2024). Sexual harassment can have detrimental effects on the victims in a psychological and emotional sense. Victims are more likely to suffer from depression or anxiety disorders following the harassment, experience higher rates of alcohol or drug abuse, have more difficulties with emotion regulation and poorer performance in the work or academic setting (Hock, 2016). Due to these potential consequences sexual harassment can have on the victims, sex offenders are associated with a lot of stigma and face many negative attitudes from the public. Any encounters connected to sex offenses or sexual harassers often evoke worry, fear or other strong negative emotions in the general population (Stafford & Vandiver, 2017), such as hate feelings. People develop cognitive strategies to justify these strong negative emotions and the subsequent consequences the offenders have to face. Two such strategies are the dehumanization and the perceived evilness of the offender (Smith, 2016; Van Prooijen & Van De Veer, 2010).

There is a substantial amount of research focusing on how victims are dehumanized by the perpetrator and by observers, in order to justify the horrific things the victims had to experience (Haslam, 2006). However, little research has been conducted examining the role dehumanization plays in the observer's perception of the offender. Within that smaller amount of

research, it has been established that moral transgressions lead to dehumanization, however, generally dehumanization in itself does not necessarily have to lead to a negative evaluation of the target (Haslam & Murphy, 2020). In contrast, attributing evilness has been shown to lay a basis for the emergence of hateful feelings (Van Prooijen & Van De Veer, 2010). As I will explain later, evilness and dehumanization go in different directions when explaining the underlying mechanisms, yet they seem to coexist in the emergence of hate. This paradoxical relationship has not yet been studied in the context of hate feelings towards sexual harassers.

The current research will examine the interaction effect of dehumanization and the attributed evilness of the offender on the emerging hate feelings of observers towards sexual harassers. We aim to answer what the role of dehumanization and evilness attribution on the negative emotional reactions towards sexual harassment transgressors is. There are three competing hypotheses to be tested. Our first hypothesis states that compared to dehumanization, attributed evilness to the transgressors predicts stronger hate feelings towards him. The second hypothesis states that compared to attributed evilness, dehumanization of the transgressor predicts stronger hate feelings towards him. The third hypothesis claims that there is an interaction between dehumanization and attributed evilness which predicts hate feelings towards the transgressor. In the following sections, we will review some literature to support each hypothesis and define our variables.

Sexual harassment involves any unwanted or offensive advances of sexual nature. It can take two forms: *quid pro quo*, where something desirable is offered in return, and behavior that creates a hostile (work) environment. (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.). It can have long-lasting, detrimental effects on the victim's physical and psychological health (Chan et al., 2008), therefore, sexual harassers are often targets of negative emotions and marginalized in

society (Viki et al., 2012). The majority of people have strong hesitations in employing sexual offenders or having them as tenants or neighbors (Willis et al., 2010). Pilot data suggests that sexual harassment elicited the most hate feelings compared to other moral transgressions such as injustice, harming and stealing. Due to the severe nature of their transgression, they are very susceptible to being dehumanized and attributed with evilness. Therefore, we selected sexual harassment as the transgression to focus on to test the interaction between dehumanization and evilness, as it is predicted to trigger the strongest hate feelings towards a transgressor in our current study.

Hate is a concept most people are familiar with, but it is a lot harder to define and operationalize. The general consensus in psychological literature is that hate is a complex intense negative affective phenomenon (Fischer et al., 2018). It is complex in the sense that it is distinct from other negative emotions but overlaps to the extent that it can be seen as an emotion of a higher order composed of other negative emotions (Pretus et al., 2022). Sternberg (2005) proposed the triangular theory of hate that conceptualizes hate as a combination of three emotions, namely contempt, anger or fear and disgust. He distinguished between several types of hate that are expressed through different combinations and intensities of these three emotions on a dimensional spectrum. The main differences between hate and other negative emotions are that hate leads to higher arousal, is caused by a higher perceived personal threat and has more attack-oriented goals, such as the elimination of the target (Martinez et al., 2022). The elimination can be the physical elimination (e.g. death), but can also refer to a symbolic or social elimination (e.g. prison). Assigning the hate target attributes, that are perceived to be unchangeable and consistent, functions to justify the want for elimination (Fischer et al., 2018).

