Theory and Society
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-025-09643-1

Psychological elitism

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Received: 18 June 2025 / Accepted: 7 August 2025

Abstract
Elites can be differentiated from non-elites by their status-enhancing attributes: their accomplishments, expertise, and group memberships. Elitism is the belief that elites deserve epistemic deference because they better understand the workings of the world. Psychological elitism posits the existence of a class of elites who possess specialized knowledge of subconscious (motivational and cognitive) drivers of human judgment that is beyond the ken of non-elites. This article challenges whether psychological elites deserve deference. The central problem is the elusiveness of ground-truth standards for determining the true drivers of judgments. To warrant deference, psychological elites must demonstrate that their reasoning operates free of the same subconscious distortions ascribed to non-elites. Absent such demonstrations, it is fair game—under the very theories that psychological elites endorse—to question the competence of psychological elites to second-guess the true reasons underlying the views of non-elites.

Keywords Ad hominem · Elitism · Mental causation · Unconscious bias · Introspection

People can explain their behavior when asked to do so. Setting aside obvious lies, how much credence should we put in these explanations? According to many philosophers, social scientists, and social commentators, the answer is very little, because people lack introspective access to the true causes of their conduct and the explanations they offer tend to be post hoc rationalizations rather than veridical reports. We deceive themselves about the role of conscious reasoning in our moral judgments

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Published online: 13 October 2025

(e.g., Haidt, 2001), about our capacity to choose actions (e.g., Wegner, 2002), and about our ability to act in objective and principled ways (e.g., Kurzban, 2010; Pronin & Hazel, 2023). We think we treat others fairly when in fact we possess unconscious biases that lead to discrimination (e.g., Greenwald & Banaji, 2013). We think we make economic and political choices that advance our interests, but in fact we make choices that preserve the status quo, even when that status quo is against our best interests (e.g., Jost, 2020).

Three elements comprise most theories of unconscious causation: (a) subconscious motives that shape thought and actions to promote a positive image of oneself and the groups to which one belongs, to advance one's interests and the interests of the groups to which one belongs, and to legitimize the status quo; (b) automatic and hard-to-detect cognitive processes that initiate and control action, maintain the coherence of beliefs and feelings, and quickly assess situations using heuristics, group stereotypes, and causal schemata; (c) false narratives that we tell ourselves to maintain the illusion of conscious control over our actions and coherence among our beliefs and actions. In short, the origins of our choices and behaviors escape our detection, but we construct stories to explain why we acted as we did. Ordinary people believe these stories; psychological elites see through them.

Deference to elites is justified when the qualities that produce elite status map onto the qualities that enable elites to achieve a superior understanding of how things work (e.g., one trained in law is likely to give better advice on how to incorporate a business than a non-lawyer).[1] But can we be confident that psychological elites—those who explain human behavior as the product of subconscious processes concealed by false narratives—escape the very tendencies that they ascribe to others? And do psychological elites really have privileged access to the subconscious of others? We offer five grounds for questioning psychological elites' claims to specialized knowledge of unconscious causation.

First, theoretical debates over psychological causation rarely yield clear winners. Indeterminacy problems frequently arise. For every cognitive-process account of judgment and decision-making, a competing motive-based account can be offered (Tetlock & Levi, 1982); for every intrapsychic account, a competing impression-management account can be offered (Tetlock & Manstead, 1985); for every flattering account of motivational and cognitive drivers of ideology, an unflattering account can be offered (Tetlock & Mitchell, 1993). It is extremely difficult to formulate experiments that place multiple competing theories into direct competition to yield a sole winner. Because behavior will almost always be psychologically overdetermined even when elites use their best methods to adjudicate among theories, elites must rely on something other than their expertise to choose one theory over another.

Second, psychological elites deem introspection to be an unreliable source of information about cognitive and motivational processes (e.g., Nisbett & Wilson, 1977; Jost, 1995), but unconscious explanations are only as convincing as the grounds for believing that elites' indirect inferences about causation are more accurate than the

[1] Elite status is often claimed without proof that the elite really does better understand the world. Unless the person enjoying elite status can empirically demonstrate superiority on the task of interest, then deference is not warranted (see, e.g., Garrett & Mitchell, 2018; Tetlock & Gardner, 2016).

direct accounts offered by the people whose thoughts and feelings are at issue. Despite a variety of ingenious attempts to identify unconscious influences on behavior, it has proven very difficult to develop indirect methods that unequivocally separate conscious from unconscious causes (Blanton & Jaccard, 2008; Klemm, 2010; Mele, 2018; Newell & Shanks, 2014). Certainly psychological scientists often employ more rigorous and reliable methods for assessing causation than do non-elites, but in the domain of mental causation, much greater care should be taken before dismissing a conscious account as rationalization and accepting an unconscious account as true.

