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## Book Review

### Understanding *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*

S. Plous, Ed. *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*. NY: McGraw Hill. ISBN 0-07-255443-6 (624 pp., \$44.05, a portion of which is donated to the SPSP Diversity Fund).

One cannot discuss a book on the psychology of prejudice without comparing it in some way to Gordon Allport's *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), so let us get that out of the way at the start. It is not as ironic as it may seem that a book published 50 years ago was more strictly scientific than one published on the same topic today after an explosive proliferation of experimental research on the subject. Careful scientific study of the psychology of prejudice did not start with Allport, but his 1954 book presciently laid the foundation for the coming movement. In *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination*, Scott Plous, all these years later, reaps for us the benefits, pulling together an extensive collection of materials that taps psychology's empirical strengths, but also effectively relates this science to other disciplines and the "real world." With the scientific credentials of psychological research on prejudice firmly established, this book has the potential to reeducate a broad audience on the nature of prejudice. *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination* also promises to help reveal the relevance of psychological research to public policy. The inclusion of the word "discrimination" in the title is itself an indication that the book intends to take its readers beyond the beliefs and attitudes to the behavior—which can be regulated through policies.

It was my good fortune to be asked to review this book just as I was preparing to teach another class on stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination. It opened my eyes and energized me with new fuel, offering accounts of diverse manifestations of prejudice, from dwarf tossing to genocide. For the obsessive empiricist, this book could be a little disconcerting. It strays dramatically from the core psychological literature, providing select readings from psychological journals, but drawing more heavily from journalism and other disciplines. It is telling, for example, that the selection authored by Claude Steele is an essay he wrote for *The Atlantic Monthly*,

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not *American Psychologist*. This reflects what must be Plous's deliberate strategy to make understanding prejudice possible for people outside the field. Many of the readings are provocative and even politicized, which may make some of us squirm, but will help to make it a valuable resource for psychological scientists who have the habit of narrowing our attention to what has been found in the lab.

The broad target audience will be further served by the outstanding website (<http://www.UnderstandingPrejudice.org>), accessible to anyone, which is a companion to the book. The introductory chapter to the book is available there, as are useful bibliographies, and links to activities, experts, and relevant organizations. This website alone represents a major contribution.

The utility of the book for expert and lay audiences alike is clear. Plous provides an excellent introductory chapter that is very current (recognizing, for example, the particular challenges posed by contemporary, subtle forms of bias), and clearly describes many of the essential elements of the psychological study of prejudice. He manages to cover a lot of ground (while graciously avoiding "self-citation bias"), but still include descriptions of specific studies, thereby giving readers a feel for the research. It is not as thorough as the typical "handbook" chapter, but is more accessible to a less expert audience and keeps an eye to policy relevance. For example, he provides an impressive and compelling table of dozens of news reports of racial discrimination in a number of domains (e.g., medical care, criminal justice, lending, etc.).

The rest of the book is a collection of research reports, essays, many poignant quotes, public declarations, graphics, and news accounts that shed light on the various forms and effects of prejudice, broadly defined. Sources include scientists, philosophers, journalists, social activists, and historical figures. Writers like Allport, Steven Jay Gould, Martin Luther King, Milton Rokeach, Gloria Steinem, and Thich Nhat Hanh offer their diverse perspectives, and quotes from the likes of Benjamin Franklin, who proclaims the superiority of light-skinned people, lay bare the depths of prejudice. The book is organized primarily around type of prejudice, rather than type of mental construct in the manner that many conventional texts might be. It has sections on stigmatization, old-fashioned racism ("Racism Then"), contemporary racism ("Racism Now"), sexism, anti-Semitism, atrocities against Native Americans ("Genocide in America"), heterosexism, the interrelatedness of groups and biases ("Making Connections"), reducing prejudice, and an intriguing and doubtless controversial appendix on prejudice toward animals.

An instructor wishing to get a class up to speed on the state of the art in prejudice research probably would not use this book as a primary text, although it would be very helpful as a supplemental source to keep discussions lively and topical. It would most likely find its optimal instructional application in interdisciplinary courses and those that seek to explore prejudice and discrimination in the real-world context. The readings in the book cry out for discussion. In courses considering the application of psychological theory and research to policy issues

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such as racial profiling, affirmative action, and hate crime legislation, the types of readings included in *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination* will help to challenge people's assumptions and spark the kind of debate that is necessary for understanding policy discourse. Outside the classroom, the book would be a great read for anyone with, or aspiring to have, social consciousness. *Understanding Prejudice and Discrimination* brings the phenomenon of intergroup bias, and much of what we know about it from psychological research, to a general audience, but is also enlightening for scientists who wish to keep their work in perspective.

—Jack Glaser

### **References**

- Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Garden City, NY: Anchor.  
Plous, S. (2003). *Understanding prejudice and discrimination*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

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