

SERENDIPITY IN ROBBERY TARGET SELECTION

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Drawing from interviews with active robbers (drug robbers and carjackers), this paper explores the role of serendipity in the robbery target selection process. Serendipity is defined as the art of finding something valuable while engrossed in something different (Roberts 1989). The discovery is unanticipated, unexpected and anomalous (Merton and Barber 2006) and may result from decidedly negative experiences. The extent to which robbery targets emerge through ‘pure’ serendipity or a more ‘manufactured’ variety sheds light on the conceptual interface between perception, need, opportunity and rational choice.

Keywords: robbery, carjacking, target selection, serendipity

Introduction

Criminologists long have argued that the selection of predatory robbery targets is guided by rational choice. Offenders weigh the costs and benefits of contemplated conduct and proceed when the latter exceed the former (see, e.g. Carroll and Weaver 1986; Cornish and Clarke 1986). This relatively sterile view of offender decision making downplays the phenomenological forces that undermine reasoned calculation. Time pressure, uncertainty, emotion and needs of various kinds can ‘bound’ rationality and give rise to choices that are more or less spontaneous (Bennett and Wright 1984). The dynamic tension between reflexive action and reasoned calculation comes into particular relief when opportunity and motivation converge along an axis of serendipity—chance circumstances that align to energize predatory conduct. It is this convergence and its implications for offender decision making that concern the present paper.

Target Selection

Any crime requires the intersection of suitable targets and motivated offenders (Felson 1998), and robbery is no exception. Which targets are perceived to be suitable, when and under what circumstances vary across situations and even within them. Contextual factors are labile and subjectively perceived.

As a criminological construct, target selection implies that something is being selected and someone is doing the selecting. Both presume agency. Understandably, the offender is the locus of much of this inquiry (see, e.g. Cornish and Clarke 1986). Offenders’ target selection strategies vary in their sophistication, calculation, focus and degree of planning. Planning is of particular concern to criminologists because of assumptions of offender rationality and, more specifically, the belief that target selection hinges on offenders’ objective information-processing capabilities. As Hochstetler (2002: 46)

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observes, 'decision-making investigators focus on offenders' agency and perceptual construction of situations as illicit opportunity. These investigators view crime as the outcome of purposeful action resulting from assessments of risk and reward'.

That being said, a growing body of research in the offender decision-making tradition shows how the selection of predatory robbery targets is awash with ambiguity (Wright and Decker 1997). Phenomenological forces like emotion and impulsivity destabilize choice and give rise to miscalculations of risk and reward. Offenders may not think about the prospects of sanctions, may think about the prospects but dismiss them, may inflate anticipated rewards or may focus on anticipated rewards to the exclusion of risks (Bennett and Wright 1984). All of these possibilities are consistent with a general lack of planning. Indeed, 'street robbery is characterized as a spontaneous, impulsive [affair] more often than it involves real [preparation]' (Alarid *et al.* 2009: 7). Offenders typically 'do not plan their crimes or spend only a few minutes planning' (Hochstetler 2001: 744; see also Feeney 1986; Wright *et al.* 2006).

Target selection can be an artefact of opportunity, but the lens through which opportunities are perceived is no doubt influenced by need. Prior researchers (Bennett and Wright 1984; Topalli and Wright 2004) have offered the terms 'alert' and 'motivated' opportunism to encapsulate the dynamic interplay between need and opportunity. Alert opportunism describes offenders who face needs that are present but not necessarily pressing. Offenders are not desperate, 'but they anticipate need in the near term and become increasingly open to opportunities that may present themselves during the course of their day-to-day activities' (Topalli and Wright 2004: 156–7). By contrast, motivated opportunism is characterized by needs that are, or soon will be, acute. 'Attention and openness to possibilities expands [sic.] to allow offenders to tolerate more risk. Situations that previously seemed unsuitable start to look better' (Topalli and Wright 2004: 157).

The distinction between alert and motivated opportunism is murky in street culture. Street culture promotes anomic, cash-intensive living that creates an endless supply of deficits and an equally endless need to extend surpluses so that they do not become deficits (Jacobs and Wright 1999). The confluence of need and inducement gives rise to perpetual searches for scores big and small. Thus, alert and motivated opportunism presuppose a conceptual distinction between offenders who have to make something happen and offenders who face situations that simply 'happen'. In so doing, the two constructs fail to specify the role of serendipity in alert opportunism and downplay its potential relevance to motivated opportunism. Serendipity, for example, can be manufactured in probabilistic ways, and this manufacturing process need not flow from desperation or truncated rationality (as motivated opportunism implies). By the same token, alert opportunism can involve considerable time pressure if prevailing circumstances are 'right' but fleeting. The role of serendipity in mediating these processes is of considerable interest.