Third, psychological elites sometimes claim that subconscious forces cause people to act contrary to their best interests, but elites use their own judgments about interests—not those of the non-elite—when making these assessments. The rationale for disregarding non-elite preferences comes from the general distrust of self-reports and a distrust of value judgments in particular: preferences are subject to manipulation by whoever controls the way choices are presented (e.g., Thaler & Sunstein, 2008) or are deformed by ideological forces within society (e.g., Jost, 1995).

For instance, Jost (1995) writes that "it will not do to simply take people's opinions about their beliefs and desires at face value. . The concept of false consciousness highlights political as well as psychological contributors to the inaccuracy of first-person accounts (p. 415)." In place of individual preferences, Jost (1995) substitutes "objective social interest (p. 401)" and defines false consciousness as "*the holding of inaccurate beliefs that are contrary to one's own social interest and which thereby contribute to the maintenance of the disadvantaged position of the self or group* (p. 400)." Exactly what constitutes objective social interest is not made clear. Jost (2020) similarly takes the view that subjective preferences are distorted by ideological forces and that subjective acceptance of current conditions should not be taken as a guide to what is just, holding out hope for an "objective (p. 15)" conception of justice. Describing the fact/value dichotomy as "outmoded (Jost, 2020, p. 47)," Jost encourages social scientists to conduct research relevant to ongoing debates about justice and morality. We agree that social scientists can usefully weigh in on empirical matters relevant to elite and non-elite arguments about what is just and moral, but we disagree that the fact/value dichotomy is outmoded. Indeed, we find it puzzling that unconscious causation theorists would give weight to their own conscious accounts of what is just and moral, as well as their conscious thoughts about what is factually true, since they should recognize the risk of self-deception.

Disregarding self-reported values begs the question why we should defer to elite judgments about value when no objective hierarchy of values exists.[2]

If a member of a racial minority group votes for a Republican candidate who opposes affirmative action for the ostensible reason that this person desires to live in a society where race plays no role in how people are treated, why should we accept an elite characterization of that choice as irrational or against the person's best interest?

[2] Some psychological elitists, such as Harris (2010), argue that scientific evidence is sufficient to establish a hierarchy of values, with no need to invoke extra-scientific authority, such as tradition or religion. We find such arguments unconvincing on both philosophical and scientific grounds.

Fourth, psychological elites sometimes declare their beliefs about factual matters to be superior to those of non-elites, with little or no justification for doing so.[3] For instance, some implicit bias researchers characterize individuals who do not believe that their IAT scores reflect bias to be in defensive denial (e.g., Howell et al., 2017),[4] yet elites who study implicit bias disagree among themselves about what exactly the IAT measures and how best to conceptualize "implicit bias" (e.g., Ratliff & Smith, 2022). Or consider Jost's (2020) claim that beliefs in fair markets and merit as determinants of economic outcomes constitute palliative ideologies in the Marxian sense (i.e., these beliefs are part of the false consciousness that sustains unjust social orders). This simple treatment of markets and merit ignores evidence of considerable social mobility in market-based economies.[5] When elites themselves cannot agree on the facts, something other than empirical evidence must drive the choice of one factual account over another.

Fifth, we cannot count on the collective scrutiny of elites to ensure that psychological elites make only true claims. Although some elite communities do try to police the quality of advice that members of that community dispense—and to live up to the standards of ideal-type Mertonian norms of science—the level of peer scrutiny, even within self-declared scientific organizations, is often surprisingly low. For instance, many social psychologists endorse extra-scientific values and beliefs, creating potential blind spots for these beliefs and values to contaminate their conclusions, and social psychologists often need only convince a handful of fellow elites to receive the imprimatur of publication in a top journal (sometimes as few as one editor and two editor-chosen reviewers determine the fate of a manuscript). The scientific process does have some capacity for self-correction, as evidenced by the spate of replication failures documented by social psychologists over the past decade, but that process can be lengthy and error-prone itself. In the meantime, dubious ideas about the unconscious causes of behavior and dubious rejections of conscious thought as a determinant of behavior persist, influencing countless students, elites in government and the media, and the general public (as happened with social psychologists' claims about implicit bias; see Baskakova et al., 2025; Kam & Engelhardt, 2025; Mitchell & Tetlock, 2025).[6]

[3] The concern here is not with elite characterizations of a non-elite explanation of behavior as false or mere rationalization; those characterizations implicate our second concern: acceptance of the elite's unconscious explanation of behavior over the non-elite's conscious explanation is justified only to the extent the elite's method of causal identification is better than the non-elite's method.

