

INTERNATIONAL AND INTERDISCIPLINARY SEMINARS

The role of luck in educational attainment

Fabrizio Bernardi

UNED - Madrid

Chair

Gabriele Ballarino (NASP - University of Milan)

Discussant

Emmanuele Pavolini (NASP—University of Milan)

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Abstract

Luck is an under-theorized concept in sociology with great explanatory potential. Our theoretical analysis draws on a mature philosophical literature to identify three forms of luck, two of which sociologists have strong research traditions on without calling it luck - constitutive and circumstantial luck - while a third form - chancy luck - is rarely investigated. Our empirical analysis seeks to understand whether chancy luck plays a role of significance in the explanation of an achievement outcome of central concern to sociologists: educational attainment. Because luck is not systematically measured in existing panel surveys or register data, we sought to identify credible retrospective accounts of chance events of great consequence in self-reported life histories. To this end we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 69 PhD students and postdocs at a prestigious European university, oversampling individuals from parents without a college degree. Three results stand out. First, our interviewees understand luck in ways largely in line with the three types distinguished in philosophical theory. Second, from inductive examination emerges a typology that distinguishes three subcategories of chancy luck with distinct generating mechanisms: institutional luck (randomness created by formal rules), coincidental luck (luck produced by the unanticipated intersection of two life trajectories or sequences of events), and indeterministic luck (luck determined by chaotic processes). Third, especially first-generation students describe instances of chancy luck with highly divergent counterfactual life trajectories. Together these results suggest that luck can be effectively theorized, measured, and incorporated in the systematic explanation of individual life outcomes.

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