There are many different attributes people grant to their hate targets. One example is their unchangeableness over time, another is the target's evilness. Evilness is an elusive moral concept, ascribed to people who oppose your morals to an extreme extent (Govrin, 2018). An evil act is thought to be fundamentally incomprehensible and morally reprehensible (Calder, 2003), therefore labeling someone as inherently evil requires less cognitive capacity than rationally explaining their behavior (van Prooijen & van de Veer, 2010) and subsequently justifies any harm they might face as a consequence (Govrin, 2008). Evil people are thought to enjoy the misery of others with no empathy regarding the victim's position, which would reduce their desire to harm (Calder, 2003). This image elicits a kind of fear due to the perception of an existential threat (Govrin, 2018). As fear also plays a crucial role in the emergence of hate feelings one can suspect a certain degree of overlap, therefore justifying our first hypothesis that attributed evilness to the target leads to greater hate feelings.

Dehumanization occurs when we dismiss or deny someone their ability for complex human specific emotions and cognitions. Dehumanized people are being demoted to have the emotional and moral complexity of an animal or a machine (Kteily & Landry, 2022). Men who dehumanize women are more likely to sexually assault and harass, as they deny them their ability to feel and use them as tools to satisfy their needs (Rudman & Mescher, 2012). It also plays a role in how observers view perpetrators because similarly to the function of attributing evilness, it diminishes the need to fathom their behavior and legitimizes the punishment (Khamitov et al., 2016). Viki et al., (2012) found that the more people dehumanized sex offenders the more they supported their exclusion from society and violent treatments. Based on the discussed evidence we can also expect to find similar results to Khamitov et al., (2016), that dehumanization elicits greater hate feelings than evilness, because dehumanization is motivated by emotions like

disgust, contempt, and anger (Giner-Sorollai & Russell, 2019; Kteily & Landry, 2022) which are emotions that show strong overlap with hate and are theorized to be the emotions hate is composed of (Fischer et al., 2018; Giner-Sorolla & Russell, 2019; Sternberg, 2005). Viewing hate as a combination of contempt, anger and disgust draws a direct parallel to dehumanization, as these emotions play a crucial role in both concepts. Additionally, the increased desire for social and physical elimination further strengthens our second hypothesis that increased dehumanization of offenders leads to greater hate feelings.

Both Evilness and Dehumanization appear to be processes that increase hate feelings, however, their approaches to explaining hate take different directions. Dehumanization denies the perpetrator their agency, whereas evilness ascribes the perpetrator full cognitive functions that create the desire to harm. The moral typecasting theory mirrors the idea of attributing evilness, as harmful agents are seen as having more control over actively pursuing their goals. Khamitov et al., (2016) found evidence that supports dehumanization over moral typecasting, which suggests that if dehumanization is at play, evilness attributions should be diminished. Nonetheless, Kteily & Landry (2022) describe dehumanization as a continuous variable that occurs on a spectrum, so it could still be possible to dehumanize to some extent and still prescribe the offender some evil attributions, allowing the two to coexist, which supports our third hypothesis that there is an interaction between evilness and dehumanization in the emergence of hate feelings.

Methods

Participants

We recruited a random sample of healthy adults ($N = 269$) from the United States through the online research platform Prolific. The pilot data ($N = 31$) and participants who either failed

both attention check questions ($N = 4$) or submitted an incomplete survey ($N = 14$) were excluded from further analyses. After exclusion a total sample of $N = 220$ remained, where 48.6% were male, 48.2% were female, and 3.2% identified as “other”. An *a priori* power analysis was conducted, and the sample size is sufficient to achieve medium to large effect size, even after exclusion. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 77 ($M = 42$, $SD = 14.5$). The majority of our sample is white (57.3%) and has obtained an undergraduate degree (39.5%).

