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Positive psychology and luck experiences

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Introduction

The idea of luck is ubiquitous but by no means simple, in the sense as it means precisely the same to everyone, everywhere. Expressions for ‘luck’ in different languages introduced nuances that are difficult if not impossible to capture in any particular tongue. And even those who speak the same language do not necessarily use the word ‘luck’ in the same sense (Cohen, 1960, p.114).

As is apparent from the range of perspectives that are being presented in this volume, the concept of ‘luck’ is not an easy one to pin down. With six separate clusters of chapters it is evident there are many views of luck. Even when we focus our attention on how psychologists have worked with the concept of luck, different approaches have highlighted some of the nuances alluded to by Cohen (1960). For example, research has revealed: how people view luck as a cause of an event (e.g., Weiner, 1985); that people often distinguish luck from chance (e.g., Wagenaar & Keren, 1988); the nature of individual differences in people’s beliefs about luck (e.g., Darke & Freedman, 1997; Smith, 1998), and how people often view events as ‘lucky’ or ‘unlucky’ by comparison to imagined alternatives (e.g., Teigen, 1995).

In some of this work, researchers have often made implicit assumptions about the nature of luck. Most notable is the work of attribution theorists, who have sought to understand how we typically think about causes for events, in particular how we might ascribe causes for

successes and failures (e.g., Weiner, 1985; Weiner, Frieze, Kukla, Reed, Rest, & Rosenbaum, 1971). This approach has suggested that causal factors of any event might be conceived as either (a) internal or external, (b) stable or unstable, and (c) controllable or uncontrollable. In this framework, luck is typically treated as an external, unstable, and uncontrollable factor to which we might attribute our successes or failures (e.g. Weiner, 1985). For example, passing an exam could either be explained in terms of one's own hard work (an internal, stable, and controllable cause) or because one was fortunate that the 'right' questions came up on the exam (an external, unstable, and uncontrollable cause).

In this chapter, we seek to build on previous attempts to examine the way in which luck is conceived in our daily lives, and to some extent challenges the extent to which luck is appropriately seen as an external and uncontrollable factor when making sense of events. A central part of this discussion is based around the argument that many events in everyday life are difficult, if not impossible, to clearly delineate as exclusively within or outside of our personal control. That is, events are typically derived through a subtle and complex mixture of both controllable and uncontrollable factors. We further argue that by exploring luck alongside positive psychology concepts such as gratitude, positive emotions, and optimism, it is possible to add to the understanding of luck and its potential place and contribution in our perceptions and overall health.

We will explore how ideas that sit within the emerging discipline of positive psychology may impact upon individuals' perception and experience of luck. In this way, we will draw upon, and contribute to, the discourse on psychological wellbeing. It is also in our focus on the *experience* of luck that we perhaps differentiate the aim of this work from some of the other theoretical approaches to luck. In this regard, we are perhaps less concerned with understanding what luck 'is' and more with the experiences we might typically align with luck and how our perceptions of luck may impact us.

There has been a small amount of work to date within psychology that has explored luck from this angle (e.g., Smith, 1998; Wiseman, 2004). This work has started to show how people's perceptions of luck are varied and nuanced, and these lay perceptions allow 'luck' to be something that we can influence or regulate through psychological and behavioural principles. For example, Smith (1998) interviewed people about their thoughts and beliefs about luck and how they saw luck as playing a role in different parts of their lives. In broad

terms, three general views of luck emerged. First, some tended to view luck as synonymous with chance in that it referred to a cause, or set of causes, that was largely random. A second view of luck conceived of it as relating to causes that did have some 'design' to them, though they were outside of our control. In this way, luck was aligned to notions such as fate or destiny. A final view of luck resonated with a perspective that luck was something one could exert some control over. This view was reflected in notions such as how one could engage in behaviours that might bring good luck, as well as the notion that we can make our own luck.

