EUI DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Sociology of Luck

Time & place: *Fall 2021 -- meeting times and places indicated in the schedule below*

Given by: *Fabrizio Bernardi & Arnout van de Rijt*

Open to: all researchers, visiting students, MW fellows and other research fellows at EUI. All participants must attend all meetings and do all assignments and presentations (no audits).

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Course Description

This course is dedicated to a fundamental but largely neglected question in life course research: "How predictable is success in life?" The purpose is to review the scant work there is and stimulate new research in this area. The course consists of a compact schedule: Five 2-hour morning and five 2-hour afternoon sessions spread over six days. Among the topics we discuss are cumulative advantage / Matthew effect, compensatory advantage, the notion of critical period, predictability in cultural markets, self-correcting vs. self-reinforcing processes, being born at the right time in the right place, historical contingency, chance and vacancy chains, categorizing chance events, predicting cascade size, perceptions of chance and support for redistribution. The primary mechanism for evaluation is response papers which are to be shared the day before class.

Course Objective

Upon concluding the course, students will be well-versed in how chance has been theorized in sociology and related disciplines, know what evidence has been gathered pertaining to its role in explaining success and life-courses outcomes, and be familiar with research methods that can be used to disentangle chance from determinism in data. We are exploring a topic that is vast and not yet well defined as field in sociology and social sciences. The course aims to provide insights into this new topic, broaden students' perspective, foster their sociological imagination, and encourage them to consider possible connections with their individual research themes.

Learning Outcomes

Be familiar with key definitions of luck in sociology. Understand key social-science theories and arguments about the role of chance in explaining success and life-course outcomes. Know key empirical results regarding the importance of chance in career and life course success. Be able to devise an effective research design for assessing the role of chance in a given empirical context.

Requirements for credit: This course requires regular attendance, active participation, and writing of response papers handed in in time. Researchers must do the required readings listed in the schedule below ahead of the meeting.

Schedule

Friday, 15 Oct (11:00-13:00) in Theatre (Badia)

Wednesday, 27 Oct (11:00-13:00 and 14:00-16:00) in Seminar room 2 (Badia)

Friday, 29 Oct (11:00-13:00 and 14:00-16:00) in Seminar room 2 (Badia)

Friday, 12 Nov (11:00-13:00 and 14:00-16:00) in Seminar room 2 (Badia)

Thursday, 18 Nov (15:00-17:00) in Seminar room 2 (Badia)

Friday, 19 Nov (11:00-13:00 and 14:00-16:00) in Seminar room 2 (Badia)

Introduction

1 Sociology of Luck (Friday 15th Oct)

Sauder, M. 2020. "A Sociology of Luck." *Sociological Theory* 38(3):193-216.

Frank, R. 2016. *Success and Luck. Good Fortune and the Myth of Meritocracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Chapters 2 and 3 (pp. 21-55)

Manis, J. G., & Meltzer, B. N. (1994). Chance in human affairs. *Sociological Theory*, 45-56.

Read the assigned readings. Be ready to participate in a discussion based on the following questions: What is luck? Why has the notion of luck been largely ignored and opposed by sociologists? Why is it important to study it?

The failure to predict

The results of a recent scientific mass collaboration projects suggests that we are highly unable to predict life-outcomes. The low explicative capacity of status attainment model (and human capital models) has created a strong headache to generations of social scientists (at least as long it has become accepted and considered as an unproblematic finding that our models manage to explain only about one third of the observed variations of outcomes such income and socio-economic status). Why is that the case? Does luck account for what remains unexplained in our models? What does "the failure to predict" tell us about sociology and its epistemological models?

2 The failure to predict I (Wed Oct 27th 11-13)

Salganik, M.J.I. et al. 2020. "Measuring the predictability of life outcomes with a scientific mass collaboration." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117(15):8398-8403.

Garip, F. 2020. "What failure to predict life outcomes can teach us." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 117(15):8234-8235.

Salganik, M. J., Dodds, P. S., & Watts, D. J. (2006). Experimental study of inequality and unpredictability in an artificial cultural market. *science*, *311*(5762), 854-856.

3. The failure to predict II (Wed Oct 27th 14-16)

Lieberson, S.and F.B. Lynn. 2002. "Barking up the Wrong Branch: Scientific Alternatives to the Current Model of Sociological Science." *Annual Review of Sociology* 28(1):1-19.

Watts, D. J. (2014). Common sense and sociological explanations. *American Journal of Sociology*, *120*(2), 313-351.

Response paper 1 (due on the 25th of October)

1. Consider papers in your area of study. How large is the R2 explained? Does the inclusion of genetic information improves the situation (i.e. does the R2 increase?). What are the reasons usually put forward to explain the low R2 in your area of interest (i.e. what are the missing variables that could make for the error term? Is there any author that theorize on the role played by luck on the life outcomes that you study.

