

# A Fair and Impartial Response to Recent Challenges to Implicit Bias Training for Police



May 9, 2017

FIP Trainers and other police professionals:

There has been some recent public challenges to the existence of implicit bias in police professionals and to implicit-bias awareness training, such as the Fair and Impartial Policing program. I write to provide a response to the challenges for your own information and also so that FIP trainers can respond to any concerns raised by individuals in their FIP classes.

The most recent challenge has questioned:

- the validity of the Implicit Association Test (IAT),
- whether implicit biases have been shown to impact on behavior, and
- the need for and effectiveness of implicit-bias-awareness training.

I respond to each of these challenges below.

## ***Is the Implicit Association Test Valid?***

A document recently disseminated in police circles challenges the reliability and validity of the Implicit Association Test (IAT; at <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/research/>) and, indeed, the reliability and validity of the IAT **is debated** in academic-research circles. What you need to know is (1) some researchers believe that the IAT is a viable measure and some do not, and (2) it is not the only measure of implicit bias (IB) and the overwhelming evidence indicates (with or without the IAT) the existence of IB.

It is legitimate to question the IAT; as above, social psych researchers continue to debate this topic. Where the recent critics err, however, is implying that, if the IAT is not a viable measure, this means implicit bias does not exist. *That is absolutely wrong.* The IAT is not the only measure of implicit bias and there is little-to-no debate in the academic-research community on the existence of IB. The Kirwan Institute at Ohio State University publishes annual reviews of the implicit bias research, particularly as it pertains to race; in their 2016 document in Chapter 4 they discuss the IAT and some of the other measures. Go to <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/researchandstrategicinitiatives/implicit-bias-review/>.

*The bottom line is this:* Yes, there is a debate about the IAT. BUT, the validity/reality of IMPLICIT BIAS does not rise and fall with the fate of the IAT. A real-life confirmation of this comes from the response to our training from attendees. They consistently report that the science generally just affirms what

they already know – that we all automatically link various groups to characteristics. This is not rocket science and, in fact, it is intuitive to most individuals, including our trainees.

### ***Does Implicit Bias Impact on Behavior?***

Critics have raised the issue of whether IB has an impact on behavior. Indeed, there **are** mixed results in the academic literature. There are some studies that test the impact of IB on behavior and show no impact; there are some studies that test the impact of IB on behavior and DO show impact. Critics correctly report that there have been various meta-analyses that attempt to assess—on an aggregate basis—what these multiple studies show. (A meta-analysis conducts analyses with studies as the unit of measure, and attempts to discern the overall direction and weight of the empirical literature by looking at studies on a particular topic in the aggregate.) There are several meta-analyses looking at the impact of IB on behavior with very different conclusions.

Let me make a couple of points. First of all, as a social scientist, let me emphasize the point: *Research methods matter!* Studies that do and do not show the impact of IB on behavior vary in terms of their research methods. They vary as to how they test this relationship; they vary as to subjects, measures of IB, the behaviors for which they are assessing impact, and so forth. That some of these show impact and some don't leads the research community to legitimately ask: *Under what circumstances and for what particular behaviors do IBs have an impact? Under what circumstances and for what behaviors do they not?* As above, this debate is ongoing in the academic-research literature.

Second, a recent critique gives heightened attention to the meta-analyses that show little or no impact of IB on behavior, and mention only in passing the meta-analyses that show the opposite. It is a highly technical debate that will make your eyes glaze over, but if you want a short summary of this debate, again go to the Kirwan Institute document referenced above and see pp. 81 – 82. The key again: even with meta-analyses, *methods matter!*

In the context of making their arguments, critics are able to describe studies that show no impact of IB on behavior. See the Kirwan Institute documents (there are Kirwan annual reviews of implicit bias research for 2013, 2014, 2015, and 2016) to read about the many studies that show IB *does* impact behavior. Indeed, the research continues in the vein described above; researchers continue to ask through their research *under what circumstances and for what particular behaviors do IBs have an impact?*

Personally I have no doubt in my own mind that my associations between groups and stereotypes impact my perceptions and behaviors. My implicit associations impact me every day and, of course, my ongoing quest is to reduce and manage them so that my behavior is bias-free. And we hear examples in our trainings *all the time*; officers in FIP training share how their automatic associations have led them *to do this or that*.

### ***Is Implicit Bias Awareness Training Effective?***

A recent critique correctly reported that there has been no controlled study of the effectiveness of implicit-bias-awareness training (IBAT) for police. FIP, LLC has been working with two entities to produce such a study. In 2015, we submitted with the Police Foundation a proposal to the National Institute of Justice to fund a controlled study of FIP; the proposal was not funded. We are also working with the Center for Criminal Justice Research at the University of Cincinnati to design/implement a

controlled study. The center has reached out through IACP to identify agencies that would agree to randomly assign half of their employees to FIP training and half not. This effort continues.

A recent critic is NOT correct, however, in suggesting that evaluating IBAT is as simple as giving the IAT before and after the training to measure whether implicit biases are reduced. Anyone familiar with our training knows that we have NO EXPECTATION that IBAT will reduce implicit biases over the course of the four to six-hour session. Such an expectation would be *totally contrary* to what the research literature says about addressing our biases.

According to the science of IB, there **are ways** to address our biases. Those of you who have been through our training know that we discuss, for instance, the contact theory and exposure-to-counter-stereotypes as methods for reducing our biases. These are not short-term fixes, but rather longer-term individual interventions. And former FIP trainees also know we recognize how difficult it is to *reduce* biases and so convey skills related to *managing* them. All of this is supported by the scientific literature. (Again, see the Kirwan Institute documents about addressing our biases or “debiasing.”)

It is also erroneous for critics to report that, since we don’t have evaluations of IBAT, we can look to evaluations of *diversity training* (DT) to assess impact. Again this indicates a misunderstanding of the content and objectives of IBAT. Diversity training and IBAT have very different contents, very different objectives. It is totally inappropriate to use the evaluation of DT to assess the impact of IBAT.

A controlled evaluation of IBAT *is* important and we will continue our efforts to bring that to fruition. But that evaluation cannot simply measure implicit biases with the IAT before and after. We will want to evaluate attitudes, knowledge, and skills and, ideally, assess impact on behavior. Any social scientist will tell you *this is not simple*. But pending a controlled study, let me remind you that every concept in the FIP training is based on the scientific literature. This important fact is *quite relevant* to the credibility and validity of FIP and other implicit bias awareness training programs.

Please do not hesitate to be in touch with us if you have questions about criticisms you hear or about any aspect of the science that provides the foundation for our program. We are working hard to stay abreast of the research and commit to keeping you updated on the research findings and debates in the field.

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