Wiseman (2004) built on this latter idea in work that continued to explore the differences between 'lucky' and 'unlucky' people, or at least people who perceived themselves in this way¹. The essence of this work was to draw out the kinds of behaviours and thought processes that self-perceived 'lucky' people tended to engage in that their 'unlucky' counterparts did not. These were organised into four general *principles*. The first of these notes how 'lucky' people were more likely to maximise chance opportunities. They might manifest in a number of ways, such as giving attention to building and maintaining a strong 'network of luck' through developing and nurturing social relationships. 'Lucky' people were also more likely to display a relaxed attitude and be open to experience, meaning that they were more likely to notice and be open to opportunities as and when they arose.

The second principle linked luckiness to a willingness to listen to, and even develop, one's intuitive impressions. 'Lucky' people were more likely to pay attention to their 'gut' feelings about a situation and make decisions about how to act in accordance with these hunches. The suggestion was that our better decisions are often ones that feel right and that trusting our instincts can be a route to experiences of good luck.

The third principle evoked the power of expectation. If we expect good things to happen, if we expect to experience good fortune, then this will likely have an impact on the likelihood of indeed experiencing good fortune. This may be a simple direct consequence of having the positive expectation of success as such expectations mean one is more likely to attempt to achieve one's goal in the first place. One is also more likely to persevere in the face of

¹ Wiseman simply refers to these groups as lucky and unlucky people. In our discussion of this work we will put the terms 'lucky' and 'unlucky' in inverted commas to illustrate that these terms, used in this context, reflect their *perceptions* of themselves as lucky or unlucky.

challenges if one is working with an expectation that things are going to work out for the best.

Wiseman's fourth principle focuses on ways of dealing with 'bad luck'. Again, working from the perspective of what distinguishes 'lucky' people from 'unlucky' people, he notes that even 'lucky' people experience their share of bad luck. It is not as if they go through their lives without bad things happening. The essence of Wiseman's fourth principle is to find ways of 'turning bad luck into good'. This might include changing one's perspective so as to be able to see some part of what has happened as positive.

We seek to build on the work started by Wiseman (2004) by exploring more deeply how these and other psychologically-based ideas might impact on people's experience of luck. We do this by explicit reference to ideas that now sit within the discipline of 'positive psychology'.

Introducing 'positive psychology'

The historical advocacy for positive psychology occurred in the work of humanistic psychologists Abraham Maslow (e.g. 1970) and Carl Rogers (e.g. 2004). Following a modern day proposal for a discipline of positive psychology by Martin Seligman in his Presidential address to the American Psychological Association in 1998, he and Mihalyi Csikszentmihaly (2000) suggest "...positive psychology at the subjective level is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present). At the individual level, it is about positive individual traits: the capacity for love and vocation, courage, interpersonal skill, aesthetic sensibility, perseverance, forgiveness, originality, future mindedness, spirituality, high talent and wisdom. At the group level, it is about civic virtues and the institutions that move individuals toward better citizenship: responsibility, nurturance, altruism, civility, moderation, tolerance and work ethic." (p. 5). While many definitions of positive psychology exist, we believe this is an original and comprehensive one.

Exploring the links between positive psychology and experiences of luck

In the discussion that follows, we consider some key concepts and research topics that now sit within positive psychology and how they potentially may play a role in our understanding of luck experiences. We see this discussion as a re-examination of the *psychology* of luck, so as to better understand how events and experiences that are typically aligned with luck might be impacted by our thoughts and feelings and actions, as well as how our approach to luck might in turn impact our psychological experience and wellbeing.

We begin with ‘gratitude’ as a topic that has been well researched within positive psychology and already been the subject of research exploring its link with perceptions of luck (e.g., Teigen, 1996). We then focus our attention on the role of positive emotions (of which gratitude may be regarded as one such emotion), with emphasis on the ‘broaden and build’ theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998). We then explore links between optimism and luck experiences, before examining an aspect of psychological wellbeing referred to as ‘environmental mastery’ (Ryff, 1989).

Gratitude

Gratitude has been, and continues to be, a key topic for positive psychology research with much of the focus on exploring its relationship with wellbeing (e.g., Emmons & Shelton, 2002; Lomas, Froh, Emmons, Mishra, & Bono, 2014). In this work, gratitude has been conceptualised in a variety of ways such as “a felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life” (Emmons & Shelton, 2002) or simply as “the positive recognition of benefits received” (Emmons, 2004).