Instruments

Experimental stimuli

The survey which participants completed was designed using Qualtrics and was realized on Prolific. The Vignette that served as the manipulation described an act of sexual harassment in the workplace in approximately 6-8 sentences and was inspired by true news headlines. Sexual harassment was depicted in the form of inappropriate behaviour in the workplace (See the full vignette in Appendix A). All transgressors in the vignettes were male as these conform with the typical transgressors in these cases.

Measures

After the vignette, participants answered the dependent measures in random order. The participants were first asked to rate their perception of the perceived evilness of the transgressor with the item “Do you think the manager harassing his employee in the situation you just read was born evil and that's the way he is?” rated on a 7-point Likert scale: from 1 (“extremely unlikely”) to 7 (“extremely likely”).

Dehumanization Scale. Participants were asked to rate 12 adjectives on a 7-point scale, ranging from ‘not at all’ (1) to ‘extremely’ (7), based on how they fit the participant’s depiction of the transgressor. This scale operationalizes dehumanization and measures how dehumanizing

the transgressor is perceived based on the traits ascribed to him. The traits are ‘capable of self-control’, ‘like an animal’, ‘mature’, ‘cultured’, ‘rational’, ‘uncivilized’, ‘lacking self-restraint’, ‘primitive’, ‘barbaric’, ‘unsophisticated’, ‘savage’ and ‘backward’.

Passionate Hate Scale. Hate was measured with the Passionate Hate Scale which consists of three subscales, measuring anger (e.g. I cannot control my anger towards this person), disgust (e.g. This person is really disgusting) and contempt (e.g. I don't want this person anywhere near me) towards the transgressor. Each subscale has four items, to be rated from ‘strongly disagree’ = 1 to ‘strongly agree’ = 7. The Scale was developed by Zeki and Romaya (2008) and is based on Sternberg's triangular theory of hate (Sternberg, 2005). An attention check was included in the Passionate Hate Scale as an extra item, where the participant is asked to select ‘strongly agree’

Procedure

Ethical approval for this cross-sectional study was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen prior to data collection. Subsequently, a pilot study was conducted on a small convenience sample via Qualtrics, to check the technical functionality of the survey, to determine the average time required to complete it, and to gather general feedback. Based on this feedback, minor changes were made to the survey and the vignettes. The responses from the pilot study were not included in the main study, and these participants were not paid.

The data collection of the main study took place on the 3rd of April 2024 via Prolific. Before completing the online questionnaire, the participants read a short overview of the general nature of the study and the survey, including instructions. Giving informed consent was needed to confirm anonymous participation and proceed with the survey. The experiment was conducted

as part of a larger scale experiment that included other transgressions as experimental conditions and measured additional variables in a within-subject design, however, that information is not relevant to answering our hypotheses. Following the informed consent, the respondents were exposed to the vignette that described an act of sexual harassment. After reading the vignette, they answered the questions of the dehumanization and hate instruments described above, as well as rated the transgressor's evilness. At the end of the study, the respondents provided sociodemographic information. Finally, they read a debriefing form describing the aim and the content of the study further and received the contact details of the researcher. The survey took on average 14 minutes and 23 seconds to complete, and each person was paid 2.30 USD for their participation.

Statistical Analysis

The statistical analysis was conducted using Jamovi (version 2.3.28). Firstly, we performed a preliminary analysis to check for missing data and errors that occurred during the coding process. Next, we performed a descriptive analysis to assess the initial relationships between the variables. To test our hypotheses, we used a General Linear Model (GLM). This model included dehumanization, attributed evilness and their interaction as predictors and Hate as the dependent variable (DV). To test our first hypothesis, that compared to dehumanization, attributed evilness to the transgressor predicts stronger hate feelings towards him, we examined the main effect of perceived evilness. To test our second hypothesis that, compared to attributed evilness, dehumanization of the transgressor predicts stronger hate feelings towards him, we examined the main effect of dehumanization. Finally, to test our third hypothesis, that there is an interaction between dehumanization and attributed evilness which predicts hate feelings towards the transgressor, we examined the interaction effect. The main effects and the interaction were

