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A Sociology of Luck

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Abstract

Sociology has been curiously silent about the concept of luck. The present article argues that this omission is, in fact, an oversight: An explicit and systematic engagement with luck provides a more accurate portrayal of the social world, opens potentially rich veins of empirical and theoretical inquiry, and offers a compelling alternative for challenging dominant meritocratic frames about inequality and the distribution of rewards. This article develops a framework for studying luck, first by proposing a working definition of luck, examining why sociology has ignored luck in the past, and making the case for the value of including luck in sociology's conceptual repertoire. The article then demonstrates the fertile research potential of studying luck by identifying a host of research questions and hypotheses pertaining to the social construction of luck, the real effects of luck, and theoretical interventions related to luck. It concludes by highlighting the distinctive contributions sociology can make to the growing interdisciplinary interest in this topic.

Keywords

luck, inequality, culture, meritocracy, chance

> *I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.*
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> *For man knoweth not his time; as the fishes that are taken in an evil net, and as the birds are caught in the snare; so are the sons of men snared in an evil time, when it falleth suddenly upon them.* – **Ecclesiastes 9:11–12**
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> *Patience, and shuffle the cards.* – **Don Quixote**

Luck has become a popular topic of debate in both the media (e.g., Dreifus 2018; Illing 2018; Roberts 2018) and academic books written for general audiences (e.g., Frank 2016; Kaplan and Marsh 2018; Mounk 2017). Grappling with the degree of inequality in the United States, authors have raised questions about how much credit or blame we deserve for what we achieve, how people perceive luck, and the extent of influence that random events and

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luck have on our lives. The general thrust of these pieces is that recognizing the role luck plays in individual outcomes is an important potential counter to dogmatic meritocratic beliefs.

These questions surrounding luck would appear to be of keen interest to sociologists, and it would be natural to imagine sociology playing a central part in these debates. Sociology, however, has been almost completely silent about luck, essentially ignoring the concept as well as its influence on social processes and outcomes. Just as the study of religion was once dismissed because its subject matter consisted of "the world of mystery, the unknowable, or the incomprehensible" (Durkheim [1912] 1995:22), the study of luck has been discounted—sometimes explicitly but most often implicitly—by turns as incomprehensible, inconsequential, or unreal.

In this article, I argue for the merits of a more purposeful sociological treatment of luck, contending that luck is real, luck is consequential, and luck can be studied systematically. I make the case that previous dismissals of luck have led sociology to overlook a ubiquitous and meaningful social phenomenon, one that prompts fruitful research questions about our social world and, especially, the inequality that characterizes it. In addition, by laying out a research agenda for the study of luck, this work shows that sociology is positioned to make distinctive contributions to broad discussions about the influence of luck. A sociology of luck has the potential to generate empirical knowledge about how luck is perceived, used, and framed that will both inform and expand on the insights of other fields.

More generally, the article raises the issue of whether sociology's reluctance to engage with the concept of luck affects how the field portrays the causes of inequality and the mechanisms by which inequality is reproduced. Identifying the structural bases of inequality is sociology's hallmark counterargument to those who assert that merit and hard work are the sole determinants of success. It is worth considering, however, if sociology's disregard of luck has led to a missed opportunity for a second, complementary front in this debate. I contend that a more purposeful study of luck offers another framework for questioning orthodox meritocracy and its commitments to responsibility and choice; if sociology does not acknowledge luck and its effects, it forecloses a productive avenue of critique.

Because little consideration has been given to the concept of luck, this article casts a wide net, aiming to encourage sociologists to give the idea of luck more rigorous analytic attention and to think more systematically about luck's role in social life. To do this, the article lays the groundwork for including luck in sociology's conceptual repertoire: It discusses what luck is, the challenges facing the study of luck, how luck might be studied productively, and why it is useful for sociology to do so. The cost of this broad approach is that some avenues of inquiry are not pursued to their end. But this cost is, I hope, outweighed by the benefit of directing attention to the rich field of research that the study of luck opens to us.

LUCK AS A REAL PHENOMENON

Before considering how luck might be studied sociologically, it is necessary to clarify what is meant and not meant here by *luck*, a word that has a variety of formal and informal definitions. The first definition of luck offered by Webster's, for example, is "a *force* that brings good fortune or adversity" (italics added). This definition corresponds to lay understandings that portray luck in a personified form as Lady Luck, Karma, or Fate. It is also related to the view of luck as a characteristic, either good or bad, inherent to particular people or objects (e.g., a rabbit's foot, a t-shirt, a found penny). Although this idea of luck as a force, a conception that often bleeds into the world of the magical, has been a topic of interest for anthropologists (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1937; Sumner 1906), not to mention sports fans, its sociological appeal is limited.

Nor, for that matter, is it useful to conceptualize luck as a simple byproduct of factors that people control. Luck cannot be productively reduced to a trite combination of, for example, hard work and open-mindedness as exemplified in the familiar sayings, "luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity" and "you make your own luck." A useful sociological conception of luck has an existence independent from purposeful actions and cannot be reduced to them.

For the purposes of this article, then, I define a lucky event or occurrence as one that involves chance, is consequential (either beneficial or harmful), and is at least partially outside the control of the person or people affected by it.[1] One key implication of this definition is that it treats luck as a "real" social phenomenon: Luck is not a mysterious, supernatural force but a condition of certain events that can be studied. Our lives, as the philosopher Bernard Williams (1976) wrote, "are saturated with luck." People are constantly subject to events that are outside of their control that have positive or negative effects on their life experiences and life chances. Examples are numerous and far-ranging: A person is born with advantageous genetic endowments; the numbers on a purchased lottery ticket match those chosen in that night's drawing; the untimely death of a high-ranking official sets in motion a vacancy chain that leads to a midlevel manager's unexpected promotion; dense cloud cover over Kokura, Japan, leads to the detonation of an atomic bomb on a secondary target, Nagasaki, instead (Rescher 1995).

These examples point to two additional characteristics of luck that matter for my conceptualization: Luck necessarily involves *consequential* events and an outcome that is at least partially due to chance. In regard to the consequentiality of luck, note that luck does not apply to mundane or negligible chance happenings like an unnoticed autumn leaf landing softly on your coat as you walk to work. Instead, luck only involves events that have a consequence—either good or bad—for the person involved: You are stung by an unseen bee; you drop a glass, but it does not break; or you win a coin flip. Although consequences are necessary for an event to be lucky, it is worth highlighting that even minor or contrived consequences can bring luck into play. Luck is just as easily applied to rolling an 11 to land on Boardwalk in Monopoly or drawing a blank tile in Scrabble as it is to a tree falling on one's house or discovering that a distant relative has died and left you a small fortune. What matters is that the event is consequential in some way.

In regard to chance, events qualify as lucky only if they involve outcomes that are unpredictable and outside of one's immediate control. The flipped coin is in the air, and we cannot control on which side it will land; we cannot control the virus that our child catches at school; we cannot control the tornado that damages our home. Lack of control is a defining characteristic of luck. Events over which we have complete control do not qualify as lucky or unlucky. As I will address in detail in the following, perceptions of probabilities often influence our estimates of luck, and there is often disagreement about how much control obtains in a particular instance; the framing of events in terms of how much control a person has (or is perceived to have) is a key empirical question concerning luck. The key definitional point is that luck always includes an element of chance, but it is not the same as chance. Most basically, luck has a positive or negative valence, whereas chance does not. Luck, in effect, is chance with consequences: It is the difference between rocks randomly plinking down a quincunx at a science museum (chance) and steel balls careening through the brass pins of a pachinko machine for cash prizes (luck).[2]

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON LUCK

Sociology has been conspicuously silent on the concept of luck: There is no literature on luck, there are very few articles that mention the word *luck* in their title or abstract, and only

a handful of articles discuss luck at all. Sociology's relative silence stands out even compared to adjacent disciplines. Although luck is not a core concept in any of these fields, economics (see especially Frank 2016; also see Becker 1981; Friedman 1962), management (Denrell, Fang, and Liu 2015; Liu and de Rond 2016), anthropology (da Col 2018), psychology (Bandura 1982; Teigen 2005), and especially philosophy (Dworkin 2000; Nagel 1976; Pritchard 2005; Williams 1976) have acknowledged its influence and have made some attempt to theorize its role.