The links between gratitude and luck have been explored by several researchers. This work tends to highlight how perceptions of being lucky are often associated with perceptions of being grateful. For example, Teigen (1997) presented students with a series of statements that were either ‘luck statements’ (e.g., ‘it is lucky that I have a family’) or ‘good statements’ (e.g., ‘it is good that I have a family’) and asked them to give a brief explanation of the meaning behind each statement, especially in terms of to what extent the ‘luck statements’ communicated anything different from, or in addition to, the ‘good statements’. The primary finding here was that the luck statements, in contrast with the good statements were more likely to be seen as implying comparison with others. A follow-up study, reported in the same paper, directly asked participants to rate the statements in terms of the extent to which they related to expressions of gratitude, as well as expressions of sympathy or care, envy, and

comparison with others. Luck statements received higher ratings of implied gratitude than good statements, when these described a positive state of affairs (e.g., ‘it is lucky I have job’; ‘it is lucky I have good health’). In a third study, participants were instead asked to describe a situation from their own life in which they felt grateful. The majority of these accounts described a situation in which they had felt grateful towards a specific person (referred to as ‘personal’ gratitude), with a minority describing a more general gratitude towards ‘life’ or a ‘high power’ (which Teigen referred to as a type of ‘existential’ or ‘impersonal’ gratitude). Participants who had described an instance of ‘personal’ gratitude were prompted to also provide an account of ‘impersonal’ gratitude, and vice versa. Participants were then asked to rate their stories along a number of dimensions, including how lucky and how unlucky they considered themselves to be. Both personal and impersonal gratitude stories received high ratings of luckiness, confirming a link between perceptions of luck and perceptions of gratitude.

Teigen’s emphasis throughout this work has been on the role of ‘counterfactual thinking’ in people’s ascriptions to luck. Counterfactual thinking refers to how we often compare events or situations with imagined alternatives (e.g., Epstude & Roese, 2008; Roese, 1997). Such thinking seems to be central to how people often view events as lucky or unlucky, by imagining possible outcomes that might have easily happened that were either more attractive than what actually happened (in the case of events perceived as unlucky) or less attractive than what happened in reality (in the case of events perceived as lucky) (e.g., Teigen, 1995). When faced with events that are readily acknowledged as involving luck, at least in part, people seem to spontaneously engage in counterfactual thinking and it is this that may serve as the basis of the links between luck and gratitude. For example, Teigen and Jensen (2011) conducted interviews with 85 Norwegian tourists who had been exposed to the Tsunami disaster that struck Southeast Asia in December 2004. The majority of the sample had been in life threatening situations. Others had been close witnesses and suffered some kind of hardship as a consequence of the disaster. A first round of interviews took place between 9 and 11 months after the Tsunami, in which interviewees were asked to reflect on their experience of the Tsunami and its consequences. While the interviewers did not directly ask questions about luck, there was one question that was included towards the end of the interview that asked whether they had thought if there was something they might have done differently. Nearly all interviewees spontaneously, i.e., without being prompted, included reference to luck concepts (e.g., Norwegian terms such as ‘hell’/’uhell’ [meaning

lucky/unlucky] and ‘heldig’/’uheldig’ [fortunate/unfortunate]), with the vast majority making reference to good luck rather than bad luck.

On the face of it, this may seem surprising that interviewees were typically referring to how lucky they had been as opposed to how unlucky they might have regarded themselves to have been caught up in the disaster. It seems they were spontaneously comparing their experience to an imagined counterfactual scenario where things could have been much worse. As many thousands of people lost their lives in the disaster, it is easy to see how such tragic counterfactual outcomes might be easily imagined for these interviewees, and therefore they see themselves as being lucky or fortunate by comparison.

Gratitude, both of the ‘personal’ and ‘impersonal’ kind described above, was mentioned in a smaller proportion, around a quarter, of the interviews, often in connection to luck. The personal gratitude was directed towards people who had given them help during the disaster, whereas the impersonal gratitude, according to the authors “comes close to suggesting a belief in fate or higher powers, as the feeling of gratefulness seems to ask for someone to be thanked” (Teigen & Jensen, 2011, p. 52). A separate analysis searching for occurrences of counterfactual thinking revealed the predominance of downward counterfactual thinking (comparing to worse possible outcomes) over upward counterfactual thinking (comparing to better possible outcomes). Whilst not all of the expressions of counterfactual thinking were directly linked to expressions of luck, many were. The preponderance of feelings of good luck rather than bad luck, and downward counterfactual comparisons rather than upward comparisons, might be taken as further signs of the link between perceptions of luckiness and imagining how things might have been worse. Feelings of gratitude may play a part in this link.

