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## Get lucky? Luck and educational mobility in working-class young people's lives from age 10–21

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### ABSTRACT

Scant sociological attention has been given to the role of luck within social mobility/reproduction. This paper helps address this conceptual gap, drawing on insights from over 200 longitudinal interviews conducted with 20 working-class young people and 22 of their parents over an 11-year period, from age 10–21. We explore the potential significance of luck within the trajectories of 13 educationally mobile young people who were the first in family to go to university, six young people who achieved similar educational levels to their parents and one young person whose status was less clear cut. Our analysis suggests that particular forms of luck may be instrumental in creating opportunities for social mobility, although the consequentiality of these are mediated through interplays of agency, structure, habitus and capital. We conclude that paying further attention to luck may help augment sociological understandings of structure/agency and Bourdieusian understandings of social reproduction.

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### KEYWORDS

Bourdieu; luck; social class; social mobility; social reproduction; trajectory

## Introduction: luck, social mobility and social reproduction

CM is a white, working-class young man from Southeast England. His parents, Lottie and Steve, left school aged 16 and 14, respectively. Lottie worked as alternative health therapist and Steve was a delivery driver. From a young age, CM dreamed of becoming a chef – a goal he maintained and achieved over the next 11 years, gaining a catering diploma and successive employment, becoming a chef-de-partie in a London restaurant by age 21. CM described his love of cooking as inspired and fostered through his family, who worked hard to provide him with experiences and opportunities that they themselves had ‘missed’. CM’s experiences of school were largely negative, with periods of stress and ill health as he was placed in ‘disruptive’ ‘bottom sets’ with undiagnosed dyslexia. He experienced ‘unsupportive teachers’, high staff turnover and was denied access to high status science qualification routes and extracurricular provision. He felt isolated as the only boy on his food technology course. At age 15, CM had a pivotal experience whilst shopping with Lottie when, on the spur of the moment,

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he went into a high street restaurant to ask for a couple of days work experience. The manager offered him a week, which led to further work and, over the years, the manager became a close friend and mentor to CM, regularly offering him advice, support and employment. CM felt he had ‘been lucky’ in meeting his mentor, reflecting at age 21, ‘Honestly, like, he [mentor] has given me so much like options in life’. As the global pandemic hit, CM found himself furloughed for extended periods and contemplated a career change.

The opening vignette summarises the trajectory of CM, one of the young people who, along with his mother, Lottie, participated in our longitudinal study from age 10–21. When we came to try to make sense of CM’s case, we recognised that many of the factors that were identified as shaping his life and outcomes – in particular his navigation of the ongoing tightrope between social reproduction and social mobility – could be partially explained by existing theories of social reproduction and as detailed below, our Bourdieusian conceptual lens. For instance, his outcomes were facilitated by the family’s possession and navigation of particular forms of social and cultural capital, including Lottie’s parenting style (e.g. Lareau 2011) and were hindered by dominant pedagogical practices such as the allocation of working-class students to ‘bottom sets’ (e.g. Archer et al. 2018). However, we were also struck by the potential significance of ‘luck’ within his account – particularly the ‘good luck’ of his chance encounter with a restaurant manager who would go on to become his close friend and mentor, repeatedly providing crucial support for CM’s chef trajectory.

We did not begin our study with any planned focus on the role of luck. Rather, the potential significance of luck emerged during the data analysis, as we identified seemingly significant experiences or events within participants’ accounts that could not be easily explained by our Bourdieusian conceptual framework. While we could see that interactions of habitus, capital and field helped young people navigate instances of ‘luck’, we were unclear exactly what these consequential chance experiences *were* and struggled to make sense of this theoretically. We found further instances of luck within other young people’s accounts, prompting us to search the literature to bolster our understanding and help interpret the data.

We found, as Sauder (2020) notes, that ‘Sociology [...] has been almost completely silent about luck, essentially ignoring the concept as well as its influence on social processes and outcomes’ (p.193). It is this gap that our paper hopes to help fill – adding to understanding of the potential role, and significance, of luck in relation to the trajectories of a sample of white working-class young people in our study. Due to the limitations of our small interview sample (that relies on post-hoc rationalisations and narrations from a study that was not designed to examine the role of luck), we cannot make strong empirical claims about the actual impact and significance of luck within the lives and trajectories of these young people. However, our findings raise interesting questions and potentially productive lines of inquiry for future sociological research regarding the potential relevance of luck for educational mobility and help push sociological thinking around structure, agency and social reproduction. Specifically, we ask:

- In what ways was luck potentially consequential for enabling young people’s educational mobility?
- How/why might some instances of luck be more, or less, consequential for young people’s outcomes?
- What are the conceptual implications of luck for understandings of structure and agency and Bourdieusian theory?

## Research on social/educational (Im)mobility

It is widely agreed that there is a worrying lack of social mobility across OECD countries and that levels of social mobility in the UK compare poorly with many other such countries (OECD, 2018). In the UK, wealth gaps continue to grow at an alarming rate (Dorling 2019), with inequalities further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Gustafsson 2020; ONS, 2021). As a result, young people's backgrounds continue to provide reliable statistical predictors of their life chances.

