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Allport's Prejudiced personality today:

Need for closure as the motivated cognitive basis of prejudice

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Running head: Motivated prejudice

ABSTRACT

In the long history of psychological research on prejudice, Allport's (1954) book *The Nature of Prejudice* is undoubtedly the foundational work, advancing ideas that remain highly influential and relevant to date. Guided by the seminal ideas of this leading scholar, we illustrate how contemporary psychological research has accumulated evidence for a basic, motivated cognitive style underlying prejudice in its different forms. Specifically, we demonstrate that Allport's classic conception of this basic cognitive style is exceptionally well captured by the 'modern' construct of need for cognitive closure (NFC), and we review the recent evidence for NFC effects on racism and sexism. Integrating Allport's writings with contemporary research, we also show that the effects of motivated cognition on prejudice are explained (i.e., mediated) by essentialist thinking and authoritarian ideology. Finally, we discuss recent evidence indicating that, in contrast to Allport's pessimistic predictions, intergroup contact is especially effective in reducing prejudice among people high in NFC. It is concluded that recent research on NFC provides a solid empirical basis for Allport's hypothesis that a general motivated cognitive style lies at the basis of prejudice.

Keywords: Prejudice, Cognitive style, Ideology

The study of prejudice has been at the forefront of social psychological research for decades, as prejudice is an undeniable aspect of social relations and a lingering societal problem. Prejudice can target many groups based on ethnicity and race (racism), gender (sexism), or any other salient social category. However, Allport (1954) asserted that the specific targeted group is only of secondary importance in understanding the nature of prejudice. Instead, prejudice should be considered in terms of a general, motivated cognitive style. To put it in Allport's (1954/1979) words: "A person's prejudice is unlikely to be merely a specific attitude to a specific group; it is more likely to be a reflection of his whole habit of thinking about the world" (p. 170), and "the style of thinking that is characteristic of prejudice is a reflection, by and large, of the prejudiced person's way of thinking about *anything*" (p. 400). Over the years, however, these seminal ideas have faded from the psychological research agenda, and the issue of a general motivated cognitive style underlying prejudice has only recently reemerged.

NEED FOR COGNITIVE CLOSURE AS A CONTEMPORARY TRANSLATION OF ALLPORT'S GENERAL MOTIVATED COGNITIVE STYLE.

Four decades after Allport formulated his ideas, Kruglanski (1989; Kruglanski & Webster, 1996) developed the Need for Closure (NFC) theory as a framework for the cognitive-motivational aspects of human knowledge formation. Since its introduction, NFC theory has taken a prominent place in social psychological research on human decision-making and judgment. The need for cognitive closure has been defined as the desire for "*an* answer on a given topic, *any* answer ... compared to confusion and ambiguity" (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994, p. 1049) and is assumed to instill two

tendencies when people make judgments and construct knowledge. The *urgency* tendency refers to the desire for quick and definite answers, resulting in the inclination to *seize* easily accessible information. The *permanence* tendency refers to perseverance or *freezing* the obtained answer and hence protecting the acquired knowledge against contradictory information.

Kruglanski and Webster (1996) demonstrated that although NFC can be temporarily heightened by situational forces such as time pressure and noise, it is also an individual trait variable, as people substantially differ in their overall level of NFC. To measure individual differences in dispositional NFC, Webster and Kruglanski (1994) developed the NFC scale, composed of five facet scales: Individuals high in dispositional NFC *prefer order* and structure in their lives as well as *predictability*, reflected in a desire for secure and stable knowledge that is reliable across circumstances and unchallenged by exceptions. High NFC individuals also experience an urgent desire to reach swift and firm decisions, reflected in their need for *decisiveness*, and they feel *discomfort with ambiguity*, experiencing situations lacking closure as aversive. Finally, they are *closed-minded*, reflected by the unwillingness to have their knowledge challenged.

Most remarkably, although Kruglanski's theory originates from a research tradition outside of the prejudice literature, NFC shows a striking similarity to the prejudice-prone cognitive style proposed by Allport. Indeed, as illustrated in Table 1, the concepts used in NFC theory have been almost literally described by Allport, and the close fit between these 'new concepts' and 'old ideas' clearly illustrates that both theories refer to the same motivated way of thinking.