Sociology's most famous engagement with the idea of luck, and a clear case of the exception proving the rule, is Christopher Jencks and coauthors' claim in their 1972 book, *Inequality*, that factors traditionally used to explain income inequality—such as family background, educational attainment, and standardized test scores—could only explain about half the variance in income. They then suggested that other factors such as luck and on-the-job competence must account for the rest. About luck, they wrote:

> Income also depends on luck: chance acquaintances who steer you to one line of work rather than another, the range of jobs that happen to be available in a particular community when you are job hunting, the amount of overtime work in your particular plant, whether bad weather destroys your strawberry crop, whether the new superhighway has an exit near your restaurant, and a hundred other unpredictable accidents. . . . In general, we think luck has far more influence on income than successful people admit. (P. 227)

The authors then considered the types of policies that might be instituted to better protect against the vagaries of luck.

The book's discussion of luck encompasses about three pages (seven paragraphs) in a 400-page volume (Jencks et al. 1972). Yet many remember this discussion of luck 45 years after the book's publication at least in part because the claims about luck met with vocal resistance (see Berube 1973; Coleman 1973; Pettigrew 1973). Jencks et al. (1979:306) later called the discussion of luck in *Inequality* one of its "most controversial claims" and tempered the statements about the role luck plays in the production of inequality. The controversy around *Inequality*'s claims about luck is telling, as is the subsequent lack of focus on luck as a meaningful factor in stratification processes.

Other published discussions of luck are difficult to find. With the exception of a recent study (Loveday 2018) demonstrating how one tenuous labor market encourages those who find employment to attribute their success to luck, there is an absence of qualitative studies of luck. Although there are prominent surveys, including the World Values Survey and the General Social Survey, that ask respondents about their perceptions of the causes of inequality and include luck on lists of potential factors to be rated, luck is only discussed in a few articles that analyze these data and, even then, only in passing. A handful of sociologists have included luck in their analyses of data trends (see e.g., McCall 2013:147–51), but once again, these analyses are typically brief and secondary.

Some authors have examined processes closely related to luck as I have defined it here using different terminology. Most famously, Robert Merton wrote extensively on the concept of serendipity and the role it plays in scientific discovery (Merton 1945, 1968b; Merton and Barber 2004). Serendipity, for Merton, refers to "the discovery, by chance or sagacity, of valid results which were not sought for" (Merton 1945:469). Merton used this idea to introduce how unexpected observations, hunches, or anomalous results can lead to new scientific insights, contrasting this process to strictly formal, theory-testing-confirmation conceptions of scientific discovery (Merton 1968b:157–61). Merton and Barber (2004:42) documented

many examples of accidental or lucky discoveries in science (e.g., Fleming's discovery of penicillin, Goodyear's discovery of how to vulcanize rubber, Woehler's synthesis of urea), accidents that are often described in terms of luck.

Comparative historical work that focuses on key events, conjunctures, path dependence, and indeterminacy (see especially Goldstone 1999; Griffin 1993; Mahoney 2000; Sewell 2005) comes closest to addressing the issues I raise related to luck. This rich line of inquiry recognizes that "things could always be otherwise," that specific, often unpredictable events can be transformative and establish new institutionalized patterns of behavior.[3] Recently, for instance, Ermakoff (2015) theorized how historical sociologists might better incorporate contingency into their explanations of social events. Contingencies are often associated with chance or lucky events, such as happenstance or unpredictable conjunctions of action sequences. Ermakoff noted, in an argument similar in spirit to my claims about luck, that "contingency" is often treated as merely a residual category—a category without theorized content—in comparative-historical research (P. 64). He argued that even though contingencies are by definition unpredictable, they can still be subjected to more rigorous analysis: "While we cannot theorize the conjunction of independent series, we can theorize the impact of incidental happenings and the possibility of causal breaks" (P. 68). Aside from its focus on chance events, this work is relevant in its analogous aim to develop more careful theorization around an "untheorizable" phenomenon. I too argue that events that are unpredictable and difficult to measure are worth thinking about systematically.

Although this list is not exhaustive—others surely discuss luck in some capacity in their studies of social processes—it does represent the totality of a concerted search for sociological statements about or studies of luck.[4] As such, it highlights the scarcity of attention luck has received from sociologists. This lack of attention is particularly striking when we consider how common the idea of luck is in everyday social interactions. We wish our friends and acquaintances "good luck," we consistently use luck as a folk explanation for unexpected or surprising turns, and we often invoke luck to assess the fairness of both major and minor outcomes: "I was lucky," "That was an unlucky break," "She is a lucky person." The almost complete absence of sociological discussions of luck, especially given the omnipresence of talk of luck in everyday situations, is puzzling. In the next section, I explore possible explanations for why luck has remained unexplored and undertheorized by sociologists.

WHY NOT STUDY LUCK?

One potential explanation for why sociology has overlooked luck in the past is related to the definitional issues previously discussed. If luck is seen only as a kind of magical power or supernatural force, then it sits safely outside of—or at best on the very edges of—the field's subject matter. It could also be that sociologists have not thought carefully about what luck is and that as a result, the various definitions of luck are conflated so that luck, along with both its sociologically relevant and irrelevant aspects, is dismissed out of hand. Or it might also be an issue of measurement given that it is very difficult to model the effects of luck.[5]

But the absence of luck from sociological discussions appears more deep-rooted than simple definitional elision or conflation. It is not just that luck has been deemed by some as being outside of sociological concern but also that it is viewed as antithetical to a sociological approach to understanding the world. It is seen, like chance, as occupying "a space repugnant to reason" (Hacking 1990:13), as a threat to some of sociology's core methodological and epistemological commitments, and therefore as "taboo" (Mattausch 2003). In its quest to be scientific, much of mainstream sociology has come to focus on causation, attempting to establish, clarify, or debunk relationships between or among variables (see Abend, Petre, and

Sauder 2013). Along these same lines, most also see sociology as primarily concerned with studying the effects of social structures (whether big or small) and identifying consistent patterns of action. Taking luck seriously would seem to betray all of these goals: Its association with the randomness of social life further (and perhaps hopelessly) complicates already complicated causal conceptualizations and appears to highlight nonpatterned aspects of our social world that structural explanations are not well suited to account for.[6]

Hacking (1990) argued that one of social science's motivating goals is to tame chance by collecting quantitative data that allow people to see, through the use of probabilistic theory, regularities at collective levels of analysis despite unpredictable events at individual levels. Similarly, one of sociology's implicit aims is to tame luck. Examinations of collectives and their patterns are often designed to debunk the role of luck, to show where it does not exist even in places where many believe that it does. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Granovetter's (1974) work on finding employment. Respondents often noted their luck in stumbling across jobs that friends or family told them about. Granovetter, however, showed that these "lucky breaks" are actually better understood as products of social networks (see also Goldthorpe 2015:46).[7] This type of explaining away of luck is not uncommon. In his study of the causes of unequal outcomes among siblings, for instance, Conley (2004) contended that much of what some might define as luck in determining the success of children is actually the product of unexamined factors. He wrote, "A truly random roll of the dice it is not" (P. 27).