Education occupies a contentious role in both academic and policy discourse, proposed as either a key cause of social reproduction or a facilitator of social mobility. As Major and Machin (2020) explain, 'For those in policy circles buying into notions of human capital theory, education is the "great social leveller"' (p.87). Yet, currently education is not enabling mass social mobility and the wealth gap between the richest and poorest in society continues to grow (Britton, Dearden, and Waltmann 2021). Moreover, human capital perspectives have been critiqued for their tendency to locate both the causes of, and the 'solutions' to, social immobility within individuals (Tan 2014). In contrast, sociological approaches have drawn attention to how social structures and the education system itself contribute to social reproduction, keeping people 'in their place'. In particular, Bourdieu explicates how structural inequalities are enacted through educational systems and practices, reproducing relations of privilege and oppression that remain entrenched and difficult to change (e.g. Boudieu and Passeron 1977).

Comparatively less sociological attention has been given to understanding how and why some young people 'go against the grain' of social reproduction to achieve intergenerational social and/or educational mobility. Existing research largely falls into two main camps – quantitative analyses of the characteristics and prevalence of those who become socially mobile (e.g. Hecht et al. 2020; Friedman and Laurison 2020; Henderson, Shure, and Adamecz-Volgyi 2020) and qualitative research on the lived experiences of mobile young people (Ingram 2018; Bathmaker et al. 2016; Bufton 2003; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009; Wentworth and Peterson 2001).

Fewer studies have sought to identify the factors enabling and supporting social/educational mobility. Exceptions include Jarrett's (1995) identification of how particular parenting practices helped 'buffer' African American adolescents from the effects of growing up in poverty and Rezaei's (2017) analysis of how 'significant others' and experiencing 'middle-class culture' through school and friendship groups seemed to facilitate the trajectories of successful professionals from Turkish migrant backgrounds. Hardie (2015) found that White and Black working-class and middle-class girls' social capital (and the cultural capital that they gained from adults in their networks) was an important mediator of educational and occupational aspirations and decision-making. Duckworth and Schoon (2012) analysed data from two cohorts of young people, both of whom faced a context of national recession when entering work and identified several factors that helped young people to 'beat the odds', namely: prior attainment, educational aspirations, school engagement, social makeup of the school environment. In comparison, DeLuca, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin (2016) ten-year study of 150 young people who lived in Baltimore public housing found that two key factors contributed to improved life outcomes – moving to a 'better' neighbourhood (as a result of a policy program or other means) and/or being motivated by a significant 'identity project', such as music, art or a 'dream job'. However, Exley's (2019) ten case studies

of adults who had become socially mobile suggested that ‘the life stories of many of my interviewees hinged on anomalous situations, chance encounters and the idiosyncrasies of the individuals involved’ (Exley 2019; p.228). The picture thus remains unclear as to what ‘makes the difference’ for a particular young person’s trajectory (Hansen 1995) and it is unclear what role luck might play within young people’s social and educational (im)mobility.

## The sociology of luck

Rescher (1995: 18) argues that ‘luck is an ineliminable part of the human condition’. However, there are contrasting views regarding the viability and utility (or not) of luck as a sociological concept. Sauder argues that sociology has paid scant attention to luck, yet ‘luck is real, luck is consequential, and luck can be studied systematically’ (2020, p.193). He proposes that this absence is because luck ‘is viewed as antithetical to a sociological approach to understanding the world’, which has led to a tendency for sociological research to ‘explain away’ luck (p.198). A potential exception is Giddens’ notions of ‘fateful moments’ and ‘fortuna’, that is, ‘times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands, as it were, at a crossroads in his existence; or where a person learns of information with fateful consequences’ (1991, p.113). However, Giddens’ treatment of such moments focuses on the individual’s exercise of agency in recognising, assessing and acting on the options presented and the capacity for such moments to be utilised within a ‘reflexive project of self’ (1991, p. 244), rather than exploring the nature of luck. Ingram et al. (2023), reject the validity of luck, arguing that ‘what can superficially appear to be luck or serendipity is in fact a manifestation of privilege and relies on the availability of stocks of capitals. Moreover, outcomes that appear to be ‘fateful’ are actually mediated by classed, racialised and gendered forms of capital’. However, Sauder argues that refusing to engage with luck risks a simplification of the social world and misses the opportunity to explore ‘a concept that could shed light on important social processes’ (p.199) and advance understanding of social mobility.

The potential link between luck and the reproduction of inequality was signalled almost fifty years ago by Jencks (1972), who felt that luck has ‘far more influence’ (p.227) in explaining income inequality than is generally recognised, particularly by successful people, who are more likely to attribute their success to their own merit, talents and/or hard work (Weber, 1958). As Sauder discusses, at the time Jencks et al.’s claims were treated as controversial and since then there has been a notable dearth of engagement with the concept. There have been some glimpses in studies hinting at the potential significance of luck within young people’s trajectories, but these are rarely expanded upon. For instance, Black’s (2009) eighteen-year study of the lives of three Puerto Rican brothers growing up in the USA highlights a pivotal experience of bad luck (a car crash) that set off a consequential chain of events that significantly shapes one brother’s life, yet luck as a theme remained underexplored.

