Gordon W. Allport’s *The Nature of Prejudice
And the Problem of Choice

Persons Themselves are Initiating Causes
In the Presence of Alternatives
Presented By Their Past History
And Present Opportunities

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*THE NATURE OF PREJUDICE*

is a tribute to the development of social science. In it one finds a systematic mind at work, using historical, cultural, economic, and psychological data to develop a theory of prejudice—a theory which does more to give structure to this complex realm of behavior than any previous work. But this volume is more than a necessary handbook for students of prejudice and for those who seek scientific guidance in the battle against it. Allport has not only summarized, organized, and interpreted a welter of studies; he has poured onto every page insight after insight into human experience. Here is a mind reminiscent of William James at his best, probing here and there, always aware of the complexity of human experience, but unafraid to try to catch it by every critical operation of social science.

This book could have easily been a pedantic book, so “impressive” with statistical lists and graphs! It may even tempt a certain type of “scholarly” mind into thinking of it as “popular.” Actually it is one of those unusual works, written by a master of style and expression, which keeps the reader reaching for more as it gracefully weaves together data, argument, and interpretation. As Allport states in the Preface, this book is written both for college and university students and also for intelligent laymen. These readers will indeed glean from attentive reading of these pages much more
than superficial formulae and conceptual over-simplifications. They have explained to them enough about emotional and cognitive processes, enough about group differences, biological and cultural, to enable them to go from chapter to chapter increasing their "sense of the problem." They will gain understanding of the causes and effects of prejudice, and of the problems we face, legislative and otherwise, in reducing prejudice. Careful notes and references to further reading are provided at the end of every chapter.

The scholar, in turn, will welcome the appreciative exposition of different theories of prejudice, the telling summaries of significant studies which everywhere support theorizing, the critical caution in interpreting many "findings," and the suggestion of areas for further research. Apart from its obvious relevance to courses in Social Psychology, this book could well be used to supplement many of the areas treated in courses in General Psychology, Abnormal Psychology, Psychology of Personality, Child and Adolescent Psychology, Mental Hygiene; and let a philosopher add that it will be a pity if the teachers of Logic, Ethics, and the Psychology of Religion do not make considerable use of this book. The readers of this journal will find in it a wealth of material relevant to their work insofar as it touches on the dynamics of personal development and social relations in general, and of prejudice in particular.

The remainder of this review will trace, all too briefly, a basic line of thought which suggests a fundamental problem in the realm of psychotherapy.

PROFESSOR Allport is very careful throughout the book to distinguish between prejudiced and realistic antagonisms between persons. He defines an ethnic prejudice as a felt or expressed "antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalization." He then proceeds to analyze both the cognitive process of categorization, and the nature of in-group formation. He emphasizes the importance of not over-stressing the effect of collective or group pressures on personality formation. "No individual would mirror his group's attitude unless he had a personal need, or personal habit, that leads him to do so."

Nevertheless, Allport is convinced that prejudice is an effect of "plural causation." He therefore devotes at least half of his book to clarifying the part which cultural, economic, and historical factors play in the formation of prejudice, and he shows that forces outside the personality must be seen as causal factors converging with those inside the personality. In a word, to understand why the prejudiced person takes one group and not another as the object of prejudice, we must go beyond the fact that the individual perceives a certain group in an oversimplified way, and understand why he sees them as he does. To be sure, the general economic and social situation in which he lives is important, as is historical long-range influence. But, in the last analysis, the individual perceives the situation as he does because of the personality he has developed in socializing himself.

Our problem draws nearer as we spell out the dynamics of prejudice-formation more concretely. In Allport's view, the growing person and adult "lives under constant pressure to obtain meanings from his welter of experiences" and is "himself intent upon the task of organization." He develops his sense of what is valuable and his image of himself within a concrete social situation; he constantly selects and