The default approach to luck, then, is to treat it as something that should be explained away rather than studied. According to this view, the job of sociologists is to take events that people see as lucky or unlucky and then explore the actual social causes or processes that can account for these outcomes. The job, in a sense, is to render the world less mysterious, to reveal the sleights of hand that only make it appear as though a rabbit was pulled from an empty hat, that a woman was sawed in two. When we cannot develop such accounts, we bracket the idea of luck—often as an error term in our equations—and await the empirical or methodological advances that will help us to demystify even more.[8]

The problem with this approach is not the effort to demystify—this is inarguably one of the primary goals of the field—but is instead in consolidating under the name of luck potential factors that investigators forgot to ask about, could not measure, or did not think to code. This view, usually left unsaid, is sometimes made explicit, as it was by Palloni (2006:599) when he wrote, "I use the word luck to refer mostly to unmeasured or badly measured characteristics (residual variance) and just pure random forces." Treating luck in this way—like an explanatory junk drawer—makes some sense when thinking about modeling behavior, but we miss something crucial when we do not attempt to parse what luck is or specify its role in social life. We risk overlooking the actual influence of luck if we simply lump luck in with everything else we are unable to account for.

This dismissal of luck, however, is not simply attributable to methodological decisions made by individual researchers; it is also an unintended product of sociology's commitment to a model of science derived from classical physics (Lieberson and Lynn 2002). Luck does not fit easily into this model's emphases on prediction, identifiable connections between cause and effect, and deduction from theory.[9] If we adopt such a deterministic view of the social world, luck truly does belong in the error term. But, as Lieberson and Lynn (2002) eloquently argued, there are alternative epistemological models of scientific inquiry, models less focused on prediction, that are potentially more effective for the study of social processes. In particular, they argue that an evolutionary model, with its emphasis on mechanism and explanation (as opposed to prediction), is better suited to the study of a fluid, complex, and uncertain social world. This model would also be better equipped to account for the role of luck and other types of chance events.[10] Lieberson and Lynn's argument highlights how

sociology's tendency to dismiss luck runs deep into the field's epistemological underpinnings, possibly discouraging the study of a concept that could shed light on important social processes. It also demonstrates that different conceptualizations of how social processes should be understood would change the field's approach to lucky events.

Finally, it is worth noting that the roots of sociology's resistance to luck may run deeper still. The methodological commitments discussed previously are themselves grounded in modernist notions of rationality and predictability. Uncertainty, unpredictability, and randomness pose uncomfortable challenges to these beliefs. Traditionally, luck has been associated with the unease that surrounds such uncertainty, the recognition that it is possible to be thwarted by things we cannot predict or control no matter how carefully we plan. In *Folkways*, for example, William Graham Sumner (1906) described how some believed that demons, always ready to wreak havoc on the best-laid plans, were the source of lucky and unlucky events. In response, specific rituals (e.g., saying "bless you" after a sneeze or ringing bells and wearing veils at weddings) emerged as attempts to stave off demons and exert some control over luck and sudden changes in fortune.

As social scientists, we have our own demons circling the edges of our enlightenment campfire, reminding us that there are aspects of social processes that we will never be able to account for, let alone predict; that comprehensive understanding is beyond our methodological capabilities; that our best efforts, too, will not necessarily be properly rewarded. Recognizing the role of luck draws attention to the limits of our methods and threatens to delegitimate our claims to scientific authority that at times feel tenuous. Imperiled by these ghosts of the unexplainable, we too are tempted to turn to our own form of demonology as we transform our methods into rituals—trusting their ability to capture all aspects of the social world, dismissing concepts for which they cannot account, and relegating what we cannot measure to the black hole of the error term.[11]

WHY STUDY LUCK

Having considered factors that might contribute to sociology ignoring the phenomenon of luck, we can now examine arguments for why studying luck is worthwhile: What is gained? What kinds of insights might be generated through luck's study? What avenues are foreclosed if we avoid discussion of it?

One argument for studying luck is that it is a concept people regularly use to make sense of their own and others' achievements, failures, life chances, and trajectories. When discussing their biographies, for example, it is common for people to mention good or bad luck as they explain their accomplishments or the turning points in their lives. Max Weber (1948:132) provided a memorable example in "Science as a Vocation" when he acknowledged the role of luck in academic success in general and his own career in particular:

> I know of hardly any career on earth where chance plays such a role. I may say so all the more since I personally owe it to some mere accidents that during my very early years I was appointed to a full professorship in a discipline in which men of my generation undoubtedly had achieved more than I had. And, indeed, I fancy, on the basis of my experience, that I have a sharp eye for the undeserved fate of the many whom accident has cast in the opposite direction and who within this selective apparatus in spite of all their ability do not attain the positions that are due to them.

Even if we believe that accounts such as these are naïve or that luck is nothing more than a folk concept—that people are, say, misattributing outcomes to luck when they are in fact caused by hidden structural patterns—it is still valuable to investigate if, how, and when

individuals employ the idea of luck to understand their everyday lives and their social world. Social constructions, of course, can have real consequences (Thomas and Thomas 1928). And widespread belief in luck makes it—like other topics related to empirically unverified phenomena such as religion (à la Durkheim), ghosts (Waskul and Waskul 2016), or magic (Webster 1948)—of sociological interest. Sociological research has not thoroughly investigated how people define luck, to what types of situations they apply luck, or whether people in different social positions use luck differently. There is also a lack of understanding of the metaphorical significance of luck, the cultural concerns it speaks to, and the anxieties it might symbolize. These are all legitimate sociological questions, and answers to them would enrich our understanding of the social world.

Luck, however, is more than a folk concept. It is a real phenomenon in that people are subject to consequential chance events that are outside of their control. These events have the potential to affect individual outcomes, and it is possible that the effects of these events are systematically conditioned by social position. As such, a second argument for studying luck focuses on what is lost when we exclude luck from our conceptual vocabulary. When sociology ignores the existence of luck or treats luck as if it has no analytic value, it affects both how inequality is studied within sociology and how the discipline portrays inequality to the public. Not only would the recognition of luck offer a more accurate and comprehensive depiction of stratification processes, but it would also provide a complementary cognitive frame for understanding the origins of and contributors to unequal outcomes. Ignoring the role of luck in these outcomes forecloses one potential argument against the meritocratic ideology that is dominant in the United States. If sociology fails to acknowledge the importance of luck (however important we determine this importance to be) or offer luck as a framework for understanding differential outcomes, meritocratic frames stand on firmer ground.

An example from literature helps to illustrate this point (both the excerpt and interpretation are taken from Wohl 1961:502):

> Frank, a poor hard-working messenger, happens to capture a thief and get a reward. "Frank did not exaggerate his own merits in the matter. . . . He felt that it was largely due to luck that he had been the means of capturing the bond robber. However, it is precisely to such lucky chances that men are often indebted for their advancement."

This passage is from a story, "Frank the Bond Boy," by Horatio Alger. It mirrors the themes of most of Alger's stories. Farm boys come to the city to save the family farm and work at demeaning and unrewarding jobs until they catch a break (save a drowning child, rein in a careening carriage, capture a thief) to get in the good graces of a rich benefactor. The benefactor then gives them a job (as well as a reward) and the opportunity to apply their work ethic to more permanent success. The rewards earned by the protagonists are not the result of virtue, Wohl (1961:503) argued, "but rather unpredictable and unearnable luck."

Now consider our popular conceptions of these "rags-to-riches" heroes: boys pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, striving, and succeeding through hard work, gumption, and pluck. The reception of Alger, what people have taken away from his stories, is much different from what is actually in the text. Aspects of luck have been scrubbed away and replaced with an exclusive focus on hard work and persistence. The frame of luck has been almost completely replaced by a frame of merit.

Sociology, by scrubbing luck from the story of inequality in its own way and for its own reasons, risks contributing to a similar bias about reasons for success. Ignoring luck makes it easier to move the focus of debates about inequality from large-scale economic trends and

historical forces to explanations centered around individual choice and responsibility (see Mounk 2017). In what ways explicit discussions of luck might affect the meritocratic frames is an open question, but it is a question deserving of more consideration.