## Conceptualising luck

Research that engages with notions of luck has used a range of conceptual approaches and terminology. For instance, Holland and Thomson (2009) define events that fall fully outside of an individual’s control as ‘fate’. However, we find that Sauder’s work offers a valuable sociological conceptualisation of luck, in which a lucky event or occurrence is ‘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' (p194). That is, Sauder suggests that 'events qualify as lucky only if they involve outcomes that are unpredictable and outside of one's immediate control' - see also Rescher (1995), whose definition similarly emphasises how luck involves largely unexpected, improbable and/or unpredicted consequential outcomes, thus differentiating luck from both chance and fortune (e.g. the affluent childhood of a person born to wealthy parent/s is fortunate, not lucky). Hence Sauder proposes that luck 'is not a mysterious, supernatural force but a condition of certain events that can be studied'. Moreover, 'luck has a positive or negative valence, whereas chance does not. Luck, in effect, is chance with consequences' (ibid.).

While entailing 'real' and consequential effects, Sauder also recognises that luck is a socially constructed phenomenon that may be differentially narrated by individuals. For instance, elites may explain away their privilege as due to luck (rather than capital) or may deny the role of luck in producing advantage, favouring notions of individual talent, merit and hence deservedness (as per Bourdieu's notions of misrecognition and symbolic violence). While the social construction and articulation of luck is an interesting and worthy area of investigation, in this paper we explore instead how an engagement with luck may help to (i) illuminate how and why some working class young people become educationally mobile but not others and (ii) contribute to ongoing structure-agency debates within sociology, through consideration of how luck may complicate the proposition that 'agency is the only meaningful countervailing force to structural determinism' (Sauder 2020, p.208).

We bring Sauder's conceptualisation of luck into dialogue with Bourdieusian theory to explore the productive potential. We feel both approaches are commensurate because, as Mahar, Harker, and Wilkes (1990) note, 'one of Bourdieu's major contributions can be seen as an attempt to construct a method which accounts for both structure and agency'. For instance, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of habitus recognises the individual and capacity for agency while foregrounding the role of the social in structuring the boundaries of possibility and the formation of the individual as a profoundly social being. Bourdieu (1986) also makes reference to chance and unpredictability through his use of the metaphor of the stacked roulette wheel, which recognises the possibility of uncertain outcomes, albeit within a context in which the odds are stacked/weighted due to differential distributions of habitus and capital within a given field. Hence, we employ a Bourdieusian lens to help foreground the social dimension of luck and how consequential unfoldings of chance moments may be produced through interplays of structure, agency, habitus, capital and field.

## Methods

Our analyses draw on over 200 interviews conducted as part of the ASPIRES project, a mixed methods longitudinal study of young people's aspirations and trajectories from age 10–23, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. Participants were originally recruited through a nationally representative sample of primary schools, when parents volunteered themselves and their children to take part in a study about young people's science and career aspirations. Fifty young people were interviewed at six time points: at the end of primary school (age 10/11), through compulsory secondary education (at ages 12/13, 13/14, 15/16) and at ages 17/18 and 20/21. Parents were interviewed at five time points (excluding age 12/13). Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, predominantly interviewing young people at school/college and parents at home, although all interviews

at age 20/21 were conducted virtually due to the global pandemic and UK lockdowns. Parental interviews and the latest youth interviews typically lasted around 1.5 h. Earlier interviews with young people were shorter, from 30 min (age 10) to one hour. Interviews were conducted by 14 members of the wider project research team over the eleven years of the study, including all the paper authors, were recorded and professionally transcribed. All participants chose their own pseudonyms, which we have honoured in this paper.

As detailed in [Table 1](#), we analyse data from a subsample of 20 working-class young people, drawn from the wider cohort of 50, focusing on those whose families had no prior history of university participation. The samples had similar gender ratios but differed in terms of ethnicity and parental educational qualifications.

At age 21, 13 of the subsample had exceeded the educational qualification levels of their parent/s by being the first in family (FiF) to go to university. Six achieved similar educational levels/occupational status to their parents (as categorised using the NS-SEC socio-economic classification tool), for whom we use the shorthand ‘SPE’ (Similar Parental Educational levels) and were working in a range of retail, supermarket, office jobs, manual apprenticeships or the armed forces. CM was classified as indeterminate status as he had continued in full-time post-compulsory education longer than his parents, taking a level 3 catering diploma (equivalent to A levels) and whose employment status at age 21 was arguably at a higher skill level, yet was also precarious.

Analysis was both inductive and deductive, guided by our conceptual framework. Transcripts were read by multiple team members, pairing those who had and had not interviewed the young person in question, to check interpretations. Coding using NVivo categorised data into 20+ moments, factors or experiences that supported or mitigated young people’s trajectories and achieved outcomes at age 21. Data were mapped using the matrix in [Figure 1](#), an inductive, theory-driven heuristic that we developed to help delineate between experiences that were improbable and consequential (luck), improbable but not consequential (chance), probable and consequential (social reproduction) and probable but inconsequential (mundane/quotidien). This mapping identified 42 examples of luck (25 from the FiF grouping, 15 from the SPE grouping and two from CM) for analysis.

