Title: The Immoral Road Not Taken and the Fabrication of Moral Credentials

Abstract:
This talk examines how people convince themselves that they have a license to commit ethically questionable behavior. The first part of the talk demonstrates people’s ability to leverage their past behavior as a moral license. I argue that people become more willing to act in ethically dubious ways when they can point to good deeds they have done – or when they can merely reflect on bad deeds they have not done. The second part of the talk demonstrates how people strategically create a moral license for themselves by changing their behavior, altering their evaluations of their past, and distorting their memories. Specifically, I argue that when people anticipate acting less-than-virtuously, they preemptively strive to perform more virtuous-seeming behavior, they inflate the moral significance of their prior behavior, and they invent “immoral roads not taken” that in reality never existed. I present evidence for these phenomena from six laboratory experiments investigating how people license themselves to act in ways that could seem racially prejudiced. Two additional experiments show how similar psychological processes can liberate people to forego the pursuit of “virtuous” long-term goals in favor of “sinful” temptations. I discuss implications for diversity and ethical behavior in organizations.