This leads to a third, related argument for studying luck: The acknowledgment of the influence of luck on life chances and life outcomes could affect the policies promoted to address inequality. One of the consequences of an emphasis on meritocracy is that personal responsibility and personal control tend to become conflated and factors outside of individual control, like luck, are not considered across a wide variety of social welfare programs and policies. Although it might be expected that a personal responsibility narrative would dominate discussions of an issue like adult poverty, it is notable that this strict meritocratic frame also dictates policies for issues that are much more difficult to associate with personal control, such as unemployment and even long-term care. It is striking that long-term care claims, many of which are the result of lucky events, like an accident (Campbell 2014) or illness (Levitsky 2014), are not exempted from this personal responsibility model. U.S. policies tend to conflate the difference between what the moral philosopher Ronald Dworkin (2000) called option luck (luck associated with a choice made or a chance purposefully taken, like betting on a horse) and brute luck (luck not associated with choices made by an individual, like being struck by a meteor). They err on the side of treating all of these events as equivalents: Individuals are responsible for their own misfortunes.

A more explicit recognition of the role of luck in individual outcomes could, in tandem with arguments about the structural causes of inequality, help change or at least soften the harshest edges of the meritocratic frame. We could acknowledge that accidents and illness lead to the need for long-term care, large-scale economic changes create unemployment, and unexpected events contribute to the poverty of some individuals. A competing or complementary framework, one that concedes that events outside our control play a role in our successes and failures, is another necessary balance to dominant meritocratic beliefs.

Recognizing the role of luck in life outcomes has implications for economic policy as well. Robert Frank (2016) argued that successful people, especially the super-rich, resist acknowledging the role that luck plays in their success. Focusing on their own efforts and hard work, they fail to appreciate the environmental contexts, like the era and place of their birth, that made their success possible. This failure to recognize luck, Frank contended, makes us less likely to contribute to the infrastructures and environments that provide us with the opportunities to be successful (to have the chance to be lucky) in the first place. Recognizing the role of luck in outcomes would encourage us to enact different types of tax policies. Frank, for example, advocated for a progressive consumption tax that would produce more revenue for infrastructures that would benefit everyone.

Taken together, these various lines of argument point to the potential value of acknowledging the role of luck in our collective successes and failures. Balancing frames based on hard work and merit with recognition of factors external to individual control could, as Frank (2016) suggested, lead to support for very different kinds of social policies. If sociology treats luck as unimportant—without empirical studies examining, for example, how people perceive luck, the contextual factors that shape these perceptions, the effects of luck on life trajectories—there is no basis for this potential competitor to the dominant meritocratic framework.

THE STUDY OF LUCK

In the previous section, I argued for the potential benefits for thinking about luck sociologically, especially when we consider issues of inequality. In this section, I elaborate on these

arguments by detailing specific types of research questions, approaches, and theoretical interventions that would constitute a sociology of luck. These research questions not only open new avenues of investigation for sociology but also demonstrate the distinctive contributions that sociology can make to broader academic and public conversations on this topic.

The Social Construction of Luck

An initial step in developing a better sociological understanding of luck is to study the basic facts of how people perceive luck and its influence on social outcomes. These perceptions have meaningful consequences for how people understand inequality and how to address it. There is a wide variety of assumptions, both popular and scholarly, pertaining to people's beliefs about luck: In the United States, people do not believe that luck plays an important role in success or failure; positive outcomes are attributed to personal qualities and negative outcomes to luck; unsuccessful people believe in luck more than successful people; attributing outcomes to luck precludes belief in hard work. Although some of these claims are compelling and may be true, there is scant empirical evidence to support them and virtually no research that provides context or nuance to these broad assertions.[12]

Research about luck, then, could start by asking foundational questions. Do people believe in luck? How do they define it? Do they see it as a consequential factor in their own and others' successes and failures? Next, it would be valuable to explore how the answers to these questions vary by social position and individual characteristics. Do perceptions of luck, for example, vary if you are employed or unemployed, a Republican or Democrat, sick or healthy, an engineer or an insurance agent, a Protestant or atheist, a veteran or nonveteran?

This approach, most amenable to in-depth interviews or experimental studies, would provide basic ideas about how people perceive luck, generate hypotheses about luck, and point to methodological strategies for studying it. An exploratory study of luck, for example, asked respondents a few basic questions about their most recent and most consequential instances of both good and bad luck. A surprising number of people, more than one-third of the 60 respondents, either refused to answer the questions or qualified their answers because they believed "there is no such thing as luck." Aside from the number of people who made this claim, the variety of reasons given for not believing in luck was instructive. For some, it is because luck violates religious ideas about providence and God's omnipotence. For others, luck is associated with magic and the supernatural and so violates a rational approach to the world. Still others are firmly committed to the idea that "you make your own luck," viewing luck as nothing more than a byproduct of effort.

Variations in perceptions and influence of luck are themselves of sociological interest. What are the characteristics of the people who hold these beliefs? What other beliefs are beliefs in luck associated with? Are these beliefs dependent on context? Are these beliefs consistent across time and life events? A better understanding of these variations not only sheds new light on how people view their social positions and achievements, but it also lays the groundwork for more effective research using other methods. Surveys are well suited to demonstrate these variations, but there are very few surveys that include detailed questions about luck. Complicating the issue further, those surveys that do explicitly ask about luck contrast luck with other ideas about getting ahead, most often directly contrasting luck with the role of hard work.[13] The opposition between luck and hard work, however, makes an assumption about how people view the world (that they see luck and hard work as mutually exclusive) that has little backing evidence. A closer examination of the association between luck and hard work demonstrates a much more nuanced relationship. Espy (2018) used belief network analysis of survey data to show that there is no clear pattern of association

between these two factors. Nearly *everyone* in this U.S. sample believed that hard work is important to success, but belief in the importance of luck varied by different group characteristics. As this example suggests, learning more about how people perceive the influence of luck on their lives would lead to more informed and useful survey questions about whether people believe in luck at all; to what types of situations they apply luck; whether luck is related (positively or negatively) to beliefs about providence, randomness, or determinism; and how influential luck is on outcomes independent of beliefs about hard work.

Asking foundational questions about how people perceive luck also paves the way for experimental studies of the effects that these beliefs might have on individual decision-making and behavior. For example, one's belief in luck could influence one's motivation and effort. Experiments could test how variations in whether one sees an accomplishment as a product of either luck or skill affect both performance and persistence on repeated tasks. Experiments would be similarly effective for studying the types of cues that encourage people to recognize the role of luck in particular outcomes, the types of issues that people are more or less apt to apply explanations of luck to, and a wide variety of other questions concerning the relationship between belief and luck.

The Framing of Luck. This last set of study ideas foreshadows a second component of the social construction of luck: how and when we can legitimately frame events in terms of luck or invoke luck as an influential factor in outcomes. When is it acceptable to attribute outcomes to luck? Are there certain areas of activity that luck can and cannot be applied to? Is luck most often applied to less consequential events (i.e., games as opposed to job interviews)? Consequential but rare events (e.g., fatal accidents or lottery wins)? How might these patterns change over time and vary by social group?

The definition of a lucky event always involves framing work, and whether an event can be characterized in terms of luck depends on our beliefs about what does and does not lie within the actor's control.[14] The degree of control involved in any particular event can almost always be debated, and therefore what we define as luck is contextual and depends on one's perspective.[15] "He was born on third base and thinks he hit a triple" illustrates how what one person sees as luck another may see in terms of effort and achievement. This same sort of debate is possible in almost any situation in which luck is invoked. Nearly every event can be framed in terms of either luck or control, depending on who is doing the framing and their interests: hitting a deer with your car, winning a sports championship, making an important scientific discovery, or even selecting winning lottery numbers.[16,17] And because it is very difficult to parse out whether and how much control an individual has in a given situation, the question of how events are framed is essential.