Serendipity

Traditionally, serendipity has been interpreted as the art of finding something valuable while engrossed in something different (Roberts 1989). The discovery is unanticipated, unexpected and anomalous (Merton and Barber 2006). The challenge of serendipity is to recognize the inherent value of the unexpected discovery lest it be perceived as just

another failed experiment or finding of residual but apparent insignificance. Horace Walpole, credited for coining the word ‘serendipity’, refers to this ability as ‘sagacity’ (Roberts 1989: 244). Serendipity promises success from setbacks but only for those wise enough to recognize that in setbacks there are opportunities.

Many of science and industry’s most important discoveries have been products of serendipity. These include penicillin, X-rays, vulcanized rubber and infrared radiation (Roberts 1989). Serendipity also has been implicated in numerous product developments that arguably have become indispensable to Western popular culture—everything from Post-it Notes and NutraSweet to Ivory Soap and Velcro. Chance is implicated in these discoveries, but chance lies at the confluence of effort and preparation. As Louis Pasteur was once quoted as saying, ‘chance favors only the prepared mind’ (in Van Andel 1994: 635). The fact that serendipity is deemed a faculty suggests that it is a skill that can be cultivated, exercised and harnessed for positive ends.

Serendipity and luck are not necessarily the same thing, although they are related. Luck is perceptual and ‘constructed’ in the sense that emergent outcomes, be they positive or negative, are ascribed to good or bad luck. Luck implies fatalism—the belief that one’s destiny is beyond his or her control (Miller 1958). Yet, some people are more lucky than others and these people may be doing things that enhance their opportunity structure for luck. They may have a unique ability to recognize chance opportunities when they arise. Or, they have access to networks that convey relevant information, are more open to new experiences than others and have a better developed intuitive capacity. Lucky people also tend to be optimistic in the sense that expectations of good fortune often produce good fortune. When bad fortune comes instead of good fortune, optimists reframe the experience in positive ways (Wiseman 2003).

In street culture, serendipity’s meaning is more nuanced. Certainly, serendipity is an artefact of finding something valuable when looking for something unrelated. But serendipity also is about how offenders transform unfavourable developments into valued outcomes. Analysts may call this luck, but some settings are ‘more lucky’ than others and, not infrequently, this will be determined by the position in which offenders place themselves and how they react once they are there. In other social settings, serendipity affords a built-in temporal cushion between discovery, recognition and action. In street culture, such phases are more or less coterminous. Targets of predatory robbery are there one moment and gone the next, requiring decisive action. The alternative is to ‘manufacture’ serendipity, adopting targeting strategies that are sensitive to time and space in order to *make* things happen. Not infrequently, the decision to do this will be energized by negative situations that offenders realize they can transform into positive ones. The extent to which robbery targets emerge spontaneously (pure serendipity) or through some degree of manipulation (manufactured serendipity) offers a window into the offender decision-making process that, in turn, sheds light on the conceptual interface between perception, need, opportunity and rational choice. Two forms of robbery—carjacking and drug robbery—provide a medium to explore this interface.

Methods

Data for this paper come from interviews with un-incarcerated robbery offenders, most of whom specialized in either carjacking or drug robbery. Respondents were primarily contacted through one specially trained field worker. A longstanding

member of the street criminal underworld in a relatively large Midwestern US metropolitan area, the fieldworker was trusted in the circles of offenders from which he recruited.

The author's initial contact with this fieldworker emerged by chance during the course of a separate project on heroin distribution. Prior to beginning that project, the author learned that one of his (the author's) students had an uncle who was heavily involved in heroin use. The author, through the author's student, recruited the uncle to participate in the study. The uncle, in turn, had a nephew who was involved in drug robbery. This nephew was cousins with yet another person who was actively involved in drug robbery and who also had multiple and ongoing contacts with carjackers, drug robbers and assorted other street predators. This person became a respondent for the drug robbery study, the primary field recruiter for the remainder of the drug robbery study and the primary recruiter for the carjacking study.

The recruitment process was relatively simple. The fieldworker would identify subjects who met a basic set of inclusion criteria. The criteria changed depending on the project but remained broadly generic as to level, frequency and recency of offence participation. In the carjacking study, for example, the fieldworker recruited respondents who had committed at least two such offences in the prior year. The drug robbery inclusion criteria were reasonably similar. In both cases, application of the criteria was flexible so as not to arbitrarily exclude potentially valuable respondents. Each respondent was paid a modest sum in exchange for participating in the study. Street offenders seldom provide services for nothing, and the fee was intended as a show of appreciation and way to defray their opportunity costs. The fieldworker also was paid a reasonable fee for each contact.