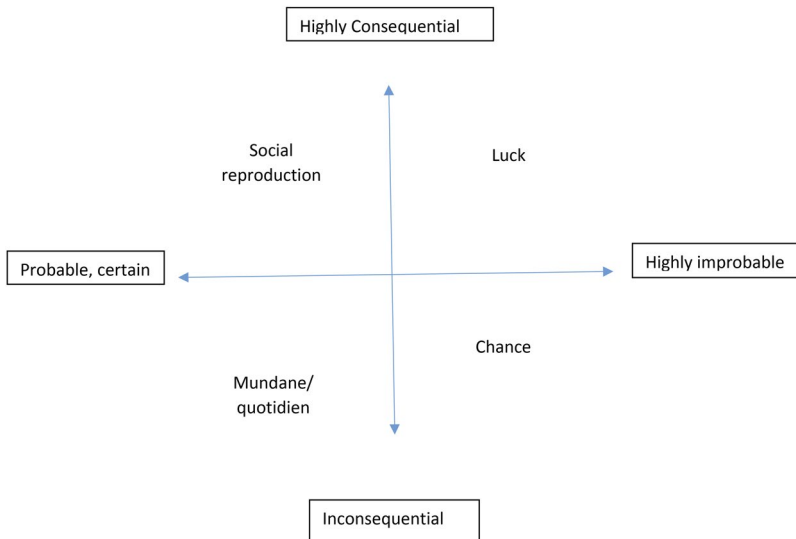
The 42 examples of luck were explored to consider what it was about the experience that made either the participants or researchers feel that it was consequential in some way and what role, if any, habitus, capital and field (see [Table 2](#)) played in relation to the moment and the unfolding/amplification of experience towards a consequential outcome.

Being mindful of the different ways in which luck may be constructed and narrated, we only categorized an event or experience as lucky if it (i) was felt to link to a consequential outcome and (ii) contained an element of being outside of the young person’s control.

**Table 1.** Details of the longitudinal interview sample and subsample.

		Whole sample (n = 50)	Paper subsample (n = 20)
Higher Education	Parents/carers HE qualification	30 (60%)	0
	No prior HE participation	20 (40%)	20 (100%)
Ethnicity	White	40 (80%)	20 (100%)
	South Asian	6 (12%)	0
	Black	1 (2%)	0
	Mixed or multiple ethnicities	3 (6%)	0
Gender	Female	30 (60%)	13 (65%)
	Male	20 (40%)	7 (35%)
<i>Total</i>		<i>50 (100%)</i>	<i>20 (100%)</i>





**Figure 1.** Visual representation of the mapping matrix.

**Table 2.** Examples of luck identified in the young people's accounts.

Role of luck in trajectory	YP	Estimated consequentiality for trajectory	
		High	Medium/Low
Supporting social/ educational mobility	FiF (13)	<i>Cultural/social capital</i> : Millie (x2), CM, Hedgehog, Georgia (x2), Lucy, Luna, LemonOnion, Louise, Roger. <i>Change in field</i> : Louise, Celina 1 (10/13)	<i>Cultural/social capital</i> : Carol (1/13)
	SPE (6)	<i>Cultural/social capital</i> : Laylany, Charlie (2/6)	
Helping maintain social location	FiF	<i>Cultural/social capital</i> : Hedgehog (x2), 1/13	<i>Cultural/social capital</i> : Lucy (x2) 1/13
	SPE	<i>Cultural/social capital</i> : Brittney; Ghost, 2/6	<i>Change in field</i> : Laylany, 1/6
Threatening downward mobility	FiF	<i>Body/heath</i> : LemonOnion, Celina 1 (mental health) 2/13	<i>Body/heath</i> : Gerrard, 1/13
	SPE	<i>Cultural/social capital</i> : Ghost, Bethany, Brittney	<i>Body/heath</i> : Charlie, 2 others (anonymised)

The focus of our article is not on participants' own constructions of luck, recognising, as per Ingram et al. (2023), that participants' discursive constructions and attributions of luck can contribute to the obscuring of inequalities and the role of structure, habitus and capital. Some, but not all, examples categorized as luck were also narrated as such by participants (e.g. CM's 'lucky' encounter with mentor; accounts of the 'bad luck' of course closures; family bereavements, accidents and unplanned pregnancy). But following Holland and Thomson (2009), we adopted a holistic classification that included researcher attributions, irrespective of whether participants recognised the events in question as lucky, or not (e.g. Laylany's luck in having a supportive, female engineering tutor) and we excluded some instances which young people attributed to luck but which did not meet our own definition (e.g. Indiana attributed being 'chucked off' his A level course to 'bad luck', whereas we interpreted his self-confessed lack of effort and attainment as a more apt explanation). Thus we only included examples of luck that we felt met Sauder's definitional criteria, irrespective of how they were constructed and narrated. Finally, we focused on examples that related to the disruption of social reproduction and attempted to identify what role interplays of



agency, structure, habitus, capital and field might play in unfolding the consequentiality of outcomes from the lucky moment.