This tension between luck and control and how it is negotiated, then, is crucial to our understanding of what is legitimately defined as luck. And the recognition of this tension points the way toward promising avenues of sociological inquiry. How do we negotiate the framing of luck versus control? Who does the framing, and how does it take place? What situational factors determine when claims about luck are accepted or rejected? The importance of these questions becomes clear when we move away from relatively ephemeral examples of jump shots and lottery numbers to systemic issues about stratification and inequality, especially how we frame the deservedness or undeservedness of the rich and the poor.[18]

A focus on framing also leads us to examine the contexts in which people are more or less likely to include luck as a consideration. A large-scale analysis of newspaper text, for instance, would provide comparative information about how often and in what ways luck is applied to different realms of activity like economic outcomes, politics, personal relationships, health,

and sports. Is it more acceptable to invoke luck when discussing health than it is when discussing poverty? Are we more apt to acknowledge the role of luck in discussions of games and sports than in competitions over economic resources?

A similar approach might be taken to study how major changes or endogenous shocks affect the invocation of luck. For example, one could investigate if and how CEOs mention luck and chance in their reports to stakeholders before and after the Great Recession to gain insight into how unpredictable events change rhetoric about control and luck. Similarly, one could study the differences in how often and in what ways luck (or its opposite, control) was invoked publicly before and after a major natural disaster.

This line of inquiry points toward the idea that social context and history shape perceptions of luck and how it is framed. This intuition is supported by survey data that show large cross-national differences in beliefs about the role that luck plays in determining success or failure as well as other cross-national qualitative work. Sharone's (2014) comparison of the attitudes of unemployed workers in the United States and Israel, for instance, showed that the unemployed in the United States primarily attributed their employment status to personal failure, whereas Israeli subjects were much more likely to cite factors outside their control, including luck, when discussing reasons for their unemployment. These various pieces of evidence all indicate how specific historical circumstances and cultural beliefs can influence the framing of events in terms of luck and control.

These differences in framing exist not only cross-nationally but also in the same settings over time. Lears's (2003) study of the complicated and intertwined history of luck, gambling, and religion in the United States provided historical evidence of particular periods, such as during major wars or economic booms, in which people were more likely to acknowledge the role of luck in their successes or failures. This analysis suggests that luck becomes more salient during social upheaval and when we are made aware of how large historical forces shape our lives.

Questions about the framing of luck can be applied to many individual-level and interactional processes as well. In their study of the concept of serendipity and how it is used in science, Merton and Barber (2004:171) documented debates about the relative role of luck and merit (defined as persistence, skill, or design) in accidental discoveries. The authors documented the tendency in these debates to see good luck as enhancing reputation if the person is seen as deserving ("It is prepared minds who are able to benefit from luck, and to preparedness may be linked such qualities as alertness, flexibility, courage, and assiduity") and as damaging reputation if the person is deemed undeserving ("the factor of luck is stressed, and it is coupled with such qualities as passivity, irresponsibility, pretension, and unreliability. If the individual succeeded, it is alleged, it was by luck alone, luck which he had no reason to expect, which he had no right to take credit for, and which will not come his way again"). These divisions not only help us see what is at stake in debates over the role luck plays in achievement but also how individual characteristics might shape the conclusions we draw from a person who experiences good or bad luck. Applying this to perceptions of inequality, it is reasonable to hypothesize that interpretations of a lucky event might well be swayed by a person's race, gender, or economic standing.

Likewise, it is valuable to explore how individual attributes or social positions affect how willing people are to see luck as an influential aspect of social outcomes. For example, do people in occupational groups with different types of exposure to chance events vary in their propensity to attribute events to luck? Do insurance agents frame events differently than engineers, cancer caregivers differently than actuaries? A microlevel approach would also highlight how context and point of view matter for the framing of luck. It is not uncommon for people who experience negative events to, paradoxically, note how lucky they are: the

residents of a burned-down house who say they are lucky because no one was seriously injured; persons diagnosed with cancer point out that they are lucky that the tumor was found early on.[19] This "silver lining effect" draws our attention to the frames within frames, situations that make people consider the role of luck in ways that they usually do not. There is also the phenomenon of recognizing luck in nonevents as well as events. A recent study on consent practices, for instance, documented how some women cite luck as the main reason why they have not experienced sexual violence or assault despite the high frequency with which these events occur (Rittenhour 2018). In this way, luck may be used to explain what did not happen but could have as well as events that did happen.

All of these considerations raise questions about how perceptions and interpretations of luck are influenced by contextual factors such as culture, structural position, and recent experiences.[20] Sociological research might also consider how views about luck are dependent both on perspective and level of analysis. Perspective is important in that what is under one individual's control and is a purposeful decision can be a purely lucky event for another: On the one side, people can choose whether they drive while inebriated, secretly leave a distant relative a fortune in their will, or drop an anvil out of a twentieth floor window; but for the victims at the receiving end of these accidents of fate, there is no control, only chance events with potentially extreme consequences. Level of analysis is important in a parallel way because what is (or seems like) luck on an individual level—suddenly finding a good job or developing a disease—may look patterned when viewed from either higher levels of analysis (as the Granovetter [1974] and Bearman [2005) studies showed) *or* lower ones (e.g., focusing on predictable cellular mutations in the case of disease).

Taken together, these research questions outline one plank of a research program about luck. This "social construction of luck" approach focuses on perceptions of luck and the frames in which luck can be used effectively, exploring how people perceive luck, how these perceptions vary by social position, the types of events luck can be legitimately applied to, and how contextual factors influence the legitimacy of luck claims. Taking up these questions lays the foundation for a more critical approach to luck.

The Real Effects of Luck

A more challenging approach to the study of luck is to try to determine the real effects that luck has on outcomes and to specify how the effects of luck might contribute to inequality. The challenge here derives primarily from the difficulty of measuring the actual impact of lucky events. We may identify situations in which we are fairly certain that luck has significant effects—think here of research on the Matthew effect (Merton 1968a) and cumulative advantage (e.g., DiPrete and Eirich 2006)[21]—but it is very difficult to isolate the effects of luck from other unmeasured factors; we cannot accurately estimate counterfactuals. We find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of acknowledging that lucky events do occur and do influence outcomes but struggling to specify exactly when and how luck matters. How might sociology provide insight into the effects of luck?

Comparative-historical research that focuses on eventful analysis, path dependence, and the contingency of historical processes (see e.g., Ermakoff 2015; Kimeldorf 1988; Mahoney 2000; Paige 1999; Sewell 2005) offers compelling models for conceptualizing luck's effects. This body of work draws attention to the role that randomness and incidental events *can* play during key junctures (see especially Ermakoff 2008, 2010) and in doing so, specifies contextual factors that influence the ability of luck to influence outcomes and even shape large-scale transformations.[22] Young (1998), for example, employed a game-theoretic approach to model the factors—including the size and correlation of stochastic

shocks—that inhibit or promote institutional change. In effect, this provides insight into the conditions under which institutions are more or less vulnerable to chance events. Likewise, Ermakoff's (2010) close analysis of collective conjunctures illustrated how historical analysis can pinpoint the times and places when chance events can be most influential. In high-leverage events characterized by indeterminacy, "happenings that in other circumstances would remain insignificant—an absence, a silence, a few words stated on the spot, or even a lapse—can have decisive consequences" (Ermakoff 2010:106). This approach shows how careful scrutiny of past accounts can provide a better understanding of when luck can matter and the effects it can produce.

Experiments and simulations also offer compelling opportunities to capture the real effects of luck. Salganik, Dodds, and Watts's (2006) experimental music market demonstrates the potential of this approach. They found that when asked to evaluate songs of roughly equal quality, people are much more likely to rate songs highly if they see that others had done so before them. Interpreted within a framework of luck, this implies that lucky events—in this case, a favorable or unfavorable distribution of initial raters' preferences—can have a great deal of influence on success or failure as these self-perpetuating dynamics are set into motion. Frank (2016:65–66) used simulations to examine the effect of luck from a different perspective, estimating the influence of luck in winner-take-all markets. He found that even if luck only constitutes a very small percentage of performance compared to ability and effort (2 percent vs. 98 percent), it still plays a decisive role in determining who comes out on top. Winners consistently scored high on luck, and those who won were rarely (only 21.9 percent of the time) those who scored highest on ability and effort.