Table 1. Fit between Allport's motivated cognitive style and Need for Closure

Prejudice-prone motivated cognitive style (Allport)	Need for closure (Kruglanski)
<i>Two underlying tendencies</i>	
“Urge for quick and definite answers” (p. 403).	Urgency tendency (seizing)
“Cling to past solutions... more given to perseveration” (p. 402).	Permanence tendency (freezing)
<i>NFC subscales</i>	
“Like order, especially social order” (p. 404).	Preference for Order (e.g., “I like to have a place for everything and everything in its place”)
“Feel more secure when they know the answers” (p. 402) and “Latch onto what is familiar” (p. 403).	Preference for Predictability (e.g., “I don’t like to go into a situation without knowing what I can expect”)
“Afraid to say ‘I don’t know’” (p. 402) and “Better not to hesitate” (p. 403).	Need for Decisiveness (e.g., “When I’m confronted with a problem, I’m dying to reach a solution very quickly”)
“Cannot tolerate ambiguity” (p. 175, see also p. 401).	Discomfort with Ambiguity (e.g., “I dislike it when a person’s statement could mean many different things”)
“Narrow-minded” and “Fail to see all relevant sides to his problem” (p. 402).	Closed-Mindedness (e.g., “I do not usually consult many different opinions before forming my own view”)

Note: Sample items of the NFC scale (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) in parentheses.

Items from the (Need for) Decisiveness facet have been revised by Roets and Van Hiel (2007).

NEED FOR CLOSURE AND PREJUDICE

Given this extraordinary conceptual fit, NFC seems to be a perfect contemporary operationalization of Allport’s general cognitive style. However, does NFC also underlie

(all) prejudice? In recent years, a number of studies have revealed that dispositional NFC is strongly related to various measures of blatant, subtle, and modern forms of racial prejudice (e.g., Onraet, Van Hiel, Roets & Cornelis, 2011; Roets & Van Hiel, 2006, 2011; Van Hiel, Pandelaere & Duriez, 2004) and even to implicit measures of racism (Cunningham, Nezlek, & Banaji, 2004). However, for the NFC concept to truly compare to Allport's idea of a general way of thinking underlying 'all' prejudice, its effects should also be evident for other forms of prejudice. In line with this idea, Roets, Van Hiel and Dhont (in press) found strong relationships between NFC and sexism toward both women and men among both male and female participants, demonstrating that NFC strongly relates to all gender-based prejudices. Most importantly, their finding that, for example, high levels of NFC in women leads not only to more prejudice toward men but also to more prejudice toward women (i.e., the own ingroup) further substantiates Allport's (1954) assertion that prejudice is the reflection of a general cognitive style that does not 'discriminate' between targeted groups.

Yet, how exactly does NFC lead to prejudice? The key to answering this question is in the way that high-NFC individuals seek to satisfy their need for quick, easy, firm, and stable knowledge about the world. That is, to meet their desire for closure in the social environment, people typically resort to essentialist categorization and authoritarian ideologies, which represent some of the most powerful, proximal determinants of stereotyping and prejudice (see Figure 1).

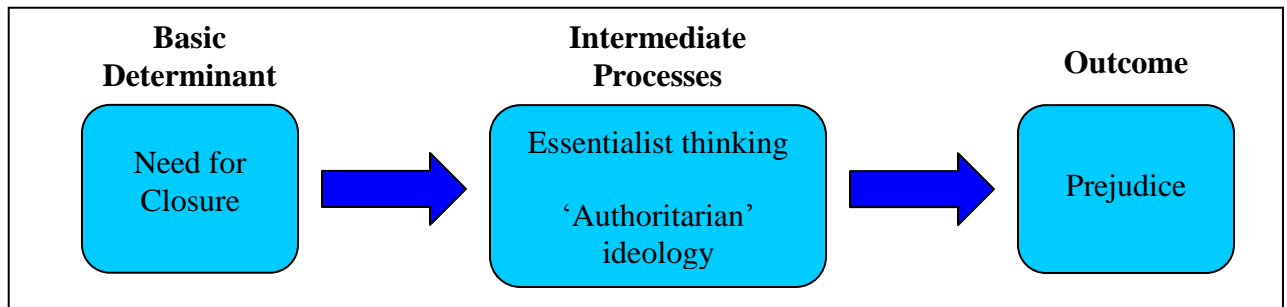


Figure 1: Allport's Prejudiced Personality in contemporary terms: General model of the effects of Need for Closure as a general motivated cognitive style on various forms of prejudice through intermediate processes of essentialist thinking and authoritarian ideology.