Interviews were tape-recorded with respondents' permission and transcribed verbatim. Interviews were semi-structured and allowed for substantial probing. Data were coded manually using standard domain analytic techniques (Spradley 1980). It should be noted that serendipity was not an initial focus of the research; it emerged during the coding process and was pursued analytically at that point.

Fifty-seven respondents were interviewed. On average, respondents were in their twenties. The majority had no high-school degree. Most were unmarried. All were African-American, owing to the fact that the main fieldworker had no contacts with offenders outside of his own race (he was also African-American). Although respondents typically were drug-involved and committed a wide variety of offences, they were recruited specifically because of their prior experience with drug robbery and carjacking.

Specific measures were applied to enhance the data's internal validity, which can be problematic in offender-based studies. All respondents were granted anonymity. No identifying information, except nicknames, was recorded. No information on dates of prior offences, locations or victims was recorded. Respondents were assured that their recorded words would be held in confidence, and that the author would not divulge any audio to authorities. Respondents were told that the research was academic in nature and that their observations might end up in a book or article. Prior experience suggested this was an effective strategy because it encouraged respondents to assume a teacher-like role during the interviews. This, in turn, enhanced the thickness of description: offenders viewed the research process as a platform with which to impart street wisdom to those 'not in the know'.

The external validity of a purposively generated sample of street offenders will always be in question, but there is no cause to believe that the respondents sampled here are unique or different from offenders examined in other studies of street robbery (see also Hochstetler 2001). Responses did become repetitious, which suggests sufficient topical coverage, although it is conceivable that this could have been an artefact of the sampling design itself. Nevertheless, the themes and patterns outlined in the present paper are broadly consistent with those evidenced in other published studies of robbery, which provides a measure of confidence that the findings reported here are not idiosyncratic.

Pure Serendipity

One of the most striking findings to emerge from the interviews is the extent to which targets of predatory robbery materialized almost magically in time and space. Victims 'became' victims after crossing paths with offenders at the right—or wrong (depending on one's perspective) time. In a number of cases, serendipity made the target selection process appear to be almost effortless.

Driving around one afternoon, one respondent was approached by a young man who broached the idea of a drug sale. Although the respondent did need drugs and also had a firearm on his person, his explicit intention was not to commit a robbery (at the time, he was driving to his girlfriend's house and attempting to meet a friend there). When the would-be victim introduced the idea of a drug transaction, the respondent realized that he could simply take what he would otherwise have had to buy and secure more than he could have purchased in the process. Robbery was the inevitable result:

Well one of these young guys come up to my car asking me if I wanted to buy some drugs . . . I had wanted me some drugs that day and I didn't have enough money and I happened to see the little guy on the street so he had me just pull over. I was going to see a friend of mine . . . I needed to go to a friend of mine and get something . . . So he [the friend] wasn't at home so I saw him [the victim] and he happened to run up to my car. So I said yes, I would like to buy some. So he got in the car with me, he wasn't aware that I had a gun in the car. So I told him, 'you know what time it is, this is a robbery.' So I stuck my gun up in his face to let him know that I wasn't playing. So he gave me \$450 cash, he gave me five grams of Boy [heroin] . . . And four tenths and about 20 pills (Blackwell)

Another respondent described a strikingly similar encounter, also unfolding as the respondent roamed the streets in unrelated pursuits. The eventual victim approached the respondent and his brother's vehicle at a red light, soliciting a drug sale. This simple interrogatory transformed the offenders' decision-making calculus, implanted the robbery idea and unleashed the offence:

No, we [were not looking to rob anybody]. We just out riding and then we stopped at a red light and he [the eventual victim] walked up on us talking about did you want to buy something so he [my brother] pulled out a gun . . . he didn't say nothing he just pulled it [the gun] out . . . And then when he pulled the gun on him then he told me to get out of the car and take his little stuff . . . I think he [my brother] really thought he had rocks or something but he only had like six packs of weed..[and] like \$600 something . . . Just took his stuff and we just pulled off . . . (V-O)

As Roberts (1989: 244) points out, persons attuned to the prospects of serendipity will observe a phenomenon that is unexpected and take note of it 'rather than dismiss it as

trivial or annoying'. This faculty is particularly valuable in carjacking, the other modality of robbery explored in this paper. By its nature, carjacking is less dependent on the mobility of the offender than of the victim (Jacobs *et al.* 2003). For perpetrators, the trick is to have the 'sagacity' (Roberts 1989) to recognize opportunities when they appear. As Joseph Henry once remarked, 'The seeds of great discovery are constantly floating around us, but they only take root in minds well prepared to receive them' (in Roberts 1989: 65). Edwin Sutherland (1937) famously called this the 'larceny sense' (see also Copes and Cherbonneau 2006). Little Tye illustrates it emphatically below:

My partner, he wanted him some rims. He had just bought this little Malibu and he just wanted rims. I needed a radio and some speakers, so it all came down like, they were goin' over there. We saw this little cat over there by a little liquor store . . . with his gal over there, pumping his beats, riding his rims, goddamn me and my partner got on [it] . . . It's just something we wanted to do. [We had money but] we'd rather go take it than spend the money in our pockets . . . That's what I'm saying, we don't need no money. We have money. We're selling dope, we got money. We stay in the projects, we got money. It's just something, we steal cars, I mean that's what we want. We don't want it, we go sell it. I mean we don't give it away, we go sell it to get more money . . . You know what happens, when you see, like a baby when they see someone they get surprised and so happy. When they see something they want they're gonna cry for it, they want it. [That's like us.] That's how we live, I mean . . . You can never have enough of money . . .

Unlike other forms of street robbery that emerge by chance, carjacking puts a particular premium on spontaneity. A 'regular' robbery victim might be banked in a perceptual reservoir for future consideration (see, e.g. Hochstetler 2001; Wright and Decker 1994; 1997), but a desirable car is there one minute and gone the next. Acting decisively can mean the difference between hitting a 'lick', as offenders refer to it, or going home empty-handed. Carjacking is rapid and simple, and the reward doubles as an escape mechanism:

I was coming from the club and I was drunk and high . . . you know, everybody go to the East Side to go see girls and stuff, you know, meet girls . . . We was coming back to [town]. We was leaving [one place and] coming back in to [town]. We seen him [the eventual victim] on our way to [town]. We had seen him at a stoplight . . . It was like at night, real late at night, about 2:00 in the morning . . . He was just riding through and he stopped at a stoplight . . . I was like, man, I like that car, man and I love [the color] red . . . It [the idea to carjack] . . . come in my head once I see the car. I say I want that and I'm gonna go get that . . . He [the victim] looked like a punk. I wanted to take the car from him you know so we went over there and took it . . . I already got what I need, a gun . . . ran up to him and put the gun to his head, 'get out of the car.' He got out of the car and we was up on him, we skirted off . . . (C-Ball)

Manufacturing Serendipity

The foregoing accounts reveal the fluidity and open-endedness of target selection when serendipity is more or less 'pure'. While an overstatement to suggest that targets select themselves in such cases, their situated vulnerability moves offenders from an indifferent state to one in which they are determined to act (cf. Topalli and Wright 2004). Although happenstance certainly produces moments of pure serendipity, more typically, effort is required to convert opportunities into scores. Effort requires knowledge of when, where and under what circumstances strategies for manipulating time and space will produce favourable outcomes. To outsiders uninitiated in the ways of the street, the process can

be difficult to master. To offenders accustomed to street-level dynamics, it can become almost second nature.

At the most basic level, manufacturing serendipity requires that offenders have a reasonably well developed 'perceptual shorthand' (Skolnick 1966) to identify the likely emergence of predatory targets based on time, place and circumstance. Palpable to the offenders who exercise it but difficult for many to articulate, it is a shorthand that maximizes the efficiency of effort relative to expected rewards.

By manufacturing serendipity, I mean fashioning circumstances that create fortuitous accidents. Manufacturing serendipity requires that offenders manipulate activity patterns in ways that produce temporal and spatial convergence with would-be crime targets. The convergence is anticipatory because it is based on probabilistic assessments of likely target-rich times and places (see also Brantingham and Brantingham 1978; Copes and Cherbonneau 2006; Topalli 2005). The convergence is historical in the sense that it draws from experiential knowledge of the perceived suitability of such venues. Offenders are passive-aggressive 'foragers' who move with purpose and logic (Bernasco and Block 2009: 95) even as their activity appears random. Offenders rely on emergent and difficult-to-predict circumstances while manipulating activity patterns in ways that permit exploitation of the targets that do emerge. This curious mix of agency and constraint can result in substantial bounties:

I cruise around neighborhoods mostly every day like that to find out where the dope dealers are you know . . . When I left out of [one area] I'm coming up from [street] going towards [street]. I make a left on [street]. See first I started in [one area] looking. Couldn't find nobody in [that area] so I go over on [street]. See I know these little cats on [street], they usually be out. I didn't see them. So I say, ok, it was about 12:00. I'm gonna find somebody you know. I go up on [street] and [street] that dude standing out flagging you know . . . So he flagged me down. He said, 'hey brother, what's up, you looking?' I told him, 'yeah, I'm looking.' He said, 'what you looking for?' Told him 'I'm looking for some Boy [heroin] and some rock.' He said, 'all right, look, check this here out. You don't mind if I get in your car?' I told him, 'no come on, get on in there.' He said, 'drive around the corner.' I take him around the corner, instead of going right around the corner, go right around the corner, jump right on [street], jump on [the Interstate . . . He said], 'Hey brother, what's up, what's up?' 'You know what's up, you know what's up now.' You can't get out of the car. Say, what's up. You gonna get out of the car when we doing 65 miles an hour on the highway, can't get out of the car, you know what's up, you know. So he say, 'don't kill me man, don't kill me.' 'I'm not gonna kill you, I just want your dope and your money man, that's all I want' and be kind enough to take you back down on [street] and drop you off by the highway. That's how I got him . . . (Do-dirty)¹