The interaction of luck and inequality is also challenging to document. Although it is a reasonable conjecture that those with more resources are better positioned to overcome unlucky events or take advantage of lucky ones, these differential effects are hard to show. Qualitative studies of those without social resources provide riveting accounts of disastrous long-term effects that followed from particular unlucky events. Desmond (2016), to cite a well-known case, described a series of events that begins with a young boy hitting a passing car with a snowball. The driver of the car chases the boy back to his home, breaks the door in, threatens the family, and leaves. The damage done to the door, however, provides a justification for the landlord to evict the family. The family subsequently struggles to find adequate housing, moving from one insecure situation to another until social services eventually breaks the family apart.[23]

Stories like this cannot demonstrate the causal importance of luck. We do not know, for example, if each link in the narrative account necessarily followed the previous one because of the snowball. The eviction may have been inevitable if the landlord were waiting for the next best reason to start the legal process. But these types of stories do draw our attention to the potential role of luck in contributing to and reinforcing present inequalities.[24] Unexpected events leading to negative spirals like this one can play out in many different fashions: A child's sickness leads to the loss of a job, a fall on the ice causes a debilitating physical injury, an uninsured driver totals one's car in an accident. One can also imagine that these same unlucky events would be less likely to create such interactional cascades for those in the middle and upper classes who have access to stable jobs, reliable social networks, insurance, and savings. It is likely that those who are better off not only have more wealth and better opportunities but also are in a position to protect themselves from unexpected random events—they are able to, in effect, insure themselves against many types of bad luck. Conversely, those in advantageous social positions may also be able to take better advantage of good luck than those who are disadvantaged. An unanticipated promotion or inheritance

might well be orders of magnitude larger for those who are already better off because the relative rewards could be much larger.

It is challenging to provide direct evidence of these differential effects of luck. Ethnographic work is suggestive, but it cannot offer the sort of direct comparisons or counterfactuals that would firmly establish the existence and extent of these effects. Another possibility would be to take advantage of natural experiments to examine if and how large-scale exogenous incidents produce different types of outcomes for people in different social positions. If wide-reaching events, like the implementation of a military draft (Conley and Heerwig 2012) or a natural disaster (Torche 2011), were framed in terms of luck for those subject to them, we could use these as tests of whether these instances of luck produced differential effects across social categories. Furthermore, this approach could provide insight into how some people are able to buffer themselves from bad luck and what the limits of this ability to buffer might be. For example, it is reasonable to hypothesize that those with privilege are better able to protect themselves from a war and its ensuing draft than they are from the immediate physical stress reactions of an earthquake.

These ideas about how the effects of luck might be measured are cursory and indicate the difficulty of the task. Examining how the practical influence of luck is assessed in other realms may provide some guidance on developing measures. Those who do advanced statistical analysis in baseball, for instance, have developed a metric called "cluster luck" that considers the impact of randomness—in this case, the clumping of hits or outs—on team success. This analysis of sports statistics draws our attention to the significance of order effects and timing in determining long-term outcomes. A lucky success early in one's career (a borderline article is randomly assigned sympathetic reviewers and is accepted, a fellowship is received after another applicant turns it down, a rare job opens up in one's particular area of expertise) will likely be much more consequential than the same fortunate event at the end of one's career.[25] Finding outcomes in which the impact of order effects or "being in the right place at the right time" are discernible would be one way to gain insight into the real effects of luck.

Potential Theoretical Implications

To this point, I have detailed the empirical questions that a focus on luck and its effects would raise. In this section, I outline how luck might be used as a conceptual tool that could help sociologists rethink existing theoretical frameworks and dichotomies. Although this discussion can only be suggestive in this context, I propose that the explicit consideration of luck in relationship to certain long-standing debates provokes new lines of questioning and has the potential to provide new perspectives on established frameworks.

Take, for example, the familiar, sticky debates about structure and agency. Sociologists have long recognized that too much emphasis on structural explanations could lead to an overly deterministic view of the social world. As Sewell (1992:2) explained, an overreliance on structural accounts leads to "a far too rigid causal determinism in social life" and implies a degree of stability that "makes dealing with change awkward." The answer to this dilemma has been to counter structure with the idea of agency. Although agency has been defined in a number of different ways—"maintaining an elusive, albeit resonant vagueness" according to Emirbayer and Mische (1998)—most analysts emphasize the ability of actors to exert influence over and thus change the social structures that constrain them.[26] Agency is often portrayed as the natural opposite of structure and sometimes even as a panacea, thwarting deterministic pressures as it actively applies, modifies, and redefines existing structures. The problem with this portrayal is not the claim that agency does these things—it does—but that

the discussion ends here. The connotation, as well-worn references to "structure versus agency" imply, is that agency is the only meaningful countervailing force to structural determinism.

Here is the type of theoretical debate for which an explicit consideration of luck could be productive. Where might ideas about luck enter into deliberations about structure and agency? How might ideas about luck modify how we think about this debate and how we frame our answers to it? One way to begin to think about how luck interacts with structure and agency is through exogenous events that affect structure, agency, and the interaction between the two. Large-scale shocks, like destructive storms or the emergence and spread of a new virus, offer clear examples. They are unpredictable in their scope and location and have the capability to transform all types of social structures—from the physical characteristics of the affected cities to the political norms surrounding responsiveness and cooperation to general scripts about science and knowledge. External, chance factors can break down existing structures, make them vulnerable, or render them obsolete. In doing so, they also open opportunities for new forms of agency (e.g., social movements or policy changes) as actors are forced to reconsider the assumptions and architecture of previously institutionalized schemas.

Luck also plays a role in influencing the outcomes of the interactions between structure and agency. Sewell (1992:18), for example, illustrated how the enactment of cultural schemas can have unpredictable effects on the resources that co-constitute structure. The same enactments—marriage, financial investment, career choice, or crop-planting decisions—can lead to very different resource outcomes instead of automatically reproducing existing structural arrangements. Luck, in the form of, say, the accidental death of a spouse, the destruction of a market or a crop by weather, or a large-scale financial crisis, influences these variations and plays a role in subsequent structural changes. In these cases, luck is a third, independent factor that interacts with structure and agency. Here, taking luck into account offers a more complete portrayal of how structures change.

But, importantly, it is not only through exogenous events that luck has effects. Chance influences the very thoughts and actions of individuals to whom we attribute agency. This insight encourages us to consider to what extent agency and luck intermingle. In his discussion of structural change, Sewell (1992:16–18) pointed out that societies contain a multitude of distinct structures, structures that vary in the logics that motivate them and so also vary in the types of actions individuals are expected to take in relation to them. Crucially, actors can transpose schemas, applying those that are common in one realm to another. It may well be that the happenstance of experiencing the demands of two structures in succession or simultaneously experiencing two or more contradictory structural demands (Sewell 1992:21) is what spurs on new adaptations or the transposition of one set of responses to a different context. Coincidental events, the ordering in which schemas are experienced, or the situational collision of different schemas—all occurrences based in chance—may serve as the basis of creativity and new ideas. To return to the example of a new virus, luck—in the form of flashes of insight from the juxtaposition of previous findings, serendipitous breakthroughs in related fields, or simply the good fortune of having the personnel with particular experiences in the right laboratory on the right day—will almost inevitably play a role in the agentic search for vaccines and treatments. Factors based on luck are interwoven with the attributes that we associate with and sometimes even define as agency.