ESSENTIALIST SOCIAL CATEGORIZATION

According to Allport, "Categorical thinking is a natural and inevitable tendency of the human mind" (p. 171). Indeed, social categorization allows people to construct and organize knowledge about the social world and to cope with its complexity. However, social categories are more than just cognitive constructions. Allport suggested that categorization may lead to a "*belief in essence*" (p. 174): the conviction that a category has meaningful, defining attributes that are shared by all its members. Such essentialist thinking, he argued, is the primary cognitive process that leads to prejudice. Remarkably, it was not until Medin reintroduced the concept of *psychological essentialism* in 1989 that (social) psychologists thoroughly addressed essentialism as an important source of prejudice. Since then, numerous studies have corroborated its detrimental impact on various forms of prejudice (e.g., Haslam & Levy, 2006; Haslam, Rothschild & Ernst, 2002).

Most importantly, Allport suggested that the belief in essence is a likely consequence of the motivated cognitive style he described. Indeed, the allocation of individuals to a limited set of meaningful social categories is very useful for making

quick, easy and stable inferences about these individuals. As could be expected based on Allport's proposition, NFC has been reported to increase the perception of target groups as homogeneous (Dijksterhuis, Van Knippenberg, Kruglanski, & Schaper, 1996) and to increase reliance on group membership information when making social judgments about individuals (Kruglanski & Mayseless, 1988).

In a series of recent studies, Roets and Van Hiel (2011) explicitly tested the relationship between dispositional NFC and essentialist beliefs about race, revealing strong correlations (up to $r = .50$).² Additionally, they demonstrated that experimentally induced NFC caused an increase in essentialist thinking, even for fictitious ethnic groups (see Figure 2). This finding provides direct evidence for the causal role of NFC on essentialist thinking. Moreover, Roets and Van Hiel (2011) revealed that approximately half of the effect of NFC on various forms of racism could be explained by increased levels of essentialist thinking. In sum, this work provides strong support for Allport's thesis that a general way of thinking leads to prejudice through the 'cognitive process' of essentialist thinking.

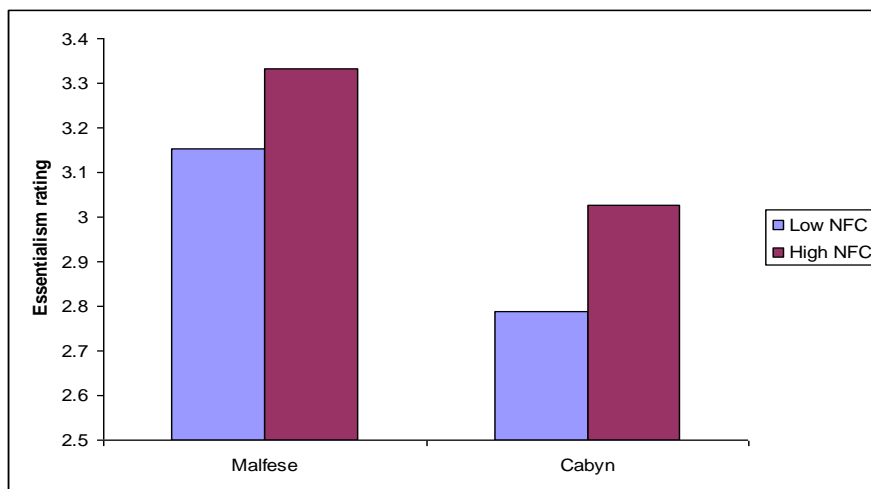


Figure 2: Essentialism ratings for two fictitious ethnic groups (the Malfese and the Cabyn) under high and low NFC manipulations (i.e., time pressure versus feedback) (adapted from Roets & Van Hiel, 2011, Study 2).

AUTHORITARIAN IDEOLOGY

Motivated cognition not only affects the cognitive processes in social judgment, it also forms our ideological beliefs. A few years prior to Allport's work, Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford (1950) introduced the concept of the "Authoritarian Personality". The links between these seminal works are plentiful (see Duckitt, 2005). In particular, when Allport described the prejudice-prone motivated cognitive style, he explicitly referred to authoritarian ideology in terms of craving for authorities that impose discipline and for defined hierarchies based on fixed groups, while Adorno and colleagues considered cognitive style variables such as intolerance of ambiguity and rigidity highly typical of authoritarianism.

