

The Illusory causality of random Risk: People's perceptions of random events.

The paper describes a study looking into the nature of laypersons' perception of various life events, comparing positive vs. negative, natural vs. man-created events while also looking at the potential influence of personal characteristics, namely: gender and Locus of Control (LOC).

Two-hundred and twenty undergraduate students were asked to decide the extent to which a series of rare life events are random or non-random. We hypothesized that negative events and natural events will be perceived as more random. We also hypothesized that men will see events as more random than women and that participants with external LOC will judge events as more random than those with an internal LOC.

Though the data supported most of our hypotheses we were surprised to find that negative events (e.g.: being robbed) were perceived as LESS random than positive events (e.g.: winning the lottery). Additional analysis of the influences of gender and LOC suggest a tendency to seek causality in negative events more than in positive ones. We link this phenomenon to existing literature on risk taking and decision making as well as to classic findings in Evolutionary psychology and human learning.

This study adds to the empirical discussion of how people perceive and understand risk in everyday settings, and links new findings to classic results from different fields of research.

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