Putting Prejudice and Discrimination in Plain Sight

A review of

Benign Bigotry: The Psychology of Subtle Prejudice
by Kristin J. Anderson

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Kristin Anderson explores six social myths in this book on how people can be prejudiced and show discrimination without even realizing it. The book is mainly on the application of social psychology theory and research to what the author calls “benign bigotry” or “subtle prejudice.” Anderson includes some research from other areas (e.g., sociology, cognitive science) as well and peppers the book with real-world examples to elucidate the concepts.

Benign Bigotry: The Psychology of Subtle Prejudice starts with an introduction to the concept of subtle prejudice, followed by six chapters, each debunking one belief that can be used to justify or maintain prejudice. It would be an excellent textbook or reading for a diversity course for students who might not have a background in psychology, as well as for more advanced seminars on prejudice, where it might be supplemented by articles and
The book would also be interesting to a lay reader; it’s easy to follow, and the author explains research in an accurate, understandable, and engaging way. It is also relatively free of the types of sensitive anecdotal examples (e.g., political or religious ones) that sometimes alienate readers unnecessarily.

The book is not an exhaustive review of research on subtle prejudice (it would have to be a much longer and denser book if so!), but the author does a good job of covering many relevant theories and studies and doing so accurately. In addition, contrary to many books on the topic, this book does not solely cover racial prejudice. The author dispels myths about gay people being hypersexual and feminists being man-haters as well as myths about criminals, affirmative action, racial prejudice, and the “benefits” of being colorblind.

Furthermore, she uses evidence from a broad spectrum of contemporary social situations, ranging from outgroup homogeneity effects in Guantánamo detainees, to leadership problems for competent women, to the subtle prejudice involved in job applications, among many others. The book is likely to be an eye-opener to most readers, alerting them to at least one way in which they may show or contribute to prejudice and discrimination without realizing it.

**Limitations**

Although there were many positives to the book, there are some places where it falls short. Anderson is careful to discuss at least some different social psychological theories within each myth-busting chapter (so that none of them are merely a repetition of previous chapters); in turn, there are understandably theories and studies that are mentioned more than once.

Unfortunately, the book doesn’t take full advantage of the opportunity to tie the various types of prejudice together. For example, the concluding chapter is mainly a summary rather than an integration. Especially for readers who are not already familiar with the concepts (e.g., cognitive dissonance, social identity) discussed, it would be nice to pull them together more in the end and discuss how similar processes can contribute to the various types of prejudice and discrimination addressed. Different processes may be more involved in some prejudices than in others, but the existing organization could lead the reader to surmise that different types of prejudices have more variable origins than they actually do.

At the end of each chapter, Anderson includes strategies for change. One chapter addresses ways to reduce discrimination in the legal system and another, to reduce it in the workplace. In most of the other chapters, however, the strategies for reducing racial and sexual prejudice necessarily contain a great deal of overlap.
What is not necessary is the repetition, sometimes word for word, of descriptions of studies. In three separate chapters, the author describes studies by Monteith and colleagues (Monteith, Spicer, & Tooman, 1998) and Devine and colleagues (Devine, Monteith, Zuwerink, & Elliot, 1991), with seven to nine sentences in each case exact copies of each other—almost two paragraphs! In another example, an entire page and a half describing a study by Son Hing and colleagues (Son Hing, Li, & Zanna, 2002) is lifted from an earlier chapter in the book.

This kind of carelessness is surprising in what is otherwise a fairly precise book. This excessive repetition further suggests that putting the strategies together in one separate chapter would have been a much better idea that would also allow for better integration, as noted above.

Another problem with the book lies in its title concepts. Subtle prejudice and benign bigotry are not well defined. It’s not clear whether the terms refer to the same or slightly different things; in various places it sounds like the concepts are equivalent to implicit prejudice, aversive prejudice, and modern prejudice—all of which most researchers would claim are at least somewhat different from one another (e.g., Dovidio & Gaertner, 1998; Gawronski, Peters, Brochu, & Strack, 2008).

The book also deals with only certain types of prejudice and not others such as ageism or single-ism. A better organizing theme for the book might be simply social myth busting. Other smaller critiques are that references are shown in endnotes rather than in American Psychological Association style (preferable probably for lay audiences, but making it more difficult for academic readers to judge the recency and rigor of the studies) and that the colorblind chapter would perhaps be better included in with one of the racism chapters.

**Conclusion**

Overall, however, *Benign Bigotry* does a great job of describing research in an engaging way and opening readers’ eyes to the many ways in which prejudice and discrimination affect their targets as well as their sources. It is an easy and interesting read, yet it describes research more accurately and understandably than do many similar types of books. It is a relatively complete picture of the social psychological reasons behind some of our more “misguided” social beliefs about others and a resource offering clear prescriptions for change. In much the same way that Cialdini’s (2008) *Influence* made social influence research accessible to all levels of audiences, Anderson places social psychological research on prejudice in plain sight.
References