These examples, admittedly cursory, suggest ways in which lucky events can motivate changes in the structure-agency dynamics and shape the outcomes of these interactions. Consequential chance events are taking place constantly and on many levels of analysis: acting on structures from outside, influencing actors from within, and potentially influencing the outcomes of interactions between structures and agents. An explicit acknowledgment

of luck's potential influence—to consider the interaction of structure, agency, and luck—encourages scholars to at least ask new questions about structure and agency: How do chance events prompt change? How do such events intervene in the reproduction of social structures? At most, it helps free us from some of its most tautological elements.

This is just one example of how a consideration of luck could lead to novel perspectives on existing theoretical debates and frameworks. Taking luck seriously in relation to inequality, for instance, alters how we conceptualize the relationship between inequality and the past (as we consider the lucky factors that contribute to one's current standing), the present (how one's beliefs about luck relate to ideas about the American Dream and upward mobility), and the future (how one imagines or tries to control the opportunities and risks that lie ahead). Or, as management scholars have pointed out, taking luck into account could improve theoretical understanding of managerial success, organizational performance, and normal accidents (Liu and de Rond 2016). The concept of luck, because of its general relevance and because it has essentially been ignored, has great potential as a useful theoretical tool.

CONCLUSION

Weber (1958:271) observed long ago the tendency for people to justify inequality in terms of deservedness:

> The fortunate is seldom satisfied with the fact of being fortunate. Beyond this, he needs to know that he has a *right* to his good fortune. He wants to be convinced that he 'deserves' it, and above all, that he deserves it in comparison with others. He wishes to be allowed the belief that the less fortunate also merely experience his due. Good fortune thus wants to be 'legitimate' fortune.

Weber saw this as a form of theodicy, a psychological need to rectify the religious belief of an omnipotent and all-good god with the existence of suffering in the world. In the United States, beliefs about meritocracy serve a similar function today. Stark inequality is legitimated by deep-seated beliefs about the importance of individual attributes and efforts: hard work, talent, grit, a will to succeed. The narratives built around these beliefs have become naturalized to the point that it is difficult to recognize the role that other factors play in determining why some people have more and some people have less.

Although merit is a determinant of success, it is not the only one. Over a century's worth of sociological research has demonstrated that political and social structures also play a key role in determining life chances. Bourdieu (1986) conceptualized these factors in terms of "accumulated history," using the metaphor of roulette to make the point that we do not all step to the betting table of life with equal odds of winning. Capital, in its various forms and types, tilts the odds—sometimes to an immense degree—in favor of some and against others. This article does not contest the effect of these factors but instead argues that sociology should dedicate purposeful analytic attention to luck as another consequential determinant of unequal outcomes. It proposes that we recognize the ongoing spins of society's roulette wheels as well as the weighted odds of the participants; that we pay more attention to the chance aspects of life chances.

Acknowledging the influence of luck, like uncertainty (Nowotny 2016) or chance (Hacking 1990), helps balance skewed neoliberal narratives about individual efforts and achievement. A sociology of luck provides an alternative basis for contesting meritocratic assumptions about the nature of inequality (e.g., the ties between rewards and deservedness, the necessity of extreme inequality, the "justness" of deserts). There is evidence that simply drawing attention to the existence of luck—encouraging people to recognize the influence of

chance occurrences—challenges dogmatic meritocratic beliefs. For example, those for whom luck is more salient are more supportive of both redistributive policies (Fong 2001) and preferential hiring for those in disadvantaged positions (Wilkins and Wegner 2014). As Frank (2016) suggested, if we can be made more conscious of the ways that luck influences our lives, we may also reconsider the aspects of success and failure that are outside of our control and therefore unearned.

A framework that draws attention to luck could, optimistically, encourage policies that help reduce extreme inequality by focusing attention on the undeserved as well as the deserved aspects of our reward structure. Such a framework would be bolstered by a sociological basis—empirical knowledge about how people perceive the role of luck in their successes and failures, how luck differentially affects people with varying degrees of social resources, and how the structure of economic systems and markets influence the relative impact of luck—that recognizes the existence of luck and tries to develop a better understanding of its effects on how we think about inequality and how it influences life chances. Conversely, if as sociologists we do not speak of luck at all, if it is not even a minor tool in our conceptual repertoire, then it remains even more inaccessible to public awareness and debate.

A thoughtful engagement with luck also has practical benefits for the field. This article has made the case that taking luck seriously generates a host of new questions and hypotheses for sociologists to explore. The field's avoidance of this topic has left a broad and fertile area of inquiry largely untouched. Even more, this article has suggested that an intensive analysis of luck could also encourage a rethinking of key dualities in our field: structure versus agency, individual efforts versus structural determination, individual problems versus social issues. Luck has the potential to intervene in these dualities in ways that can help us reconsider their implications.

The study of luck benefits sociology in another way. As noted at the outset, the idea of luck and its effects has become a topic of interest in the media and other academic fields. Sociology is positioned to make a wide range of distinctive empirical and theoretical contributions to these discussions. For example, studying the ways in which luck is socially constructed—investigating how people perceive the role of luck in their lives, how they frame events in relation to luck, how they use luck in explanations and interactions, and the types of situations to which people feel they can legitimately apply luck to—provides missing empirical foundations on which abstract political and moral arguments about responsibility, deservedness, and blame can be constructed. Likewise, building on a long tradition of studying the causes and consequences of inequality, a sociological approach to luck could help specify the complex interplay among structure, individual characteristics, and luck in determining life outcomes and success. Sociology has much to add to debates about luck and its effects, and it should not cede these discussions to adjacent fields.

Finally, I have argued that one explanation for sociology's dismissal of luck is that the recognition of the influence of luck is at odds with the field's emphasis on structures and institutions; the untamed randomness of luck is often seen as antithetical to the search for social patterns. But this view is mistaken. The study of luck can bolster rather than undermine this focus on the structural. It does so by helping to specify the importance of the large-scale forces (the forces of social institutions, of history, of nature) that people are subject to and pointing to the limits of individual self-determination. To put it another way, the study of luck is yet another means for us to gain insight into the "interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world" (Mills 1959:5).

It may be true that the study of luck is, to continue with Mills (1959), both frightening and empowering. It is not only that luck is difficult to measure and its causal import difficult to

determine. Acknowledging luck raises existential threats: Is it even possible to take into account the effects of randomness on social processes? How do we make sense of a world fraught with uncertainty? A consideration of luck reminds sociology of its limits, reminds us that the events that befall or propel us cannot be wholly reduced to identifiable social causes or be fully explained, even in retrospect and even with incredible computational power. But the answer to this threat is not to ignore luck, to avert our eyes and pretend like it does not exist. The answer, as always, is to recognize its relevance, turn our analytical lenses its way, and specify more precisely what it is that we do not know.

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NOTES

1. This conceptualization is consistent with how luck is customarily defined in philosophical discussions of moral luck, epistemic luck, and luck egalitarianism. Broncano-Berrocal (2014:3), for example, wrote: "Philosophers who have theorized about luck have characterized the notion using three types of conditions: (1) *chance conditions*, (2) *lack of control conditions*, and (3) *significance conditions*. The core idea of chance conditions is that lucky events are by chance. Lack of control conditions roughly say that an event is lucky for an agent only if the agent lacks control over it, whereas significance conditions say that an event, even if chancy or beyond an agent's control, cannot be regarded as lucky unless it is significant to the agent." There are, however, debates about the precise nature of luck; the most common conceptualizations are the modal account (Pritchard 2005), the probabilistic account (Rescher 1995), and the lack of control account (Riggs 2009).
2. In common usage, the terms *luck* and *chance* are often employed interchangeably, with *chance* being used to indicate what I define here as *luck*.
3. Sewell (2005:102) wrote, "An eventful concept of temporality assumes that contingency is global, that it characterizes not only the surface but the core or the depths of social relations. Contingent, unexpected, and inherently unpredictable events, this view assumes, can undo or alter the most apparently durable trends in history."
4. Due to space restrictions, this review does not address related concepts such as risk or fate. Both serve to rationalize the uncertainty that luck represents, the former by turning uncertainty into a probability and the latter by deifying it (see Aubert [1965] 1982). Goffman's (1967) ideas about action are also related. But whereas action pertains to situations that are usually purposefully entered into (and so imply certain boundaries and a certain amount of control), luck is always in play and can have very consequential effects even when the actor does not consciously choose to take a risk.
5. One of the reasons for the difficulties connected to operationalization and measurement is that it is easier to measure "what happened" than "what might have happened instead." We are able to ignore the influence of luck in our day-to-day lives in part because we are often not even aware of having experienced good or bad luck. We stop to tie our shoe before turning a corner, oblivious to the fact that

the large chunk of ice falling from the building's eaves would have landed on us if we had not. We did not get the job we applied for because our application was misplaced by the hiring committee, but we assume we reached too far and attribute the outcome to our lack of worthiness.

