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A MACAT ANALYSIS

GORDON W. ALLPORT'S

THE NATURE OF PREJUDICE





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An Analysis of

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Gordon Allport's

The Nature of Prejudice

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Alexander O'Connor



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CRITICAL THINKING AND THE NATURE OF PREJUDICE

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Primary critical thinking skill: REASONING

Secondary critical thinking skill: EVALUATION

With his 1954 book *The Nature of Prejudice*, American psychologist Gordon Allport displays the crucial skill of reasoning, producing and organizing an argument that was persuasive enough to have a major impact not only in universities, but also on government policy.

The question that Allport tackled was an old one: why are people so disposed to prejudice against those from other groups? Earlier psychologists had suggested a number of reasons, especially in the case of racial prejudice. Some had suggested that racism was a learned behaviour, conditioned by negative experiences of other races; others that there was an objective rationale to negative racial stereotypes.

Allport, however, reasoned that prejudice is essentially a by-product of the necessary mental shortcuts the human brain uses to process the vast amount of information it takes in. Because our brains want to use as little effort as possible, they regularly fall back on simple stereotypes – which easily generate prejudice. Gathering strong evidence for this hypothesis, he reasoned, clearly and persuasively, that our natural cognitive approach is the most significant factor in accounting for prejudice. Going further still, Allport also reasoned that, once this was better understood, social scientists would be able to influence policy-makers to curb discrimination by law.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THE ORIGINAL WORK

Gordon Allport (1897–1967) was born in Indiana in the United States. He studied at Harvard University, and went on to work there for 40 years. He made huge contributions to the field of personality psychology and his influence is still felt today. Allport lived through important and unsettling historical times, including the Holocaust and the American Civil Rights Movement. This gave him a burning desire to tap into psychological explanations for the violent, discriminatory behavior of so many people. He was convinced that social science had a vital role to play in giving governments policy guidance to reduce the evil of discrimination.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS OF THE ANALYSIS

Dr Alexander O'Connor did his postgraduate work at the University of California, Berkeley, where he received a PhD for work on social and personality psychology.

ABOUT MACAT

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KEY POINTS

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- Gordon Allport was an American psychologist who had a profound and lasting impact on his field.
- *The Nature of Prejudice* gives a comprehensive understanding of the psychology of prejudice, explaining how and why prejudice exists.
- The ideas that Allport put forward in *The Nature of Prejudice* shaped the study of prejudice for decades and are still relevant today.

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Who was Gordon Allport?

Gordon Willard Allport (1897–1967) was born in Montezuma, Indiana, the youngest of four sons. One of his elder brothers, Floyd Henry Allport,* was an influential social psychologist* himself and played a key role in developing Gordon's career. Floyd studied psychology at the prestigious Harvard University and encouraged Gordon to enroll there as an undergraduate. The two brothers later went on to collaborate on a book on personality psychology.*

After gaining his degree in philosophy and economics in 1919, Allport headed for Europe, teaching in Istanbul, Turkey, for a period. He also visited Sigmund Freud*—who became known as the father of psychoanalytic therapy*—in Vienna in 1920. Allport returned to Harvard that same year to begin a PhD in psychology, earning his

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Macat Analysis of Gordon Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice*

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doctorate in 1922. The university then awarded Allport a traveling fellowship, and he returned to Europe to study Gestalt psychology* in Berlin and Hamburg. This new school of psychology placed particular emphasis on the cognitive* (or conscious thought). The experience shaped Allport's later work and influenced his move toward the use of cognitive theory rather than psychodynamic* or behaviorist* thinking.

Allport returned to Harvard University in 1924, where he worked first as an instructor and then as a professor for the best part of four decades until his death in 1967. He was elected president of the American Psychological Association in 1939.

Published in 1954, Allport's fourth book, *The Nature of Prejudice*, is his best-known work and is considered one of the most important and influential texts in social psychology. Allport is also known as one of the founders of personality psychology and wrote a number of books on the subject, including the influential *Becoming: Basic Considerations for Psychology of Personality* in 1955.

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What Does *The Nature Of Prejudice* Say?

Allport wanted to integrate already-existing research on prejudice* with his own ideas to show that:

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- prejudice does not have a single cause, but is the result of many different factors

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- prejudice and discrimination can be limited and, ultimately, combated.

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Decades of research have followed *The Nature of Prejudice*, but the majority of Allport's conclusions stand up today, and the original ideas he explained in the book are still relevant. Allport's highly influential

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intergroup contact hypothesis* was first outlined here. This hypothesis suggests that if people have increased experience of a group outside their own, then their attitudes toward that group will improve.