[4] Crosby (1984), conversely, argued that female survey respondents who acknowledged the frequency of sex discrimination but reported not being personally subjected to discrimination must be in denial.

[5] For instance, Chetty and colleagues found declines in socioeconomic mobility over time in the U.S. but estimated that half of the American children born in 1984 would earn more than their parents (Chetty et al., 2017). A large literature exists on social mobility and the persistence of poverty across generations, but generally higher-income economies with democratic governments have higher rates of social mobility and lower rates of intergenerational poverty persistence than developing economies and countries with autocratic governments. No doubt government taxing and spending policies affect levels of social mobility and poverty persistence, but markets and human capital do as well.

[6] The scientific process on steroids—in the form of adversarial collaborations—is a much quicker way to make progress on what is true and false (Clark et al., 2022).

Together, these concerns warrant deep skepticism of psychological elitism—so deep that we recommend adopting the starting stance of epistemic parity: place psychological elites' explanations for non-elite opinions and non-elites' explanations for those opinions as meriting equal consideration. Both may be the product of accuracy-degrading subconscious forces that each group fails to recognize in itself or even conscious deceptions. Psychological elites have not established that they are more adept than non-elites at debiasing their collective judgments or more honest than non-elites. When psychological elites dismiss questions about ideological influences on research as improper *ad hominem* attacks (e.g., Jost, 2011; Jost et al., 2009), they either fail to apply their own theories to themselves or are claiming a privileged epistemic vantage point—a claim for which they have yet to produce a compelling justification.

If the unconscious motives of the non-elite can be studied scientifically, so can those of the elite. If laypeople from one political party endorse belief X, and laypeople from another political party endorse belief not-X, then the evidence surely suggests that political commitments play some role in belief formation, whether the laypeople admit it or not. We see no reason to reach a different conclusion when we observe elites endorsing clashing schools of thought, regardless of protests that such suggestions violate proscriptions in scientific exchanges against ad hominem arguments or that scientific institutions are up to the task of neutralizing elite ideologies.[7]

We close with two caveats. First, embracing the starting stance of epistemic parity does not imply embracing a closing stance of epistemic parity. We recognize that evidence can accumulate over the course of a research program that tips the burden of proof more onto one party than the other. We subscribe to the cautious creed of Bayesian incrementalism which expects that some debaters will gradually gain credibility while others lose credibility, at varying rates, by advancing empirically implausible or logically incoherent arguments. Our concern is a limited one: checking illegitimate claims to epistemic superiority by elites whose methods and accomplishments do not warrant it—and who often have a track record of resolving ambiguities in data in favor of theories that serve partisan goals. Psychological elitism often appears in contentious disputes over the forces that determine the distribution of resources within society and how to apportion blame/responsibility for inequalities. Psychological expertise brought to bear on other topics will often raise less concern about ideology-driven self-delusions, but the usual risks arising from allegiance to a preferred theory will remain.

[7] For instance, in an amicus brief filed with the Supreme Court in a recent case challenging a Colorado law that prohibited sexual orientation discrimination in retail businesses and other public accommodations, a group of scholars suggested that psychological research on the stigmas associated with being gay, lesbian, or bisexual was influenced by the personal interests of the researchers (Scholars of Family and Sexuality, 2022). The American Psychological Association, along with two other organizations, wrote in a reply brief that "[a]d hominem attacks of this kind are not consistent with the standards of science, which call for evaluating research based on the quality of the conceptualization, reliability of the methodology, and objectivity of the interpretation of the results, not on the researchers' personal connection to the research topic (American Psychological Association, National Association of Social Workers & Colorado Psychological Association, 2022, p. 5, note 13)." From a system justification perspective, this formulation of ad hominem serves to reduce attacks on the authority of psychological elites, and the belief that science keeps elites pure justifies their position of power within society.

Second, worry about the difficulty of identifying unconscious causes of behavior should not extend too far. Identifying causation in any complex system, whether it be a society or a brain, is never easy, and psychology has much to offer without psychological elitism. Psychologists deploy scientific methods to assess a wide range of latent constructs that often predict behavior well, and psychological science offers insights into how we think and behave that many laypersons will never comprehend through their own observation and introspection. And the tools of psychological science can be used to cast doubt on the explanations for behavior offered by elites and non-elites alike, even if we can never be sure about the true causes.

Author contributions Both authors contributed to the paper's conception and structure. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Gregory Mitchell and both authors commented on previous versions of the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Funding No funding was used in the writing of this paper.

Data availability This paper presents a critical analysis of existing literature; no data or research materials were used in the writing of this paper.

Declarations

Ethical approval Ethical approval was not needed because no data was used in the writing of this paper.

Conflict of interest Author 1 declares that he has no conflict of interest.
Author 2 declares that he has no conflict of interest.
On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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