## Findings

As detailed in Table 2 and discussed below, we identified 10/13 of the FiF young people's accounts as containing examples of potentially consequential lucky experiences that had supported their social/educational mobility in some way. An additional example from a FiF young person was excluded as it was felt to be less consequential. We identified two further examples of luck that had potentially supported two of the SPE young people, Laylany and Charlie, in their trajectories. While not associated with social class mobility per se (the young women entered jobs of broadly similar socio-economic status to their parent/s) we felt these represented 'gender mobility', as they involved luck in accessing jobs in heavily male-dominated fields (engineering and automotive repair, respectively). Both FiF and SPE young people recounted experiences of luck that they felt had helped them to maintain their existing social class locations and examples of 'bad luck' that risked downward mobility – although as discussed further below, most also described having largely mitigated the threat of these experiences to their trajectories, either achieving upward social mobility or a similar status to their parents by age 21.

### *How might luck support social/educational mobility?*

We begin by considering how and why particular examples of luck might have been consequential for young people's social/educational (and gender) mobility and from these extrapolate the potential role that luck might play in helping to disrupt forces of social reproduction within young people's lives. We propose that (i) chance access to dominant forms of social/cultural capital might play a role in supporting educational mobility and (ii) changes in the field may open up new possibilities for educational mobility.

### *Lucky access to dominant forms of social/cultural capital*

Looking at the lucky experiences that seemed to have supported young people's trajectories, the majority of examples (9/13 FiF and the two SPE young women) involved lucky access to dominant forms of social and cultural capital that helped the young person's mobility. As discussed below, we interpreted the potential significance of these experiences as due to the young people being serendipitously able to access exchange-value capital that they did not otherwise possess.

For instance, Millie, Hedgehog, Luna and Louise all described how a teacher or college tutor had unexpectedly provided significant personal help that had gone 'above and beyond' their expectations and usual experiences and supported their access to university, which they felt otherwise would not have happened. For example, despite a long-standing desire to become a PE teacher, Millie worried constantly that she was not 'clever' enough and that her attainment would not be high enough. Her chronic self-doubt almost led to her abandoning her dream at multiple time points. However, Millie and her mother, Sinead, explained many times over the years how a particular PE teacher went repeatedly above and beyond to support and reassure Millie to pursue her aspiration. As Millie explained, her PE teacher

came from a similar social background and 'she said to me that she wasn't the brightest either, but she really tried. And she obviously succeeded and got where she wanted to be'. Sinead concurred that Millie 'wasn't the best at anything', but could see how her teacher 'helped shape, in a way, how she saw herself in the future'. The teacher provided personal and emotional support and access to knowledge and resources that helped Millie to maintain her aspiration and continue into further education. At age 16, Millie moved to a local college to continue her studies, but without the support of her PE teacher, her anxiety and worries increased that she was not 'good enough' to go to university ('I hum-ed and I ha-ed all the way through college about whether I'd go to uni ... college really made me doubt myself'). However, a university careers advisor helped build Millie's confidence and apply for university. Millie felt strongly that both professionals' support had been instrumental in helping her to achieve her dream.

CM and Carol both recounted examples of lucky access to exchange-value social and cultural capital that came from an adult who they met by chance. In CM's case, this was his work experience mentor, as discussed in the opening vignette, with the significance of this role repeatedly recounted by both CM and Lottie. Carol's access to cultural capital came from a chance conversation with a woman she sat next to on a train who worked in media, an industry that Carol aspired to. The woman shared how challenging it is to access a media job and, as a result, Carol changed course to pursue a 'safer' route into teaching, and at age 21 had commenced on a PGCE. While differing in both the nature of the lucky experiences (CM's being long-term, Carol's lasting only a couple of hours), and the extent of cultural capital and support conveyed (from extensive to modest), we interpret both CM and Carol's accounts as exemplifying how lucky access to specific forms of social and educational capital appeared consequential for their respective trajectories.

LemonOnion, Georgia and Lucy all recounted how they had been significantly supported by social and cultural capital that they had gained through significant individuals in their respective workplaces, with LemonOnion and Lucy being encouraged - and in LemonOnion's case, given extensive practical help - by a work friend to access university. The 'luck' of these encounters was underlined by LemonOnion and Lucy undertaking non-graduate jobs at the time (in a supermarket and nightclub, respectively), largely working with non-graduate colleagues, with no family history of HE participation and little to no access to support for accessing degree level study. However, as discussed later in more detail LemonOnion was significantly helped to both consider and apply to university by a work friend and colleague. Lucy described being similarly encouraged to consider university by a work colleague - a current university student - who helped dispel Lucy's concerns about student debt, uncertain degree outcomes and provided a counterbalance to Lucy's own peer group, who largely had chosen not to go to university.

While the majority of examples related to interpersonal sources of social and cultural capital, Roger had a chance access to cultural capital *via* an online resource, which he attributed to initiating his trajectory into quantity surveying. As Roger explained, 'I did one of those job generator things, I had no idea what I wanted to do'. The online quiz recommended 'quantity surveyor', which Roger had never heard of before. He decided to find out more ('I had a look into it and I thought yeah that sounds really good'), seeking out and completing two work experience placements ('I didn't really have anything on what the job was about, so I just wanted to try and see what it was like'), during which time he made some useful contacts and ended up pursuing a degree level quantity surveying

apprenticeship. However, he felt that without the initial experience of the job quiz, it was highly unlikely that he would have known about, let alone pursued, a route into quantity surveying and HE.