Whereas the above respondent discusses the importance of circulating generally within a target-rich environment, other offenders applied a more direct approach. Manufacturing serendipity could be quite purposive in this regard. The logic that drives the selection process is the same—putting oneself in a position to capitalize on emergent opportunities that are uncertain but possible and drawing from experiential knowledge to do so—but the selection process itself was less random. Thus, one respondent, Goldie, received information about the possible emergence of a carjacking target. Although the

¹ Bennett and Wright's (1984) 'searchers' acted in a reasonably similar manner but unlike the offenders explored here, their offenders waited before exploiting targets. Offenders who manufacture serendipity act more or less contemporaneously after spotting the target.

information was not precise, it was sufficiently specific to get him to lurk. Pure serendipity may be about finding something fortuitous while looking for something different, but manufactured serendipity creates an opportunity structure for fortuity by merging luck with preparation. As [Roberts \(1989: 119\)](#) notes, 'Discoveries have been made, not only "by really trying," but also by clever design or *conception*'.² Goldie illustrates this logic as it relates to his hunch about a carjacking target:

I'm standing across the street like I'm waiting on a bus or something sitting at this stoplight . . . I got the drop that he [a car] usually come through this certain place, [Street] and [Street] around this time. I was standing at the bus stop waiting on him, you know . . . I'm standing there hoping and if he don't come, you know, but he did . . . Just chilling and he pulled up you know and the [stop]light changed just in time. I ran up over there, put the gun to his head, asked him if he was going to get out or die, you know what I'm saying, either one, you going to get out this motherfucker or die? . . . First night [waiting for him]. First night got his ass . . . [Lucky,] Yeah. (Goldie)

Manufacturing serendipity can be particularly important when predatory robberies flow from moralistic concerns. Criminologists have long recognized that robbery and assault serve as social control devices for offenders who are wronged by others ([Black 1983](#)). The need to manufacture serendipity for moralistic reasons can, on occasion, be quite reflexive—a product of provocative target behaviour at a discrete moment in time. Although, in purely serendipitous incidents, would-be victims also play a role in their own selection, in those incidents, being at the right place results less from victim precipitation than bad timing. In a moralistically energized incident, the target behaves in a way that creates a specific imbalance in need of rectification. The offender transforms the imbalance into an opportunity for gain. Being aggrieved certainly is not invited or appreciated by respondents (which the notion of serendipity can, at times, imply), but the affront does permit offenders to turn something unwelcome into something propitious, and that lies at the core of serendipity as a situational process. J Rock thus explains what he did to a drug dealer who 'disrespected' him:

Like I ask them [for drugs] for something and they don't give it to me, I'll tell 'em 'I'm coming back for your ass' and I come back. You think I'm bullshitting, I'll rob his ass. Come right back . . . [Put the gun in their face] 'Give me all your dope and all your money now. I asked for something and you wouldn't give me nothing so now I want it all.' . . . Don't fuck with me, nobody, nobody, nobody. (J Rock)

Although objective financial need certainly primes the selection process (as the above respondent implies), manufacturing serendipity requires a perceptual trigger to generate awareness of debasement ([Tittle 1995](#)). In street culture, sensitivity is high, so such triggers are in ample supply. This is especially true of carjacking because imbalances are frequently created by mobile displays of wealth perceived by would-be offenders to be insulting. Flossing, as it is sometimes called, constitutes both a putdown and a provocation ([Jacobs et al. 2003](#)) and creates an imbalance that cries out for rectification. The provocation may not be welcome, but the opportunity to make something fortuitous come out of it is:

²This is why building contractors occasionally hire archaeologists to be on site during certain excavations. The frequency with which artefacts of one sort or another are unearthed while digging makes the occurrence predictable. Such a practice betrays the inherent recognition of a likely serendipitous find simply by preparing for it ([Roberts 1989: 106](#)).

We were tired of seeing them just coming through, always trying to floss as they went past . . . always wanting to go somewhere and stare, or always showing off, talking a lot . . . Me and my partner, we saw him pull up to the lot [while we were sitting in a park next door]. . . . He [the victim] went into the [gas station] and he was pumping the gas. His partner was listening to the news . . . It was late, round about 2, 2:30 . . . Boy I knew he had some money . . . People drive around like that . . . From his pockets, we took about five Gs . . . You floss it too much you get robbed . . . he tried to floss man . . . (Snake)

Discussion

The methods and motives of robbery are well understood. Less clear are the situational factors that give rise to perceptions of opportunity irrespective of method or motive. The objective of this paper has been to re-focus attention on this situated convergence through the concept of serendipity.

