

Decision Processes Colloquia

Monday, December 1, 2025

Where: JMHH G50

When: 12:00 – 1:20 pm

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Why luck that builds merit is deemed unfair, but nevertheless rewarded

ABSTRACT:

Many forms of luck shape life outcomes, often by creating opportunities to develop “merit” (e.g., skills, academic preparation). People generally view allocating rewards based on luck as unfair, but see merit-based allocation as fair. What is less clear is how they judge fairness when merit itself is partly the product of luck. In a series of studies, I examine how people evaluate candidates who differ in whether, and how, luck contributed to their performance. I find a gap between what people say is fair and what they choose. Selecting candidates who gained merit through luck is judged less fair than selecting candidates who “just” have merit (with no salient role for luck), but more fair than selecting candidates who are merely lucky. Yet when making choices, people select high performers whose merit was luck-enabled nearly as often as high performers whose merit appears independent of luck. These findings help explain how people can see inequalities as unfair while still making decisions that perpetuate them, with implications for selection and broader debates about meritocracy.

