

Discussion

An invitation to Tetlock and Mitchell to conduct empirical research on implicit bias with friends, “adversaries,” or whomever they please

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Although Tetlock and Mitchell have never published any empirical studies on implicit bias – nor, to our knowledge, have they attempted any such studies – Tetlock and colleagues have now published at least seven critiques of research in this area (Arkes & Tetlock, 2004; Blanton, Jaccard, Klick, Mellers, Mitchell & Tetlock, 2009; Mitchell & Tetlock, 2006; Tetlock & Arkes, 2004; Tetlock & Mitchell, 2008, 2009a; Wax & Tetlock, 2005). We have argued that many of their criticisms are specious and that the most serious of their objections are contradicted by existing empirical evidence, which we reviewed for the readers of *Research in Organizational Behavior* (Jost et al., 2009).

In “A Renewed Appeal for Adversarial Collaboration,” Tetlock and Mitchell (2009b) accuse Jost et al. (2009) of “numerous misrepresentations” in rebutting their latest attack on implicit bias research. In this brief reply, we seek to clarify where the misrepresentations (or perhaps misunderstandings) really lie and to address the alleged need for “adversarial collaboration” with respect to research on implicit bias.

Tetlock and Mitchell (2009b) deny encouraging “organizational complacency” about the problem of implicit bias, but it was they who posed the rhetorical question, “What Must Organizations Do to Check Implicit Bias?” in the title of their (2009a) chapter and apparently concluded, after more than 70 manuscript pages of assailing implicit bias research, that the answer is “not much” (or perhaps “nothing yet”).

Tetlock and Mitchell (2009b) also deny the charge of “blanket skepticism,” yet declared that “there is no evidence that the IAT reliably predicts class-wide discrimination on tangible outcomes in any setting” (2009a, p. 6). Recent reviews considering dozens of studies that empirically link several indicators of implicit bias to a great many “tangible outcomes” show that their repeated claim that implicit measures have no predictive validity are demonstrably false (Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009; Hardin & Banaji, in press; Hofmann, Gawronski, Gschwendner, Le, & Schmitt, 2005; Jost et al., 2009).

Despite the inauspicious nature of their overtures to researchers of implicit bias, Tetlock and Mitchell (2009b) now state that their true goal is to stimulate a process of collaboration with their “adversaries” and that this was in fact the core theme

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of their target chapter—although they did not substantively address this issue until p. 18. What can be said about this appeal for adversarial collaboration? Naturally, we encourage any and all research that could resolve the alleged “dispute” over whether implicit bias predicts consequential real-world behavior. However, it seems to us that the dispute is more apparent than real, given the strength of evidence that exists already (e.g., Greenwald et al., 2009; Jost et al., 2009).

As we noted in our full-length chapter, the vast majority of social psychologists accept the existence and ubiquity of implicit social cognition – including implicit group bias – and have done so for many years. Although criticisms of the IAT as a measure of prejudice are hardly new, Tetlock and Mitchell are apparently the only ones who think that by attacking one specific way of measuring implicit associations they can convince readers that implicit bias *itself* does not exist.

Although we disagree with most of their criticisms (and with the strained conclusions they draw from them), we do agree that it would be useful to conduct studies that include multiple measures and manipulations of implicit bias in business and other organizations in order to predict additional outcome variables, such as decisions about hiring and firing as well as task assignments and financial compensation. Studies such as these would not only complement the evidentiary basis for assessing the scope of implicit bias but also sharpen our understanding of the boundary conditions under which implicit bias does and does not operate and to what effect (see also Blair, 2002; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Glaser & Knowles, 2008; Lowery, Hardin & Sinclair, 2001; Rudman, Ashmore, & Gary, 2001). In the meantime, however, we do not think that Tetlock and Mitchell’s level of skepticism (or complacency) about implicit bias is justifiable, given the abundance of evidence demonstrating that it *does* exist (see Jost et al., 2009).

Part of the problem is that Tetlock and Mitchell (2009a, 2009b) place far too much emphasis on *who* does the research and too little on what is done and what is found. Perhaps that is why they focus so heavily – and, we think, inappropriately – on the presumed ideological beliefs of researchers (see also Tetlock, 1994; Wax & Tetlock, 2005). From a scientific point of view, it simply does not matter *who* participates in the research – whether collaborators, “adversaries,” or adversarial collaborators – or what their beliefs are concerning the free market and/or governmental intervention. Rather, what matters are that sound research is carried out on the most important unresolved issues concerning the relationship between implicit attitudes and social behavior.

