

Rewriting personal history by inventing racist roads not taken

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In 2008, research showed that expressing support for Barack Obama increased people's comfort in subsequently saying or doing things that might be considered racist. Researchers argued that endorsing a black political figure made people feel as if they had "non-racist credentials" that reduced their concern about subsequently seeming prejudiced. Now this same research group has identified a mental trick that people play to convince themselves that they have these same non-racist credentials: convincing themselves that they were presented with but passed up opportunities to act in racially insensitive ways in the past.

In a series of new studies from the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, researchers report two new findings. First, when people worry that their behavior could seem racist, they point to past opportunities for [racism](#) they had been faced with but passed up—the "racist road not taken"—that ironically increases people's [willingness](#) to express less racially sensitive views. Second, people actually distort their memories and convince themselves that they previously passed up opportunities for racism—opportunities that did not, in fact, exist.

"Our research suggests that people demonstrate remarkable flexibility when it comes to convincing themselves that they have proven their lack of [prejudice](#)," said Daniel A. Effron, lead author of the studies and visiting assistant professor of management and organizations at the Kellogg School of Management. "The ability to point to blatantly racist behaviors that they didn't perform seems sufficient for people to feel

that they have non-racist credentials—even if virtually no one would have chosen to perform those racist behaviors. People are essentially willing to make a mountain of proof out of a molehill of evidence.

"What's more, our results show that people are willing to go even farther and invent the molehill, convincing themselves that they passed up opportunities for racism that they didn't actually have," continued Effron.

The researchers conducted a series of six experiments. The first three established that participants are more likely to express less racially sensitive views – such as saying they would prefer to hire white people instead of black people for a hypothetical job, or allocating funds to an organization serving a white community at the expense of one serving a black community – if they have specific examples of racist behavior they have foregone.

The last three focused on the [memory](#) distortion of participants—their invention of racist alternatives to their actions that they could have taken but did not.

One such experiment asked participants to identify a criminal from a lineup of suspects. The evidence clearly pointed to one particular suspect who was white. All participants accused this suspect, but one participant group was also given the opportunity to accuse a clearly innocent black suspect instead. This group later felt more comfortable expressing less racial sensitivity in response to additional scenarios since they had been faced with, but not taken, a racist viewpoint.

In a follow-up study, participants all passed up five opportunities to accuse a clearly innocent black suspect of a crime—that is, they could point to five racist roads not taken. But when participants were later made to worry about feeling prejudiced, they "remembered," on

average, that they had passed up nine opportunities for racism—in effect claiming that their past contained nearly twice as many racist roads not taken than it actually did.

"Inventing racist roads not taken seems to be a strategy for convincing yourself that you're not prejudiced," said Effron. "Thinking about these roads not taken can subsequently make people feel licensed to relax their vigilance in trying to avoid future prejudiced actions. There is concern that this may allow people to express truly prejudiced views. On a more optimistic note, though, there may be some cases where this ability allows people to have frank, constructive conversations about race without worrying about being misinterpreted as prejudiced."

More information: The paper, "Inventing Racist Roads Not Taken: The Licensing Effect of Immoral Counterfactual Behaviors," was co-authored by Dale T. Miller of Stanford University's Graduate School of Business and Benoît Monin, a professor in the business school and the School of Humanities and Sciences at Stanford, along with Effron of Kellogg. The research is featured in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Provided by Northwestern University

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