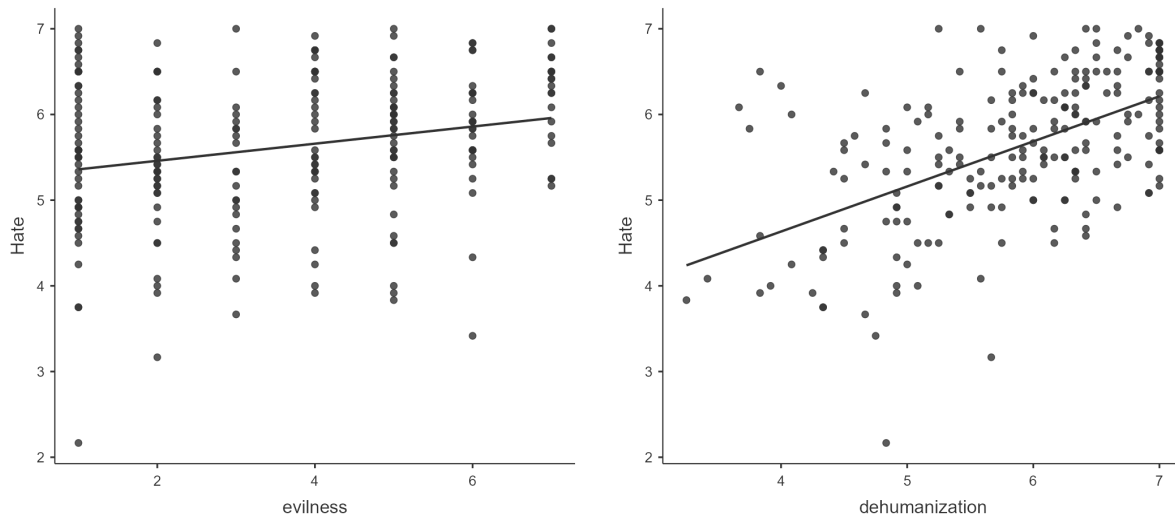
displayed and evaluated in an ANOVA table. For this analysis, we checked our corresponding assumptions and a significance level of .05 was chosen.

Results

The preliminary analysis showed no missing data. The overall rating for evilness attributions towards sexual harassers was not very high on the Likert scale ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 2.0$). On the other hand, participants scored relatively high on the dehumanization scale towards the sexual harassers ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 0.90$). Similarly, the hate feelings towards the sexual harassers were also rated relatively high ($M = 5.62$, $SD = 0.86$). The normality assumption for the regression was checked using a QQ-Plot of the residuals and was not violated (see Figure B1). Hypothesis 1 investigated if the attributed evilness predicted significant hate feelings towards a sexual harasser. We found a significant main effect of evilness on hate feelings with a small effect size, $F(1, 216) = 3.94$, $p = 0.048$, $\eta^2p = 0.018$, $\beta = 0.049$. Although we do not reject the hypothesis, the effect is only marginally significant. Hypothesis 2 investigated if the dehumanization of sexual harassers predicted significant hate feelings towards them. The results showed a significant main effect of dehumanization on hate, $F(1, 216) = 86.89$, $p < .001$, $\beta = 0.5164$, with a larger effect size, $\eta^2p = 0.287$. Hypothesis 3 investigated the interaction effect of the dehumanization and evilness attribution of sexual harassers on the emergence of hate feelings. The Results showed a non-significant interaction effect with a small effect size, $F(1, 216) = 1.53$, $p = 0.218$, $\eta^2p = 0.007$. We can therefore reject the third hypothesis. Taken together these results suggest that dehumanization plays the most important role in predicting significant hate feelings toward a sexual harasser. The different slopes for the linear relationship between hate and evilness and hate and dehumanization are summarized in Fig 1.