As a result, Allport's writings have often been interpreted in terms of authoritarianism (see Duckitt, 2005). However, whereas Allport's (1954) general cognitive style -like NFC- is in itself non-social and reflects a motivated way of thinking about *anything*, authoritarianism refers to an ideological attitude or a set of generalized social beliefs (Duckitt, 2001). Moreover, according to Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, and Sulloway (2003), people adopt an ideological belief system such as authoritarianism precisely because it promises to satisfy their deeper psychological needs and motives, particularly their closure needs. Hence, general, non-social, motivated cognition can be considered the underlying basis of social attitudes such as authoritarianism.

The assumption that NFC underlies authoritarian ideology is supported by multiple studies showing that not only dispositional but also situationally induced NFC leads to typical expressions of authoritarianism, such as the derogation of opinion deviants (Kruglanski & Webster, 1991), the formation of and preference for autocratic

group structures with centralized authority (Pierro, Mannetti, De Grada, Livi, & Kruglanski, 2003), and an increased need for conformity (Kruglanski, Webster, & Klem, 1993).

Putting together these individual pieces of evidence, various scholars have tested models in which social-ideological attitudes mediate the impact of NFC as a basic, motivated cognitive style on prejudice. Studies by Cunningham et al. (2004), Onraet et al. (2011), Roets and Van Hiel (2006), and Van Hiel et al. (2004) have demonstrated that a stronger endorsement of authoritarian views of society largely explains why people high in dispositional NFC show increased levels of blatant, subtle, and even implicit racism. These mediation effects were obtained for Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA, Altemeyer, 1981) and to a somewhat lesser degree for Social Dominance Orientation (SDO, Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), which capture Allport's (1954) description of authoritarianism in terms of craving for authorities imposing discipline, and preference for defined hierarchies, respectively. Recently, Roets et al. (in press) demonstrated that this mediation model including RWA and SDO also accounts for gender-based prejudice.

SUMMARY

Based on the extraordinary conceptual fit between Allport's prejudiced personality and NFC as well as the substantial body of recent empirical evidence on the role of NFC as a basis for race- and gender-based prejudice, we believe that NFC provides a most promising contemporary counterpart for the motivated cognitive style assumed by Allport to underlie 'all' prejudice (although further corroboration for other

forms of prejudice is appropriate). In fact, we claim that NFC is the only suitable counterpart given that other potentially relevant constructs not only lack a comprehensive conceptual fit with Allport's prejudiced personality, but, compared to NFC, also failed to yield strong and unique effects on prejudice, as has been demonstrated for Experiential Openness (Onraet et al., 2011), for other cognitive style variables such as Need for Cognition (Cornelis & Van Hiel, 2006), and for Closure abilities (as opposed to needs; Roets & Van Hiel, 2006).

In conclusion, recent research on NFC has finally provided long overdue support for Allport's thesis that a general motivated cognitive style underlies prejudice. At the same time, this body of research has identified the major mediating mechanisms for this relationship, as depicted in Figure 1.

SHOULD WE BE FATALISTIC?

The present review demonstrates that Allport's (1954) ideas of the prejudiced personality successfully predicted research findings over the following six decades. Moreover, Allport's work not only provided valuable insight into the prejudiced personality, it is also considered foundational for the intergroup contact hypothesis, which states that contact (under certain conditions) with outgroup members diminishes prejudice against this group. However, Allport assumed that intergroup contact cannot yield the anticipated positive results among people with this prejudice-prone cognitive style, exactly because of their rigid way of thinking. Yet, as Hodson (2011) has also pointed out, if interventions to reduce prejudice are ineffective for those people who are most prone to prejudice, then what is the point of such interventions?