6. The potential taint of luck on the scientific enterprise can be so threatening that we write lucky, chance, and accidental events out of formal descriptions and reports (see Merton and Barber 2004:269–75; see also Feynman 1966; Medawar 1963). Merton and Barber (2004:275–82) labeled these forgotten aspects of research "obliterated scientific serendipities" and provided prominent examples of the role these factors have played in major discoveries. For instance, in his memoir of the discovery of DNA, Francis Crick wrote, "The key discovery was Jim's determination of the exact nature of the two base pairs (A with T, G with C). He did this not by logic but by serendipity. . . . In a sense Jim's discovery was luck, but then most discoveries have an element of luck in them" (as cited in Merton and Barber 2004:282).
7. Bearman (2005) found a similar pattern of perceived luck explained by social networks in his study of doormen. Pettigrew (1973:1529) made this view explicit in his review of *Inequality*: "Consider influence networks. Much that is called 'luck' is probably the operation of 'knowing the right people' and being in 'the right' communication channels."
8. It is, however, acceptable to acknowledge the role of luck in early stages of a research project like when we stumble on a relevant source, find a valuable interview subject through a chance meeting, or a news item seen in passing leads to a new hypothesis. I thank an anonymous reviewer for this insight.
9. In an unfinished essay, W.E.B. Du Bois (2000) pointed to this very tension between the pursuit of explanatory laws and the role of chance in the study of the social world. Du Bois wrote that both the natural and social world are dictated by chance as well as law. As such, future sociology should incorporate both into its analyses of the social world, recognizing that there are "actions undetermined by and independent of actions gone before. The duty of science, then, is to measure carefully the limits of this Chance in human conduct" (P. 44).
10. Providing an example of an evolutionary approach, Lieberson and Lynn (2002:11) wrote, "Changes occur at all times thanks to mutations, but the issue is whether any of these changes will permit the species to adjust to the new survival conditions. If so, then the species will survive; if not, there will be extinction or a decline in numbers or in spatial range reflecting these new conditions. In order to make predictions under such conditions, one would have to predict the entire universe of events that would have a bearing on adaptation and survival. Moreover, since mutations can be viewed as chance events, evolution would have to predict a set of chance events not only for the species under consideration but for all other species that are relevant as predators or prey. The specifics are different in the social order, but chance is not."
11. The boxing up and then setting aside of luck calls to mind Aubert's observations about chance events. Aubert ([1965] 1982:7) wrote that these events are often discounted as meaningless or absurd, but acknowledging them betrays an effort to control them as well: "When an event is characterized as due to chance, luck, or random factors . . . it removes the event from a social chaos to a world of order, meaning, and morality."
12. Loveday's (2018) study of fixed-term academic staff in the UK, for instance, found the opposite of conventional wisdom to hold. Interviewees attributed their *success* to luck and their *failures* to individual shortcomings. Loveday attributed this result to feelings of lack of control among precarious workers.
13. The General Social Survey (1993, 1998, 2000, 2002 waves), for example, asks, "Some people say that people get ahead by their own hard work; others say that lucky breaks or help from other people are more important. Which do you think is most important?" The World Values Survey similarly pits luck against hard work (World Values Survey waves 2–6).
14. A long line of psychological research has explored the relationship between control and responsibility in studies of the fundamental attribution error. See Liu and de Rond (2016:414–15) for a concise summary of research in this area.
15. Perspective, of course, also dictates whether an unexpected event represents good luck or bad luck. A sudden gust of wind pushes a field goal just short of the goal post; this same event is good luck for the defense but bad luck for the kicking team. See Liu and de Rond (2016:413) for a discussion of how perspective influences interpretations of chance events.

16. Virtually any sports championship can be framed to emphasize either the luck experienced by the winning team or the superior skill or character of that team. Every playoff team seems to possess the crucially important "will to win" right up to the game they lose. See Merton and Barber (2004:159–71) for debates about the relative importance of luck and control in "accidental" scientific discoveries. See Frank (2016:72) for examples of how even lottery winners believe that they assert some control over their success.
17. In their discussion of scientific accidents and credit, Merton and Barber (2004:179–81) made the incisive point that one reason for people to dismiss the role of luck is the fear of their accomplishments being attributed to "mere luck" or "only luck." To receive something valuable—money, credit, acclaim—due in no part to personal efforts or characteristics but only because of luck is stigmatized ("dumb luck"). This may be why lottery winners try to stake some claim to control over their success.
18. For another type of example, see Begley (2017) on recent debates about whether bad luck or environmental factors are more important determinants of cancer.
19. Conversely, the person who wins a substantial prize for getting five of six numbers right on a lottery ticket might feel unlucky for barely missing out on the grand prize.
20. One could also add organizational context to this list. A few sociologists, most famously Erving Goffman, have examined organizational spaces like casinos where luck plays a dominant role (see especially Sallaz 2009; Schull 2014). The focus of these studies is on the workers and work performed in these spaces. In line with the framing work proposed here, one extension could be to examine how organizations invoke luck to both encourage participation and cool out those who lose.
21. To take an illustration from academic research, Cole, Cole, and Simon's (1981:885) experimental study of evaluations of National Science Foundation grant applications led them to conclude that "the fate of a particular grant application is roughly half determined by the characteristics of the proposal and the principal investigator, and about half by apparently random elements which might be characterized as the 'luck of the reviewer draw.'"
22. The *can* in this sentence is important. As Mahoney (2000:513) noted, "to argue that an event is contingent is not the same thing as arguing that the event is truly random and without antecedents." Although this line of research demonstrates how we might document the effects of luck, luck or chance is rarely explicitly incorporated into these analyses.
23. Although the throwing of the snowball was intentional, the boy was unlucky in the expression of rage shown by the driver of the car. He did not expect this result (or it is unlikely he would have thrown the snowball), and he did not have control over the fact that the driver would react so violently.
24. These ethnographic chains of events are similar to the reactive sequences analyzed by historical sociologists (see especially Mahoney 2000). Methods developed in this area, such as event-structure analysis (Griffin 1993), could be usefully applied to studying narrative chains involving lucky events.
25. In his reflections on luck in sport, Smith (2012:198–99) noted how important the timing of luck is in careers: "An early lucky break stays lucky throughout your life. Once you're in a good job, advantages accumulate: you are surrounded by better colleagues, an enhanced network and greater challenges. Chance events are not like weights, balanced in a scale, with good luck on one side and bad luck on the other. Instead, the intervention of luck is like a boulder that diverts the course of a stream: the course is changed forever, whatever happens downstream. By then, it is a different life that is being altered. Luck not only intervenes; it persists."
26. For example, Emirbayer and Mische (1998:970) defined agency as "the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments—the temporal relational contexts of action—which, through the interplay of habit, imagination, and judgment, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive response to the problems posed by changing historical situations." Sewell (1992:20) defined it as "exerting some control over the social relations in which one is enmeshed, which in turn implies the ability to transform those social relations to some degree."

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