The fact is that hundreds of researchers from laboratories around the world – including researchers who know each other and many who do not – have pursued a wide range of partially overlapping research agendas pertaining to implicit bias. Nearly all who have seriously investigated the question have documented the pernicious role of implicit bias among many different kinds of decision-makers in a variety of social contexts. As the Jost et al. (2009) review shows, studies have already identified moderating variables and boundary conditions that determine when implicit bias and its consequences are likely to be exacerbated and when they may be muted or even reversed. We have no doubt that researchers will continue to address these issues and think that it matters not at all *who* the researchers are or what their relationships are to one another.

If Tetlock and Mitchell are saying that they *refuse* to accept any evidence of implicit bias and its consequences for judgment and behavior unless they are personally involved in the conduct of the research, then they are adopting a position that is alien to the scientific community. We doubt that this is their intention, but shifting the emphasis away from *what* research findings reveal to *who* carried out the research (and what their political attitudes are) is problematic, to say the least. It is little wonder that, after interviewing Tetlock on the subject of implicit bias, a *New York Times* journalist (Tierney, 2008) concluded of research (and researchers) in this area that: “If they can’t figure out how to get along with their own colleagues, how seriously should we take their advice for everyone else?”

All of this reveals the poverty of Tetlock and Mitchell’s approach. It does not matter one iota, from the perspective of *science*, whether research colleagues “get along,” let alone collaborate, with one another or not. Nor does it matter whether specific researchers are politically liberal or conservative (see Tetlock, 1994), unless one believes that the methods of social science are a *sham*. We do not believe that they are. Accordingly, we are obliged to take seriously empirical evidence produced by qualified researchers, regardless of whether they are considered (by themselves or others) to be liberals, conservatives, “market purists,” “statist interventionists,” or “none of the above.”

One would think that it would be unnecessary to remind readers that the *raison d’être* of the scientific method is to propel us *beyond* the kinds of interpersonal and ideological disputes that Tetlock and Mitchell (2009a, 2009b) would have us perpetually mired in. The effect of accusations of ideological bias in social science (see also Haidt & Graham, 2007; Shermer, 2008) is almost surely to undermine our collective credibility with the public, as Tierney’s (2008) article shows. But every practicing scientist knows that *you simply cannot make the data come out as you please*.

We take this opportunity to remind our colleagues that the data must be taken seriously on their own terms and that ideological and other *ad hominem* arguments are fallacious because they fail to do just that. When Allport (1954)

correctly anticipated a defensive response on the part of those who might object to prejudice research, he wrote: “Whether the scientist is for or against prejudice and discrimination cannot alter the fact. Prejudice is not ‘the invention of liberal intellectuals.’ It is simply an aspect of mental life that can be studied as objectively as any other” (p. 516).

In terms of directions for future research, one useful place for qualified researchers – *any* researchers, including Tetlock and Mitchell – to begin would be to subject at least some of the interesting hypotheses they have proposed to actual empirical investigation. For example, it is one thing to speculate that managerial accountability should eliminate the behavioral consequences of implicit bias in certain kinds of work organizations, but it is quite another to demonstrate it empirically. Whether or not Tetlock and Mitchell are roused from their armchairs to personally conduct the studies, we are confident that researchers of implicit bias would take note of any experiment (conducted by *anyone*) that assessed managerial behavior as a function of implicit bias following a manipulation of decision accountability.

It is certainly possible that accountability would reduce effects of implicit bias under these circumstances, as Tetlock and Mitchell (2009a) speculate, but it is also possible that accountability would exacerbate certain kinds of bias, as Lerner and Tetlock (1999) concluded in their review of the literature on accountability. In any case, these and other unresolved issues are likely to be addressed in empirical research on implicit bias in the coming years. Indeed, implicit bias is one of the most highly researched topic areas in all of social science, as the critics well know. We invite Tetlock and Mitchell to join the empirical enterprise and test their speculations by scientific means.

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