Lucky access to social and cultural capital also played a key role in supporting Laylany and Charlie's trajectories into male-dominated areas of employment, helping them to go against the grain of gender social reproduction. While studying engineering at her local further education college, Lalany experienced intense, persistent sexism from some of the young men on her heavily male-dominated course. Laylany described the significant support of a female tutor, who acted as both a role model and an ally, tackling the sexist behaviour and motivating Laylany to continue in engineering. Given the very low percentage of women engineers in the UK (EngineeringUK 2021) we interpret the female tutor as a lucky form of social capital, being both statistically improbable and highly consequential for Laylany's engineering trajectory.

Likewise, Charlie described how she had repeatedly been unable to find work within the automotive repair industry until she applied to a firm who, unknown to her, wanted to recruit a woman to improve their workplace diversity. While she did not get the position, she recounted her luck when the garage contacted her some time afterwards to offer a car panel beater apprenticeship, which she successfully gained. We interpret Charlie's experience as lucky because the availability of the apprenticeship, the firm's desire to hire a woman and their decision to contact her about the newly available apprenticeship role were all beyond her control, were consequential for her work trajectory and contributed to her accessing this male-dominated space. Moreover, it was by chance that the apprenticeship position opened up at this particular, fortuitous moment, after her recent contact with the company and 'failed' job interview.

***Use-value vs. exchange-value capital.*** We interpret these accounts of 'lucky' access to particular social/cultural capital as examples of exchange-value capital supporting educational and/or gender mobility, noting that such examples were common (11/13) among the FiF students but were less common within the SPE young people's accounts (2/6). We hypothesise that luck might be important for facilitating social mobility when it enables working-class young people to access and benefit from symbolic forms of capital, facilitating access to elite fields, such as university. So, might 'lucky breaks' in the status quo offer the potential for disrupting social reproduction?

From a Bourdieusian perspective, it is not access to any form of capital that may be consequential for young people's educational mobility, but specifically access to exchange-value capital, that is, capital which had a symbolic value that can be leveraged within the field in question. We interpreted examples of SPE young people's lucky access to social/cultural capital as largely reflecting use-value capital, which we surmise may be consequential and valuable for maintaining their social locations and wellbeing, but which did not seem to translate into educational mobility. Hence, we hypothesise that young people's outcomes may be differentially shaped by the type of capital offered by the lucky experience. For instance, Ghost recounted lucky access to social/cultural capital that led to him gaining employment as a roofer after he left school. This was of considerable benefit at that point in his life and arguably helped prevent his downward mobility at a precarious moment, in the absence of other forms of capital and financial support. However, while this capital appeared to have considerable use-value it did not seem to have an exchange value or translate into social or educational mobility. This point is also exemplified by Hedgehog,

who left school at age 16 and worked in a succession of jobs that he described as having accessed through chance encounters that provided him with the requisite social/cultural capital to a access field, such as when he became an estate agent thanks to a serendipitous encounter with a stranger who gave useful help and advice. After a couple of years, while working for a utilities company, Hedgehog recounted a sudden epiphany moment when he caught sight of himself in a mirror in his high visibility work overalls and realised that this 'isn't me', recalling 'I don't know why, just something really, like, just *snapped*' (a potential example of *habitus clivé*?) Trying to find a new direction, he contacted an old school tutor, who ended up supporting him to successfully apply for a degree in film, an option that Hedgehog had never previously considered or realised was possible. We interpret Hedgehog's access to social/cultural capital as enabled by the 'lucky' help provided by his old form tutor, who was fortuitously still in post and disposed to help an ex-student who had left a number of years previously. That is, Hedgehog's case illustrates how lucky access to different types of capital offered different potential for facilitating educational mobility or reproduction.

### ***Can changes in the field shape new possibilities?***

Four young people identified how their trajectories had been impacted when their desired post-16 courses had suddenly and unexpectedly closed. In three of the cases, course closures led to shifts in the young person's specific focus or specialism, without changing their overall class trajectory. For example, Laylany had a longstanding ambition to go into aeronautical engineering. At age 16, the local college that she had applied to unexpectedly cancelled the aeronautical engineering course at short notice. Due to financial and transport constraints, Laylany was unable to transfer to the same course at another college and so pragmatically switched to mechanical engineering, which was offered by the local college. She successfully completed the course and at age 21 was employed as an engineer in a local SME.

In Louise's case, however, an unexpected course closure seemed to help facilitate her educational mobility. At age 16, Louise applied to a small, local further education college to study dance. Due to her family's financial situation, more prestigious routes were not an option and Louise anticipated taking a vocational dance qualification and then working as a dancer. However, her local college unexpectedly cancelled the dance course and, as a result, Louise transferred to a larger, city-centre college that offered an A level in dance. Louise did well on the A level and described benefitting from a highly supportive relationship with her A level dance teacher, who provided considerable social/cultural capital and support and encouraged Louise to pursue dance at university – an option that Louise said she had never been aware of before. At age 21, Louise was studying dance at university and felt that without the 'luck' of having ended up at the city-centre college, her trajectory would have been very different and was unlikely to have involved university. We interpret Louise's case as suggesting that chance changes in the field that are beyond a young person's control (such as the sudden closure of a college course) may open up (or close down) new possibilities for their trajectory that their habitus has previously ruled out as 'not for me'.