With *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport changed the focus of personality psychology. The Freudian analytic approach, in which a person's childhood experiences are thought to shape his or her unconscious and forge the personality, had some support. But at the time the book was published in 1954, behaviorism was the approach that dominated. Behaviorism puts forward the idea that we are all effectively blank slates and that our character traits* are created by external, environmental factors. Allport looked at both the Freudian and behaviorist approaches, and considered both to be too extreme. Freud's psychodynamic approach didn't seem to recognize the importance of conscious thought (the cognitive), while behaviorism appeared to deny the importance that thought processes and experience, whether conscious or unconscious, could have on someone's personality. Allport expressed his support for a more cognitive approach, suggesting that personality is formed by conscious mental activities such as attitudes, beliefs, and memory processing. This was a significant shift in the field of psychology, and Allport's work in *The Nature of Prejudice* helped develop the field of social cognition.*

Allport argues in his book that prejudice has many causes and that all human beings are capable of it. His theory suggests that prejudice is the result of cognitive processes, of patterns of thinking and beliefs. One of these cognitive processes, the "least-effort principle,"* was described by Allport before anyone else in relation to prejudice. In the least-effort principle, a person uses generalizations and stereotypes* as a mental shortcut to form a view of someone, rather than taking the longer route, drawing on memory and judgment. Allport said that these stereotypes, or shortcuts, are often based on visible features, such as a person's race.

Allport's intention in writing *The Nature of Prejudice* was to make a

Macat Analysis of Gordon Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice*

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positive difference, as prejudice and discrimination were widespread in the United States and the rest of the world. The book was written when the shocking details of the Holocaust* had recently become known and the American Civil Rights Movement,* which was fighting for greater rights for minority groups, was gaining momentum. *The Nature of Prejudice* developed new ideas, but also offered a comprehensive look at all the existing theories on the subject. Allport found the idea of behaviorism negative, because it put forward the notion that change could come about only through a modification in the environment in which people were living. So in this framework the only way it would be possible to change prejudice would be to alter the poor economic situations in which certain groups lived. Allport suggested that how people think about things—cognition—was a much more significant factor in conquering prejudice. He believed that once it was better understood *why* prejudice occurred, social scientists would then be moved to act to influence policy-makers to curb discrimination by political means. *The Nature of Prejudice* was widely read and admired when it was first published, and some anti-discrimination laws were indeed introduced in the years after it appeared. It could be concluded that Allport's ideas in *The Nature of Prejudice* had some influence in reducing prejudice and discrimination. There is little hard evidence of a direct link, however, so it is not possible to say exactly *how much* social change Allport's psychological investigation of prejudice concretely achieved.

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Why Does *The Nature Of Prejudice* Matter?

The Nature of Prejudice is essential reading for anyone interested in personality and psychology. In 2005, a collection of essays to mark the 50th anniversary of the book was published. Called *On the Nature of Prejudice: Fifty Years after Allport*, each essay paid tribute to Allport's core themes. Written by the most influential prejudice researchers working in psychology—such as John Dovidio* and Susan Fiske*—the essays

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give credit to Allport for paving the way for most contemporary social psychological research on prejudice. In his introduction, Dovidio says, "There is no debate that Gordon Allport's (1954/1979) *The Nature of Prejudice* is the foundational work for the social psychology of prejudice. Contemporary prejudice researchers and scholars regularly refer back to this work not only for apt quotations, but also for inspiration. Social science instructors often pair Allport's book with recent articles. Indeed, any student of prejudice ignorant of Allport would be rightly considered illiterate."¹

The Nature of Prejudice is also invaluable reading for anyone interested in the growth of the human rights movements of the mid-twentieth century. In particular, Allport's ideas about prejudice act as a historical record of the early times of the American Civil Rights Movement. This is because his ideas represent the central arguments that were put forward by the movement, aiming to reduce prejudice and discrimination and improve the rights of minority groups. In addition, the book also supported and informed legislation intended to fight discrimination in the United States. Allport believed that "legislation, if enforced, may be a sharp tool in the battle against discrimination."²

Finally, Allport gave balanced consideration to many different theories of prejudice. He drew from most areas of psychology, including clinical,* social, personality, and developmental* psychology. Not only does *The Nature of Prejudice* provide an introduction to the broader field of psychology, it also emphasizes that most psychological phenomena are determined by a number of different factors.

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NOTES

¹ John F. Dovidio et al., *On the Nature of Prejudice: Fifty Years after Allport* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 1.

² Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 442.

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