Robberies have long been described as ‘low-level, desperate, and impulsive exploits’ that rarely involve advance planning (Alarid *et al.* 2009: 2; see also Feeney 1986). Although prior research emphasizes the role of opportunity in triggering such events, only recently have studies begun in earnest to identify the situated manner in which opportunity is constructed (see, e.g. Hochstetler 2001). The present paper has sought to expand this line of inquiry by sensitizing readers to the notion of serendipity.

Serendipity requires that offenders both make, and let, things happen. The latter is especially consequential given the frequency with which moments of pure serendipity arise. The transition from relative indifference to committed action is rapid, and the capacity for motivation to ‘flex’ in this way has not been examined in any great detail by prior etiological studies of crime. Likely, this is because criminologists view offender motivation through static risk factors. Risk factors create predispositions to crime, but they neither cause nor shape crime in the offending moment. The offending moment is the magical instant by which indifference transforms into committed action. The speed of this transformation can be torrid, as this paper has demonstrated.

Spontaneity may imply irrationality, but the spontaneity that drives serendipity is firmly rooted in reasoned calculation, a process long associated with rational choice. Over two centuries ago, this tradition embarked with two seminal treatises in utilitarian theory—Beccaria’s 240-year-old *An Essay on Crimes and Punishment* and Bentham’s comparably historic *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. By focusing on sanction threats and how would-be offenders react to them, Beccaria (1764) presumed that offenders ponder what they are going to do and how they are going to do it before they do it. Bentham (1789) similarly opined that would-be offenders exercise a ‘quantum of sensibility’ in how they construct, define and respond to criminogenic circumstances.

Over the years, rational choice theorists have refined the focus by adding concepts like decision frames (Tversky and Kahneman 1981), editing/evaluation (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) and non-compensatory strategizing (Johnson and Payne 1986). Decision frames come from ‘prospect theory’ (Lattimore and Witte 1986)—an approach that explores how offenders discern among various conduct options based on the discrete outcome probabilities of each. Editing/evaluation is a more complicated process in which offenders code, combine, segregate, cancel, simplify and detect dominance in relation to some anticipated action. This analytic process requires that

offenders be sensitive to things such as decision weights, value functions and risk perceptions, as each relates to outcome probabilities (Lattimore and Witte 1986).

Non-compensatory strategizing, the third approach, is simpler and more relevant to serendipity. It holds that offender rationality is limited and that offenders weigh but a few aspects of a few alternatives and ignore the rest (Johnson and Payne 1986: 173). Non-compensatory strategizing promotes ‘standing decisions’ (Cook 1980) that offenders cultivate over time and which they invoke on command. Steeped in ‘iterative agency’ (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), standing decisions sensitize offenders to patterns and practices and permit efficient reaction to emergent cues (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Offenders learn ‘which discriminative cues are associated with “good” targets’ and these cues ‘then serve as a “template” applied in subsequent actions (Cromwell and Olsen 2004: 19). Expertise may play a role in this process (Topalli 2005), although the nature of expertise’s role is unclear. Novice offenders, for example, may be less constrained by biases and more apt to ‘go with the flow’, which can expand choice and the universe of would-be crime opportunities to recognize.

Despite its centrality to offender decision making, theorists have largely ignored serendipity’s function in the non-compensatory-strategic toolkit. Certainly, opportunities arise, but opportunities mean nothing unless or until they are perceived, recognized and acted upon by offenders. Serendipity bridges the gap between the emergence of opportunity and opportunity’s exploitation because it is a faculty that offenders exercise.

Prior research mistakes serendipity for opportunity and fails to grasp the distinction between the two. Opportunity is inherent; serendipity is referential. Opportunity is situation-focused; serendipity nests offenders in those situations. Opportunity is fixed; serendipity is adaptable. Opportunity is an event; serendipity is a capacity. Even when prior research explores opportunity, it does so almost exclusively through the lens of need (see, e.g. Hochstetler 2001; Topalli and Wright 2004). Thus, studies repeatedly emphasize how intense pressures energize offending decisions and distort the manner in which offenders reach these decisions. Wright and Decker (1994: 200–1) found that all but a few of their offenders typically ‘began to contemplate the commission of their [offences] while under intense emotional pressure to obtain money as quickly as possible’. This required them to develop a repository of crime targets they could tap when desperation inevitably set in. Only one person in Wright and Decker’s sample of over 100 offenders qualified as purely opportunistic (i.e. serendipitously minded)—someone who ‘just happen[ed] upon’ a vulnerable target and, as a result, commit[ted] an offense on the spur of the moment’ (Wright and Decker 1994: 99). Moreover, nearly 90 per cent of their sample had a *specific target* in mind before setting out to offend (Wright and Decker 1994: 63). In an earlier study of British offenders, Bennett and Wright (1984) found similarly that only 7 per cent of their sample fit the ‘opportunist’ category—equivalent to someone who responded reflexively to unexpected but favourable situational cues, namely someone who responded serendipitously. It is precisely because desperate offenders cannot predict when and under what circumstances opportunities will arise that serendipity was a residual category in these studies.

