

Research proposal for **2014 Russell Ackoff Doctoral Student Fellowships**
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This Must Be a Sign!:

How People Perceive Serendipity and How It Affects Their Decision Making

Consider these two examples...

Case 1. My apartment is in West Philly. I always take the Locust Walk route when I come home from school, as I believe it's the safest way. But today, I had to take the Spruce street route, because Locust Walk was closed due to construction. Coincidentally, there was a marketing campaign on Spruce Street today, and I was given a free pair of running shoes when I walked by. I really needed a new pair, so I am incredibly glad that there was a construction project on Locust Walk today.

Case 2. I never go to the parties at conferences. I think conference parties are boring and the food is always bad. But one summer, I went to a conference party because it was right in the room where I presented, and I was starving. I met a girl who was a graduate student at Penn there, and she turned out to be the love of my life. She is now my wife.

Although these two stories differ in many ways, they share an interesting component: serendipity. It was serendipitous that the person in the first example took Spruce Street where there happened to be a marketing campaign going on, and it was also serendipitous that the graduate student in the second example went to the conference party where he met his future wife. We hear stories like these all the time about the serendipitous events that people feel have shaped their lives. However, little research has examined how people perceive such serendipitous events (compared to non-serendipitous events), and how they affect people's decision making. It seems likely that people perceive serendipitous outcomes as somewhat more special (the person in the first example may be happier about getting the free running shoes than he would have been if he had received them along his usual route home, and the graduate student's decision to pursue a relationship with and marry the girl from the conference party might have been influenced by how serendipitously he met her). While some scholars have noted that people have tendencies to personalize coincidences (Falk, 1989; Jones & Muirhead, 2012), and some have observed amplified affective responses to outcomes that are different from one's prediction (Coughlan & Connolly, 2001; Sheppard & McNulty, 2002), relatively little research has explored how exactly

people perceive serendipitous events differently compared to non-serendipitous (or “regular”) events and how serendipity affects people’s decision making. That is the primary goal of this proposed research. The key hypotheses are as follows:

H1: People perceive serendipitous outcomes as more valuable than non-serendipitous outcomes.

H2: People are more excited about serendipitous gains compared to non-serendipitous gains.

H3: Ceteris paribus, people prefer decision options that were created serendipitously over the decision options that were created non-serendipitously.

In order to test these hypotheses, we propose a combination of a lab study and a field study.

Laboratory Experiment Design: The Computer Glitch Study

In this lab experiment, 1/3 of the participants will receive a candy serendipitously and the other 2/3 of the participants will receive a candy non-serendipitously. Participants will come to the lab and get ready to start a normal set of studies. About 1/3 of the participants in each session will encounter a “surprise” computer glitch causing a software crash. When the participants report this problem, the RA will pretend to consult the lab manager about what to do, and the lab manager will tell them that they should actually participate in a different set of studies that are set up in another room. The RA will bring these participants to the other room. Although the participants in both rooms will then participate in the same study involving the receipt of candy, the participants who went to the other room will believe they only got to engage in the candy study because their computer crashed. In short, they will believe the receipt of this candy is “serendipitous”. Our hypothesis is that the participants who received candy serendipitously (because their computer crashed) will value it more, will be more excited/happy about getting it, and will be less willing to exchange it for another prize.

Field Experiment Design: The Speed Dating Study

In this field experiment, 100~150 college students will be recruited to take part in a speed dating event. Using a similar serendipity manipulation to the laboratory study (a “glitch” requiring some people to be re-paired or re-located), we will examine i) whether the participants who were paired with their dates “serendipitously” will find their counterpart more attractive compared to the participants who were paired with their dates in a control condition and ii) whether the participants on average found their dates more attractive when they were paired with them “serendipitously”.