Figure 1

Linear Relationship between Hate and Evilness and Hate and Dehumanization



Discussion

This study aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the underlying mechanisms that contribute to the emergence of hate feelings towards sexual harassers in the general population. Specifically, the research focused on examining two variables, namely dehumanization and evilness attribution, and determining how each of these factors, both independently and through interaction, influenced the intensity of hate feelings. The findings indicated that the attribution of evilness to the harasser had a marginally significant effect, suggesting a subtle influence on the development of hate feelings at best. In contrast, increased dehumanization of the harasser significantly predicted increased hate feelings towards him, indicating that it is an important underlying mechanism for hate. The interaction between evilness and dehumanization showed no significant effect on the emergence of hate feelings, implying that these variables do not covary for explaining hate feelings. This suggests that the perception of the harasser as less human

seems to be a crucial mechanism that significantly contributes to experiencing hate feelings towards them.

These findings expand on Sternberg's (2005) conceptualization of hate as a combination of the emotions of contempt, anger and disgust. The parallels to the emotions motivating dehumanization, namely disgust, fear and anger (Giner-Sorollai & Russell, 2019; Kteily & Landry, 2022) suggest that dehumanization is a powerful underlying mechanism for hate formation, which is further strengthened by our Results. Viki et al. (2012) found that the dehumanization of an offender leads to a greater desire for their social exclusion. Our findings suggest that hate feelings are the bridge between dehumanization and increased prison sentences as the dehumanization elicits greater hate feelings, which motivates the social elimination that comes along with a prolonged prison sentence. However, the findings by Khamitov et al. (2016) are only partially replicated by our study. They found that people are more likely to dehumanize an offender than to perceive him as highly agentic. While in our study, dehumanization seems to play the more prominent role in shaping hateful feelings, evilness also had a significant effect, which should not be neglected. Some alternative theories could explain the marginal effect of evilness on the emergence of hate feelings.

Webster and Saucier (2015) investigated how evilness affects the desire for punishment and retribution. Punishment was operationalized as a desire for longer jail time and opposition to parole, which are types of social elimination. Retribution is the principle of payback or revenge, which can be seen as a type of physical damage or elimination. Hence, Punishment and Retribution could be motivated by two separate types of hate. They found that evilness led to an increased desire for punishment but not for retribution, suggesting that evilness might only be correlated with a certain type of hate. The theory of several types of hate was also suggested by

Sternberg (2005), who distinguished the types through varying compositions of the three underlying emotions, contempt, anger and disgust. Dehumanization is motivated by anger, fear and disgust (Giner-Sorollai & Russell, 2019) and the types of hate mainly characterized by disgust, such as cool and boiling hate, are, according to Sternberg (2005), the ones where the hate target is seen as subhuman. Opposingly, the types of hate characterized by contempt, such as cold hate, are where the target group is viewed as evil. Therefore the type of hate known as cold hate could be emerging towards perpetrators that are perceived as more evil. The underlying emotion of contempt is aligned with the desire for minimal contact, explaining the increased desire for punishment and social elimination. Different types of transgressions might elicit different types of hate and are therefore motivated by different underlying mechanisms, which could explain why dehumanization had a larger effect in the context of sexual harassment but this could differ in another type of transgression. Our measure of hate did not distinguish between different types, which could explain the marginal significance of evilness attributions. Future research could establish if different underlying mechanisms are at play for other types of transgressions and lead to varying types of hate.

Person-centered morality theory states that people have an inherent drive to assess the moral character of others, where the evaluation of the morality of an action and the morality of the individual performing the action can be distinct (Silver & Berryessa, 2021). These moral evaluations are then used to make judgments about future behaviors (Silver & Berryessa, 2021), which is why the dehumanization of a perpetrator increases the desire for punishment, as future behavior is predicted to be subhuman and savage as well. Identifying dehumanization as a central underlying mechanism for hate against sexual harassers could be important for reintegrating sexual offenders into society. Through strategies that humanize the offenders, such

as showing their remorse, people would be able to distinguish the subhuman act of sexual harassment from the offender and decrease their hate feelings towards them. These strategies could not only decrease hate feelings but also the public desire for harsh punishments, such as the death penalty which is still enforced in many countries.