The robbery literature is afflicted similarly by its disproportionate focus on need and how opportunity passively works through it (see Wright and Decker 1997). The robbery literature is peppered with descriptions of desperate offenders trolling the streets seeking to attack the first suitable target into which they run. Thus, Jacobs’ robbers were ‘very much spinning out of control’ (Jacobs 2000: 42–3). Wright and Decker’s (1997) robbers

lurched from one crisis to the next. Topalli and Wright's (2004) carjackers sacrificed prudence for immediacy. Feeney's (1986) robbers, at times, careened into crimes.

None of these studies explores serendipity as an empirical process or meaningfully links it to the construction of criminal opportunity *in situ*. Part of the problem is that studies on criminality in general, and on offender decision making in particular, conflate desperation with impulsivity and imply that the latter and former are one and the same. Concomitantly, these studies presume that desperation so limits rationality that serendipity, as a faculty, cannot meaningfully be exercised. The renowned lack of planning on the part of many robbery offenders is thought to be *prima facie* evidence of their recklessness. Certainly, the present study does not wish to disabuse readers of the urgency that frequently imbues robbery offenders' actions. It does, however, wish to sensitize readers to the distinction between impulsivity and recklessness so that serendipity's conceptual import can better be grasped.

Impulsivity lies at the heart of street crime and robbery tends to be no exception. Impulsive people want things the easy way; they are risk-seeking, attracted to thrills and unable to defer gratification (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Numerous scholars (see, e.g. Nagin and Pogarsky 2003) have noted how present orientation interferes with the ability to process potential setbacks, setbacks being critical to understanding how serendipity operates as a faculty. In particular, impulsivity subsumes a 'here and now' worldview and the 'commensurate tendency to devalue or discount delayed consequences' (Pogarsky and Piquero 2004: 374). 'By seeking immediate gratification, those [with high levels of impulsivity] are relatively unmoved by the potential pains of punishment that are both uncertain and removed in the future. As such, the "emotional force" of present desires overwhelms the apprehension of pain in the future [citation omitted] . . .' (Wright *et al.* 2004: 182).

But the present orientation that guides the serendipitous exploitation of crime targets underscores a sensitivity to future consequences, not an ignorance of them. Indeed, the longer-term outlook that mediates serendipitous conduct arguably is risk-averse, not risk-seeking. Not only have choice theorists failed to appreciate this wrinkle in offender decision making, but they have emphasized just the opposite: 'In decision making parlance, the criminal opportunity presents a choice between a sure thing (restraint from the criminal act), and a gamble that arises because the contemplated conduct can produce a gain with some probability and a loss with complementary probability. Individuals who tend more toward the safety of a sure thing rather than risk a loss are considered risk-averse. In contrast, individuals with the opposite propensity, namely, to risk a loss for even the slightest chance of reward, are considered risk-seeking' (Nagin and Pogarsky 2001: 885). Offenders who act serendipitously, and particularly those who do not face pressing needs at the time, capitalize on a 'sure thing' and make moot the uncertainty of the crime target's re-emergence. By forestalling the emergence of desperation that ultimately will require them to act, offenders reveal the forward-thinking potential of impulsive action.

Impulsivity can also affect the manner in which serendipity is enacted. Conventional criminological wisdom holds that offenders living in and for the moment will be hard-pressed to focus on anything but that moment (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990). Conventional wisdom also holds that 'bounded rationality' is especially problematic in high-velocity, uncertain environments imbued with desperation (such as street culture). On their face, such conditions would seem to restrict the functional expression of

serendipity because they compromise choice. The present study brings this into question and is supported by research in cognitive psychology, which suggests that bounded rationality may improve rather than undermine the perceptual clarity upon which serendipity relies to operate. Actors who face strict limits on the factors they can realistically attend to can discern emergent cues more efficiently. When information loads lighten, decision makers are better able to ignore irrelevant data and focus on cues of real substance (see, e.g. Khatri and Ng 2000). Bounds on rationality may thereby encourage offenders to lock into discrete moments and discern them resourcefully and creatively, sharpening serendipity's edge and the strategic vision necessary to invoke it.