Fortunately, whereas a vast body of research has corroborated Allport's visionary ideas of the cognitive style underlying prejudice and the intergroup contact hypothesis (see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), his pessimistic prediction of the interplay between dispositional cognitive style and intergroup contact has recently been disproved. Various researchers (e.g., Hodson, 2008; Dhont & Van Hiel, 2009, 2011) have already presented evidence that intergroup contact reduces prejudice most among people who adhere to an authoritarian ideology (for an overview, see Hodson, 2011). However, in the context of Allport's writings, it is necessary to question whether these positive findings may reflect a more fundamental interplay between intergroup contact and basic, motivated cognitive style that underlies authoritarian ideology (see Figure 1). In particular, positive intergroup-contact increases familiarity with the out-group as well as the salience of positive information about this group. Since high-NFC individuals both desire familiarity and seize information that is most salient and easily-accessible (urgency) to form their attitudes, intergroup contact should be especially effective to reduce prejudice in these individuals. Recent work by Dhont, Roets and Van Hiel (2011) indicates that this is indeed the case. In a series of studies, these authors demonstrated that people high in dispositional NFC are more susceptible to the positive effects of intergroup contact on prejudice reduction than low scorers on NFC. Additionally, in a field experiment they found that Belgian high-school students, especially those high in NFC, who went on a one-week, intense-contact school trip to Morocco subsequently exhibited substantially less negative outgroup attitudes than a control group that was not involved in the program (see Figure 3).

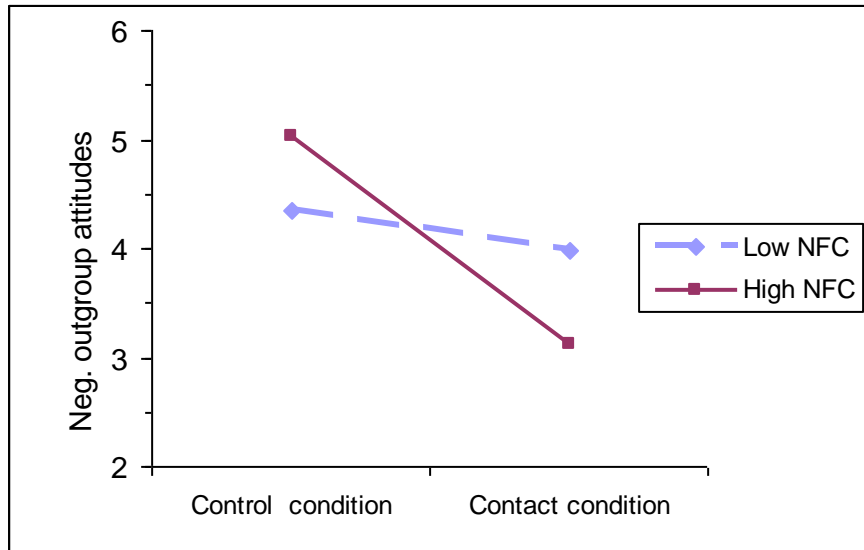


Figure 3. Effect of intergroup contact on negative attitudes toward the outgroup under high (+1 SD) and low (-1 SD) dispositional NFC (adapted from Dhont, Roets, & Van Hiel, 2011, Study 3).

Finally, Dhont et al. (2011) also demonstrated that the superior effect of intergroup contact in high-NFC individuals can be explained by the established notion that intergroup contact diminishes intergroup anxiety, which consequently reduces prejudice. Those who feel most averse and fearful toward the unfamiliar, ambiguous, and unpredictable, are likely to benefit the most from the anxiety-reducing effects of the salient information provided by positive intergroup contact.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary prejudice research converges in support of Allport's (1954) seminal thesis of a motivated cognitive style underlying prejudice and also provides insight into the mediating processes of this connection. However, in contrast to Allport's pessimistic view that prejudice-prone people are 'incurable', prejudice in these individuals can be

overcome, not by seeking to change the underlying cognitive style, but by using its heightened susceptibility to the positive impact of intergroup contact.

ENDNOTES

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² Correlations are measures of agreement that can range from -1.00 to 1.00.

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RECOMMENDED READING

Allport, G. (1954). (See References). The must-read, foundational work on prejudice, including Allport's seminal ideas on the "prejudiced personality" and "intergroup contact".

Duckitt, J. (2001). (See References). An elaborate discussion of the contemporary Authoritarianism concept and research, providing an inspiring theoretical framework for Right-Wing Authoritarianism and Social Dominance Orientation as its modern operationalization.

Hodson, G. (2011). (See References). A highly accessible, brief overview of recent research showing that intergroup contact is most effective in reducing prejudice for people who are ideologically the most prone to prejudice.

Kruglanski, A. W. (2004). *The Psychology of Closed Mindedness*. New York: Psychology Press. An easy-to-read overview on NFC theory and research. More accessible than the earlier, more 'academic' review by Kruglanski and Webster (1996) (see References).