Another alternative explanation for the marginal effect of evilness is the baseline difference in people's beliefs in evilness, regardless of the transgression or the offender. Webster and Saucier (2015) found that a person's general belief in the existence of pure evil had much more predictive value than their manipulation of a moral transgression. This suggests that there are some people who believe in pure evil more than others. The Concept of Evil is a recurring topic in religious teachings and Pocknell (2021) investigated religious beliefs as a prime influence on the development of belief in pure evil. Differences in religiosity could be an important mediating variable when examining the effect of evilness attribution on hate feelings and should be controlled for in future studies to reduce its effect.

Our Study displays several strengths that enhance its empirical value. One of the strengths is our sample that met the appropriate size established through our priori power analysis. Additionally, all of our measures have been validated in previous studies, which guarantees the accuracy of our data collection methods and enhances the credibility of our results. Furthermore, the vignette used in our study was previously tested during our pilot study, to ensure an accurate manipulation of the transgression.

Nonetheless, some limitations deserve consideration when interpreting the implications and generalizability of our results. Firstly the study is very theoretical and therefore lacks ecological validity. In real life the emotions towards sexual harassers can differ greatly depending on the type and severity of the harassment, relationship to the perpetrator or victim

and one's proximity to the event (McCarty et al., 2013)). Future research should aim to incorporate more emotionally evocative stimuli, to increase ecological validity. The measure for evilness was very superficial in the sense that it only incorporated one item that very transparently measured evilness. As discussed earlier, evilness is a very complex and abstract construct and people might not be able to consciously grasp everything it entails to accurately depict their perceived evilness of the transgressor. We could have used a more comprehensive measure that also incorporates unconscious or underlying perceptions of evil. While our sample was sufficient in size, the generalizability is limited due to the sample's WEIRD demographic, exclusively from the United States and excluding non-binary individuals, due to the statistical insignificance in sample size. Future studies should explore cultural and gender differences in the emergence of hate feelings towards sexual harassers to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the underlying mechanisms. Furthermore, our reliance on self-report data introduces potential biases, like social desirability. Sexual harassers are very stigmatized in society, leading to a predominantly negative image that people might want to express against them to signal their disapproval of that behavior, which however might not accurately represent their emotional state. Lastly, the marginal effect of perceived evilness suggests the need for a replication of this study to determine whether this effect can be more robustly established or deemed non-significant.

Conclusions

This study highlighted the importance of dehumanization as an underlying mechanism for the emergence of hate feelings towards sexual harassers. It demonstrated that the divergent processes of dehumanization and evilness attributions do not interact to have an effect and evilness attribution merely has a subtle impact on hate feelings. It also clarifies a common

misconception in the literature that evilness and dehumanization are equated despite their divergent approaches. Evilness is often termed demonization, which is seen as an extreme form of dehumanization (van Prooijen & van de Veer, 2010). Our findings demonstrate that these two constructs are not the same. These findings are important for disentangling the complexity of hate as an emotion and understanding the emotions provoked by sexual harassers in the general population. It demonstrates the importance of addressing dehumanization and introducing interventions that humanize offenders, in efforts to mitigate hate and decrease stigmas, aiding their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

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Appendix A

Sexual Harassment Vignette

The Manager of a small company has been inappropriately approaching his female employees. One day, he asks one of them to stay after work to help him with a project. While working on the tasks, he makes inappropriate comments about her appearance and touches her thigh. After she refuses, he insists and tries to kiss her. She resists again and claims to be feeling uncomfortable and that she wants to leave. He replies that if she leaves now, she better not come the next day because she will lose her job.

Appendix B

Figure B1

QQ-Plot for the Normality Assumptions Check