

Decision Processes Colloquia

Monday, April 25, 2022

Where: 360 JMHH

When: 12:00 – 1:00 pm

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The Moral Repetition Effect: Bad Deeds Seem Less Unethical When Repeatedly Encountered

ABSTRACT:

Reports of moral transgressions can “go viral” through social media, continuous news coverage, and gossip. When they do, the same person is likely to hear about the same transgression multiple times. In this talk, I introduce a novel phenomenon: People will judge the same transgression less severely after repeatedly encountering an identical description of it. In a series of experiments, participants rated real and hypothetical business transgressions, fake-news sharing, violations of fundamental “moral foundations,” and various everyday wrongdoings as less unethical and less deserving of punishment if they had been shown descriptions of these behaviors previously. A longitudinal field experiment showed that this “moral-repetition effect” can occur in a realistic setting over a two-week period. The results suggest that repetition affects moral judgments by blunting people’s emotional responses to wrongdoing. Accordingly, encouraging people to base their moral judgments on reason, rather than emotion, eliminated the moral-repetition effect. The results extend understanding of when and how repetition influences judgment, and they reveal a new way in which moral judgments are biased by reliance on affect. The more people that hear about a transgression, the wider moral outrage will spread; but the more times an individual hears about it, the less outraged that person may be.