That being said, two essential links in offender decision making must be addressed if analysts ever are to understand why offenders perceive things the way they do and how they act once the perception is made (Piquero and Pogarsky 2002). The first is the manner by which information known to an actor becomes a judgment. The second is the manner by which such judgments influence actual behaviour (Piquero and Pogarsky 2002: 154). Research on offender decision making has left these processes largely untapped. When it does explore them, the bulk of the focus is on person-based traits as opposed to situations (see, e.g. Nagin and Pogarsky 2003). Because serendipity explores persons nested in situations, the oversight is problematic.

A cursory review of the data presented in the current paper reveals the prominence of situational factors. A number of factors were relevant, but the role of weapon availability and co-offenders was especially germane. Firearms routinely transformed indifference into committed action irrespective of objective needs. Firearms obviously inflict serious injury, they can do it from a distance and everyone knows that firearms have these attributes, which makes for a highly effective contingent threat (Cook 1982) and a rapid way to convert nascent motives into action. Co-offenders were equally powerful in catalyzing the process, which is understandable, given that decision makers in group settings 'do not respond passively to situational opportunity; they create it by selecting and transforming the situations they confront' (Hochstetler 2001: 740). In particular, co-offenders encourage accomplices to take risks. They embolden behaviour, diffuse responsibility and enhance perceptions of dominance—all of which entice decision makers to seek out opportunity with greater vigour and manufacture it with more intense resolve. Co-offenders, finally, quicken the pace by which actual decisions are made, which can reveal serendipitous circumstances more readily or encourage offenders to act on them with less regret. Certainly, the cases of V-O, Little Tye and C-Ball highlight this powerful process of 'social exchange' (McCluskey and Wardle 1999; see also Alarid *et al.* 2009).

Because serendipity is a faculty that involves the situated capacity to turn setbacks into opportunities, the manner in which 'setback experiences' influence serendipity's structure and process warrants empirical attention. Deterrence theorists have made analogous arguments regarding the relationship between prior punishment experiences and future criminality (see, e.g. Paternoster and Piquero 1995): punishment experiences can influence the manner in which offenders contemplate additional crime (see Minor and Harry (1982) on the 'experiential effect') by promoting more nuanced decisions that carry a lower risk of detection. Setback experiences may similarly sensitize offenders in the realm of opportunity perception and perhaps promote greater efficacy in serendipity's exercise. We know this happens in the 'real world'. Research on entrepreneurship, for example, shows a direct correlation between prior failures and

innovation potential (Minniti and Bygrave 2001). The most prolific entrepreneurs the world over typically experience setback after setback before tasting success and only taste success because failure is pedagogical (Roberts 1989). Street offenders are widely perceived to be failures in almost every sense of the word. Maybe it is failure that makes serendipity possible and real.

Experiential effects highlight this ‘accractive’ potential (Zimring and Hawkins 1973) of serendipity. Accretion is important because it implies dynamic interplay and/or conditional interaction between different forms of serendipity, both of which ultimately influence how or when serendipity is expressed. For example, having a crime target fall onto one’s lap does not mean that serendipity will not be manufactured a moment later if a previously established target emerges or if some affront moves offenders from a neutral state to one in which they are determined to act. Crime targets may also emerge one after another in a purely serendipitous manner, which can alter the trajectory of serendipity-based decision making: a series of purely serendipitous encounters can make offenders ‘resistant’ to incidents that might otherwise require serendipity to be manufactured (e.g. in response to an affront). Conversely, frustration tolerances may rise after a spate of good but unexpected fortune, permitting offenders to develop greater cognitive clarity in how they exercise serendipity: a series of positive outcomes can liberate the psyche from worry and allow offenders to devote energy to cultivating chance encounters that bear yet more fruit. At the same time, bad fortune can also make offenders more attuned to their environment, more sensitive to affronts and more apt to manufacture serendipity from negative events. Whether hypersensitivity ‘primes’ reactions in general, or makes offenders more discerning of crime targets in particular, is unclear and merits additional research attention.

In the final analysis, serendipity speaks to the non-deterministic nature of offender decision making. Although opportunity may, in some cases, ‘make the thief’ (as the nineteenth-century French saying holds; see Fattah 1993: 246), opportunity is unpredictable and must be appraised. Appraisals are based on the sense that offenders ‘make of situations using contextually relevant precedent and experience’. Indeed, offenders ‘construct criminal opportunity by comparing recently formulated understandings [against] developing events and adjusting situations to make events and understanding correspond’ (Hochstetler 2001: 747, 756). By definition, uncertain events rarely occur in predictable frequencies, but emergent cues can be recognized, processed and manipulated for productive ends. Serendipity hinges on this curious combination of agency and constraint. When action and receptivity interact in such a way, favourable outcomes result from unexpected and even negative events.

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