Abstract:
As societies become increasingly globalized, many organizations and nations prioritize the cultivation of cultural diversity as a top development goal. Whereas some past research has suggested that increasing cross-cultural exposure boosts open-minded thinking and creativity (i.e., cultural synergy), some research instead suggests that cross-cultural exposure leads to more rigid thinking and rejection of new ideas (i.e., cultural collision). Understanding these divergent responses in multicultural space is not just timely but critical—it informs how to resolve conflict exacerbated by cultural differences and how to promote cultural diversity more optimally at work. My program of research builds on rich traditions in social science that study the powerful impact of individuals’ lay theories—beliefs about the nature of things and how they work—on attitudes and behaviors. I argue that lay theories of culture—the extent to which people believe racial-ethnic characteristic to be malleable versus fixed—are one critical factor that determines when cultural collision versus synergy occurs. In this talk, I will present a series of studies examining the impact of malleable (vs. fixed) lay theories of culture on intercultural trust and conflict outcomes, and on the effectiveness of diversity policies (e.g., multicultural vs. colorblind). Results suggest implications for understanding how to promote well-being and productivity in the increasingly diverse workplace, guiding my ongoing investigation into how organizations can actively transform potential cultural collision into synergy.