### ***'Making the most of luck': considering the interplay of luck with agency and structure***

While our definition of luck required that the example in question contained elements that were outside of the young person's control, we also noted that in all the examples of luck

that we identified in the data, a young person's agency and their structural location also played an important role in the unfolding and mediation of the experience and the resultant outcomes. For instance, at age 17, LemonOnion was studying three A levels at college and attaining highly when a chance event significantly changed the course of her life. As she put it, 'I was getting straight As ... and then I fell pregnant'. The pregnancy was an unplanned surprise and had a significant impact on her subsequent trajectory. This event involved interplays of agency (e.g. deciding to have sex and to continue with her pregnancy), structure (e.g. reduced capital and options for balancing motherhood with continued academic study) and chance (e.g. the unplanned nature of the pregnancy). While LemonOnion wanted to continue studying for her A levels, this was not possible because her relationship with her mother deteriorated and LemonOnion ended up leaving home and moving to a different region. After her child's birth she 'took a year to figure it out' and decided to become a midwife ('I had a baby and I found it so fascinating, and I loved the science of it'). For some time LemonOnion worried that midwifery was 'hard to get into... I didn't think I was going to get the grades to do it' until she started work at a supermarket out of economic necessity where, coincidentally, 'a girl I was working with, she was pursuing Midwifery and she'd just done her Access course'. This lucky encounter both motivated LemonOnion and provided her with exchange-value capital, in the form of her new friend's practical support, knowledge and contacts (e.g. motivating LemonOnion to apply, providing contact details, introducing her to the course tutor, helping her to complete the form) that ultimately led to LemonOnion submitting an application and being accepted to study midwifery at university.

We read LemonOnion's account as exemplifying an ongoing interplay and entanglement between luck, agency and structure that opened up and closed down potential avenues and options in significant ways. We see the 'luck' involved in falling unexpectedly pregnant and meeting a midwifery student friend at work as not solely reducible to either agency or structure – both involve elements of chance that sit outside of agency/structure. Yet the consequentiality of these experiences for LemonOnion's trajectory was mediated by both her own agency (e.g. acting on the new capital and submitting a course application) and her structural location (e.g. not being able to stay at home and continue studying; needing to find local paid employment).

We traced similar interplays across other young people's examples, noting interweavings between young people's agency, capital and a 'lucky' structural alignment between themselves and the significant adults who provided the lucky access to particular social and cultural capital. For instance, Millie attributed her close connection with her PE teacher to their mutual recognition of sharing a class/gender identity and feelings of not being 'clever enough'. But we also found examples in her narratives of how the relationship was nurtured by Millie's social skills and interpreted instances of her asking for help as instances of agency. We drew similar interpretations from Georgia's account of accessing social and cultural capital through lucky encounters with employers: we found no other examples of relevant social or cultural capital within Georgia's or her parent's interview data and hence attributed her decision to 'reach out to some local companies' to her own agency and initiative. One company invited her to come and meet with the bosses for an informal chat and, based on the encounter, offered Georgia a part-time job. This lucky break led to a series of further opportunities, including graduate employment. Likewise, we interpreted Roger's leveraging of the lucky insight provided by the online job quiz to his own agency and industriousness, which led to work experience placements, course research and his successful graduate

apprenticeship. Moreover, young people's agency and capital also played a part in how they had navigated and mitigated experiences of 'bad luck', such as when Gerrard and Charlie worked extra hard to catch up for their national A level examinations after missing substantial study time due to an unlucky infection after surgery (Gerrard) and injuries sustained in a bus crash (Charlie). We interpret these accounts as showing how luck can be consequential and crucial for opening up (or closing down) possibilities for young people to go against the grain, but these opportunities were then realized (or not) by the young people's agency, capital and field, which mediated the extent to which they were able to leverage, 'work' or mitigate these experiences. As Anthias (2007) argued, it is not the existence of social capital per se that is important, but the extent to which it can be mobilised, which will depend on the social location of the actor in question and the context (or field) in which they are located.

## Discussion

In this paper we have attempted to add to sociological understanding of the concept of luck and its potential significance within young people's educational and occupational trajectories. While our limited data and methodology do not allow us to draw firm empirical conclusions about the role of luck in supporting social mobility, our findings offer some intriguing hints that suggest luck may be worth further attention. Moreover, our interpretations hint at a productive potential for luck to augment existing Bourdieusian understandings of educational mobility. We conceptualise luck not as a 'thing' or a force, but as instances of consequential improbability that are characteristic of the social world. In this respect, luck helps foreground the probabilistic nature of the world and social life, underlining sociology's value in helping to identify and understand the role of the social in producing differential life outcomes. We extrapolate that a sociological engagement with luck may also help inform emancipatory projects aimed at challenging dominant relations, indicating the importance for identifying, amplifying and leveraging small 'cracks' in social reproduction. As Gramsci (1971) noted, no hegemony is absolute – but, we would add, social mobility may not solely attributable to agency, such opportunities might also be opened up by luck.

