The Nature of Prejudice by Gordon W. Allport (1954)
Foreword to the 1st Chinese Edition

Gordon Allport’s *The Nature of Prejudice* is without peer. No contribution of its kind existed prior to its appearance in 1954. No contribution in the 65 years since has come close to achieving its impact. The latter is striking because between then and now, the scientific study of prejudice grew rapidly to become a mainstay of experimental psychology. There are thousands of scientific papers detailing every aspect of the structure and function of these unique attitudes and beliefs. And yet, *The Nature of Prejudice* is what we, teachers, hand to our students when we must introduce them to the modern understanding of prejudice.

Allport was best known for his work on personality psychology and is considered to be a founder of that field. But it is *The Nature of Prejudice*, a topic he seldom wrote about in scientific journals that remains his most well-known book, having sold over 500,000 copies by 1980. We know that Allport’s father was a physician who used his home as a clinic and often saw patients who could not afford medical care. Herbert Kelman, Allport’s student and his successor as Cabot Professor of Social Ethics at Harvard, has speculated that Allport’s recognition of the long shadow cast by group-based differences may have emerged from his early observations of inequality reflected in the comings and goings of that home-based clinic.

Three aspects of *The Nature of Prejudice* make it the remarkable book it is: its prescience, its scope, and its effortless weaving of evidence with anecdotes and observations, both vernacular and literary. *The Nature of Prejudice* stands out for its clear-eyed description of prejudice as an example of irrational thought and feeling. Even today it is difficult to persuade students of psychology, or anybody else for that matter, that prejudice is not just about a “few bad apples” in society. It is difficult to shake off the belief that we ourselves are without prejudice, and that the problems of prejudice will evaporate if we can only expunge those who espouse group-based hatred or support for the extermination or banishment of entire groups from their own countries.

The view that the problem of prejudice boils down to a manageable number of bad actors, however compelling, is wrong. It is compelling, because even as I write this introduction, sitting as I do in the United States, we have learned that yet another gunman, has yet again killed several innocent people, this time in a shopping mall in El Paso, Texas. The alleged manifesto of the 21-year old gunman reads, “This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas ... I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by invasion.” It is so easy to reserve the label of “prejudice” to the motivations of such minds and leave the rest of us outside its frightening boundaries.

Of course, as a personality psychologist, Allport recognized that humans differ from each other in their experience and expression of prejudice. But he also saw something far more elusive: the continuity between the thoughts and feelings that constitute prejudice, and the broader spectrum of categorical thinking found in all humans. After offering some rudimentary definitions in Chapter 1, Allport offered what may be the single greatest contribution of the
volume in Chapter 2, titled “The Normality of Prejudgment”. In it, Allport says “The human mind must think with the aid of categories ... Once formed, categories are the basis for normal prejudice. We cannot possibly avoid this process. Orderly living depends upon it.” (p. 20).

This notion – that what is normal and even necessary for thought and action, for everyday survival, is also the underlying machinery that gives rise to prejudice – is a difficult idea to have comprehended, let alone articulated so forcefully given what was known about the human mind in the early 1950s. We must remind ourselves that this was a time prior to the cognitive revolution, prior to the vast empirical basis that is now available to psychology, and decades prior to the now commonly understood notion of the irrationality of human cognition. Allport knew this before these truths about human nature had been laid bare and it is in this sense that his prescience is his greatest gift. Given his view of the ordinary nature of prejudice, if he were around today, he would easily grasp the contemporary notion of implicit bias, a term coined by his direct descendants, but one that eludes some psychologists even today.

The scope of coverage in The Nature of Prejudice is also remarkable. Again, writing in 1954, when the empirical basis of knowledge about prejudice was scant, Allport did not write a slim volume focusing on a few topics that could be safely covered by offering intuitions and platitudes. The Nature of Prejudice is a broad sweep of just about every aspect of prejudice we currently think and write about in our scholarly journals: categorization and learning; in-group love and out-group derogation; racial and ethnic differences, real and imagined; the role of visible markers of group membership and the feeling of strangeness they provoke; the role of language in creating and maintaining prejudice; counterintuitive ideas such as hatred of one’s own group; stereotype formation and change over time; the role of historical processes, sociocultural processes and immediate situation processes; the role of demagogues, religion, loyalty and scapegoating; the power of conformity; the development of prejudice in the young child; guilt and inner conflict; aggression and extreme forms of hatred; the intertwining of prejudice into other aspects of personality; what conditions make for a tolerant personality; and reduction in prejudice, specifically, the formulation of the “contact hypothesis” that is the basis of research on prejudice reduction even today.