2. It is no easy to find survey data on the role played by luck on life success. Do you know of any survey (maybe made in your own country) that includes questions on the role of luck on individual success or failure? Go and search for it. If you find it, please point it to us in the response paper. We could use it to test some ideas developed through-out the seminar.

3. Answer to our wikisurvey on luck. We will provide a link and more details in due time

Cumulative Advantage and Compensatory Advantage

4. Fri Oct 29th 11-13

Bernardi, F. (2014). Compensatory advantage as a mechanism of educational inequality: A regression discontinuity based on month of birth. *Sociology of Education*, *87*(2), 74-88.

Bernardi, F., & Gil-Hernández, C. J. (2021). The social-origins gap in labour market outcomes: Compensatory and boosting advantages using a micro-class approach. *European Sociological Review*, *37*(1), 32-48.

Bol, T., de Vaan, M., & van de Rijt, A. (2018). The Matthew effect in science funding. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *115*(19), 4887-4890.

Van de Rijt, A. (2019). Self-correcting dynamics in social influence processes. *American journal of sociology*, *124*(5), 1468-1495.

5. Fri Oct 29th 14-16

Discussion on ideas on how to study the role of luck on individual life outcomes

Response paper 2 (due on the 27th of October). 500 words max.

Present an idea – short research proposal on how to study the role of luck in the determination of an outcome of your own interest, using insights from the failure to predict and cumulative/compensatory advantage literature. We plan to finance the best proposal with up to 1.000e to actually realize it or do a pilot study based on it (realizing that the selection process inevitably has a chance component).

6. Friday 12 Nov 12th 11-13

Discussion on ideas and research proposals on how to study the role of luck

Luck in History

7 Friday Nov 12th 14-16

In the afternoon our guest is Giancarlo Casale from HEC

Sterelny, K. (2016). Contingency and History. *Philosophy of Science*, *83*(4), 521-539.

Ermakoff, I. 2015. "The Structure of Contingency." *American Journal of Sociology* 121(1):64-125.

Luck in Science

8. Thursday Nov 18th (15-17)

Merton, R. K., & Barber, E. (2011). *The travels and adventures of serendipity*. Princeton University Press.

Yaqub, O. (2018). Serendipity: Towards a taxonomy and a theory. *Research Policy*, *47*(1), 169-179.

Wang, Y., Jones, B. F., & Wang, D. (2019). Early-career setback and future career impact. *Nature Communications*, *10*(1), 1-10.

Sinatra, R., Wang, D., Deville, P., Song, C., & Barabási, A. L. (2016). Quantifying the evolution of individual scientific impact. *Science*, *354*(6312).

Optional:

Merton, R. K. 1968. "The Matthew Effect in Science." *Science* 159:56-63.

Response paper 3A, due on the 16th of November (Note: choose this response paper or response paper 3B on luck in sport). 500 words max.

Write a response paper about unexpected discoveries in your research area or in sociology or political science more generally, or about how we can make theoretical or empirical progress on the role of chance in scientific careers.

Luck in Sports

What role plays luck compared to talent in sport? Is the role of luck more important in basketball than in soccer? How can we quantify the role of luck? Can we adopt some of the ideas developed in studies on sport and games to study the role of luck in life-course outcomes?

9 and 10. The success equation (Fri 19th November)

Mauboussin, M. 2012. *The Success Equation: untangling skill and luck in business, sports and investing*. Harvard. (chapter 3 and 4: pp. 47-90)

Read also this summary of the book:

https://www.wired.com/2012/11/luck-and-skill-untangled-qa-with-michael-mauboussin/

Lieberson S. "Modeling Social Processes: Some Lessons from Sports". Sociological Forum. 1997;12 :11-35.

Gilbert, D.E.and M.T. Wells. 2019. "Ludometrics: luck, and how to measure it." *Journal of Quantitative Analysis in Sports* 15(3):225-237.

Lefranc, A., N. Pistolesi, and A. Trannoy. 2009. "Equality of opportunity and luck: Definitions and testable conditions, with an application to income in France." *Journal of Public Economics* 93(11):1189-1207.

Response paper 3B, due on the 16th of November (Note: choose this response paper or response paper 3A on luck in science). 500 words max.

Do some preliminary work for a possible term paper applying the success equation discussed in Mauboussin (2012), i.e. Var (skill)= var (observed) – var (luck), to two sports of your own interest. For instance you could compare the role of luck in the Premier league and Liga or Serie A or in other sports. Search for data and think about how applying the success equation to estimate the role of luck in each sport. Try to come up with some testable research question concerning the role of luck in sport, e.g. has COVID19 increased the role of luck in sport results (why should that be the case)? Has the VAR innovation reduced the role of luck in soccer (why should that be the case)? Can we measure the role of luck in penalty kicks?