While Bourdieu's work is popularly represented as overly deterministic, we agree with Mahar et al. (1990) that such accusations are too simplistic and fail to acknowledge Bourdieu's recognition of the probabilistic world and the interconnection of the individual and the social. We found that luck played a part in supporting participants' socially/educationally mobile trajectories through chance disruptions of dominant power relations that opened up possibilities which were leveraged and mediated through interplays of agency and capital. Some lucky moments seemed to initiate chain or domino reactions (successive amplifications, as in Roger's example) or pendulum effects (as in LemonOnion's case), which we interpret as illustrating recursive interplays of agency, structure and luck. These interplays were revealed by successive longitudinal interview interviews and may not have been apparent had we used a cross-sectional design. Like Holland and Thomson (2009), we recognise the complexity and near impossibility of untangling structure and agency within the unfolding of fateful or critical moments. We also agree with Ingram et al. (2023) that it is not just the 'lucky' event per se that contributes to a particular outcome or trajectory but the unfolding of the moment through interplays of habitus, capital, agency and structure. However, we differ from Ingram et al. in the degree of analytic significance that we accord

to the lucky moment. While we recognise that the moment itself is not deterministic, we maintain that there is a potential significance to these chance moments in which hegemony is disrupted which offers possibilities for learning about the conditions that might enable social mobility (without reduction to explanations of individual agency or 'merit'). As Rescher asserts, 'by and large, luck is an interrupter of the usual course of things' (1995, p.25). Hence we propose the potential sociological value in identifying and interrogating 'lucky' moments in which hegemony is disrupted towards more socially just possibilities (such as through shifts in recognition and/or redistribution).

### ***Extending understandings of the 'causes' of social/educational mobility***

We are interested in the ongoing question of how and why some working-class young people go against the grain of social reproduction to achieve educational mobility. Using the lens of luck, our analyses challenge popular explanations of mobility as due to meritocracy, agency, personal exceptionalism or psychological characteristics such as individual 'grit' (as often espoused by educational policy, e.g. see Department for Education, 2014). Indeed, our interpretations question assumptions of meritocracy, in which social mobility is attained by those who are the most naturally gifted and 'the best'. Rather, we read the data as suggesting that most of our sample who attained social/educational mobility by age 21 had (recounted having) benefitted from a lucky break that opened up new forms of exchange-value capital that they were able to capitalize on. That is, they were able to 'work' and leverage chance gaps in hegemony through agency and capital, to go against the grain of social reproduction. We thus hypothesise that agency may be important for realising luck but may be insufficient to produce mobility in the absence of luck. Such a reading challenges notions of meritocracy and the associated 'blaming' of working-class young people for their immobility. Indeed, we note how the SPE young people showed considerable agency and resilience but lacked the 'lucky breaks' of their peers to create the conditions that they might be able to exploit to enable mobility. In this way, to echo Sauder (2020), we conclude that luck may constitute a useful piece of the wider puzzle of factors that shape youth trajectories and outcomes.

### ***'I should be so lucky': designing for luck?***

Our analyses suggest that social mobility requires active intervention. A Bourdieusian lens proposes that social mobility will not happen 'naturally' (as in the metaphor of cream rising to the top) because the default is social reproduction. Moreover, working-class young people are structurally more susceptible and vulnerable to risk, without the benefits and cushioning provided by possession of privileged forms of habitus and capital (see also Beck 1992). While not all middle-class young people enjoy wholly smooth, untroubled trajectories and may also experience bad luck (e.g. see Hamilton 2016; Lareau 2011; Stevenson and Schneider 1999), arguably middle-class youth tend to possess forms of capital that help buffer and navigate bad luck, whereas working-class young people are far more vulnerable to risk. In this way, we interpret luck as a structural issue - young people from under-resourced communities may be more dependent upon 'good luck' to facilitate or initiate the conditions for mobility (given the unequal distribution and valuing of capital within dominant fields) and will be at greater risk from bad luck. Indeed, we posit, social mobility may not happen in the absence of luck.



Our paper offers some potential future lines of work for sociological theory and empirical analysis – and may have implications for policy and practice. As Sauder (2020) suggests, if we fail to recognise the role of luck, we are ‘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’, indeed, ‘ignoring luck makes it easier to move the focus of debates about inequality from large-scale economic trends and historical forces to explanations centred around individual choice and responsibility’.

There are, of course, many limitations and caveats to our study, including the restricted nature of our qualitative sample, design and methodology, hence our findings remain necessarily partial and restricted regarding the potential role of luck in young people’s lives. More research might usefully explore these ideas with wider populations, e.g. by social class and ethnicity.

We also note the challenges in defining ‘social mobility’ within our study sample - the complexity of youths’ lives, trajectories, identities and experiences challenged unidimensional class-based notions of social mobility and wish to recognise that not having gone to university did not mean that the SPE young people were not ‘successful’ in their lives. They all had secure employment, had managed to resist the prevalent forces of downward mobility that were threatening their generation (especially during the global pandemic) and conveyed a sense of wellbeing that deserves to be celebrated. Moreover, at age 21, we do not consider any of the young people’s outcomes as final or achieved – they were very much still at the start of their adult lives. In this respect, educational mobility was not an ‘end point’ and their onward trajectories remain precarious. We will have to wait and see what comes next and indeed, what luck awaits them.

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