One becomes breathless reading The Nature of Prejudice as Allport leaves no stone unturned, signaling that if we are to understand this issue as the complex one it is, it will require a view from every angle. Allport commented elsewhere that given the centuries and resources it took to understand the workings of an atom commensurably greater investment will be required to understand the complexity of the human mind. Recently, my colleague, the MIT biologist Nancy Hopkins offered a similar analysis. She expressed deep concern regarding geneticists reductively characterizing the complexity of intelligence in domains like mathematics and science as being group-based and inherited. As a cancer biologist, Hopkins is well aware of just how limited our current understanding of the genetic basis of cancer is after decades of high-investment research. She wonders about what sorts of values might motivate an interest in genetic differences between men and women’s math and science abilities. She worries about the ease of speculation stemming from a few studies about a topic massively more complex than the misfiring of a single cell.
In contrast to such oversimplification, Allport understood the complexity of what might begin as prejudgment and ends up in genocide. His respect for the topic’s complexity reveals itself in the breadth of the book. It consists of 200 unique sections (with additional information in summaries and notes at the end of each of 31 chapters). Arguably, The Nature of Prejudice should be required reading not just for students of the topic, but for those rushing to take positions on complex phenomena like the genetic basis of human intelligence. It may serve as a lesson in scientific modesty that comes from confronting complexity with awareness.

Sixty-five years after the publication of The Nature of Prejudice, we know so much more about the topic of prejudice, not just from the sheer number of papers that have been published on the topic but also from the multi-method approaches that have emerged ranging from small controlled experiments to quasi-experiments in the field, correlational studies, economic games and simulations, and machine learning, not to mention the far more sophisticated statistical methods available today that provide greater confidence in what we know and do not know. When Allport wrote his book, the data available would have been a fraction of a percent of what is available today, and remarkably, his views are largely in line with what the data have revealed. In fact, other than his coverage of psychoanalytic theory, prominent during his time but playing no role in scientific psychology today, there is almost nothing else that seems misplaced, all these decades later.

So how did Allport achieve his grip over the topic in 1954? I offer that Allport had a quality that protected him, when others may have been led astray. He was first and foremost a personality theorist, and that meant that he understood the way in which genes and society, the global and the local, the individual and the collective act in consort to make each of us as we are. He understood that the outside changes the inside, and vice versa. Moreover, Allport’s theoretical understanding of psychology was embedded in a practical, historical understanding of the world. He had deep familiarity with the facts surrounding slavery and anti-Semitism in America, a familiarity that had escaped many others of his social class. He drew his insights from events occurring in all corners of the world. He was poised to receive the experiences of immigrants from Europe after WWII. This allowed an unparalleled grasp of both the theoretical and the pragmatic as he painted a clear-eyed picture that is strikingly modern at its core. Just change the names of the social groups in his book, and each of us will see similarities to new intergroup relations today.

In one way, we have heeded Allport’s teaching. We have ventured in the direction he recommended, and learned a great deal more, and faster, about the ordinary nature of prejudice. In the process, we came to assign to the term “prejudice” a more limited meaning than Allport could, using it to refer to one form of prejudice that is explicit, conscious, and marked by animus. The cognitive revolution aided our understanding of prejudice to suggest the possibility that biased treatment may not simply emerge from processes and mental content within our conscious awareness or conscious control, but through aspects of our minds of which are not aware, and cannot easily be aware, unless we build the technology that will show it to us. That produced the possibility of social cognition being expressed implicitly, not
just explicitly. Today, the idea of *implicit bias*, colloquially also referred to as *unconscious bias*, and understood to be a feature of all humans and collectives and a part and parcel of unintended discrimination, is not only an accepted part of academic understanding but has transcended into a meme. In 2016, American presidential candidates were asked in their first public debate about what they would do about implicit bias. Organizations, including governmental agencies, financial investors, and film producers strive to understand how implicit bias imposes hidden costs on them they do not wish to pay.

Although Allport’s view of prejudice is through an American lens, we must remember that his message is universal, because he speaks about a matter that is universal. As such, *The Nature of Prejudice*, read even with modest imagination, will resonate in China, as it has elsewhere in the world. Chinese readers will find particular resonance in Allport’s theorizing as China explores the world beyond its borders through travel, commerce, and intellectual exchange. This first Chinese printing of *The Nature of Prejudice* can serve as a guide to its citizens as they embark on new levels of intergroup relations to be undertaken on an unparalleled scale. In China and elsewhere, the question for readers as they turn the pages – paper or digital – is this: Can the unique power of scientific understanding conquer age-old and newly emerging threats to a unified and peaceful world?

Mahzarin R. Banaji  
Richard Clarke Cabot Professor of Social Ethics  
Department of Psychology  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
USA