It is therefore apparent that perceiving oneself as lucky can at least imply feelings of gratitude that involve appreciating the way an event may have turned out in comparison to a less attractive imagined possible alternative. As we have seen, even if the set of events in and of themselves are not attractive (such as being in a life threatening situation caused by a tsunami), one might still consider oneself as being fortunate by comparing to how things might have easily been worse (a lucky survivor). One might feel gratitude for this state of affairs, and this might be a general gratitude that is not directed to any particular person or group of people, but instead a more ‘impersonal’ feeling of being thankful. Thus, gratitude

may serve a purpose that helps us to cope with negative experiences, by allowing us to reappraise them with reference to imagined worse alternatives.

A separate, yet related, question concerns the role that gratitude might play in *creating* experiences that could be perceived as ‘good luck’ experiences. The argument here is less concerned with how gratitude reflects, or engenders, counterfactual thinking, and is more concerned with how a grateful attitude to life in general may play a role in bringing about experiences that are deemed fortunate. The discussion above suggests that an appreciative or grateful mindset might, at the very least, mean that more events in general will be *perceived* as lucky if one is able to readily bring to mind less attractive alternatives in contexts that we typically take for granted. For example, most people living in the developed world might get up in the morning and have a wash or take a shower with hot running water. It is something we take for granted. However, in some parts of the world hot running water cannot be taken for granted and, when we remind ourselves of this, we might more readily appreciate what we have access to that others do not.

In addition to this widening of what we might classify as lucky or fortunate, we may ask how gratitude could actively have an impact on the creation of luck experiences. Here we are drawing on work on gratitude that has examined the impact of keeping a regular gratitude journal, e.g., daily or once a week, in which one makes a note of things in one life that have happened over that that day or week for which one is grateful. Such work has highlighted how cultivating gratitude in this way can not only have a positive impact upon wellbeing, but also appears to have interpersonal benefits in that people indicate they are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviours such as helping someone with personal problem or offering emotional support (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

We speculate that a further positive consequence of cultivating gratitude that may be mediated through its interpersonal benefits is an increased possibility of what might be referred to as ‘interpersonal luck’. That is, prosocial behaviour towards others may have a reciprocal effect, meaning a rise in experiences of being the benefactor of unrequested, and perhaps unexpected, good deeds of others. Indeed, it may be through a process of this kind, at least in part, that one develops the kind of social ‘network of luck’ to which Wiseman (2004) refers. He describes how self-perceived lucky people tended to have a larger social network

than self-perceived unlucky people that they often built through seeking and creating opportunities to connect with others. The expression of gratitude to others, and the prosocial consequences of this, may be one way such a network is built echoing the suggestions by Steindl-Rast (1984; 2013) that gratitude promotes an expanded and stronger sense of social links and cohesion. This is something we will explore more fully below in relation to the ‘broaden and build’ theory of positive emotions (e.g., Fredrickson, 1998).

Positive emotions

As we have noted above, gratitude may at the very least confer emotional benefits or may be conceived as an emotion itself. The work of Barbara Fredrickson has taken the latter approach and has argued how this, alongside other ‘positive’ emotions, may have what she has termed a ‘broaden and build’ effect upon psychological processes and subsequent physical, intellectual, and social resources (Fredrickson, 1998). The theory is predicated on the question of what purpose do positive emotions serve. Fredrickson (1998) argued that existing theories of emotion were largely, if not fully, focused on emotions that might be typically regarded as ‘negative’ emotions, such as anger or fear. She therefore argued that theories to date did not sufficiently account for the range of positive emotions, especially in terms of the relationship between such emotions and our thought processes and actions. In an attempt to redress the balance and bring a clearer focus on those emotions that are typically regarded as positive (e.g., amusement, awe, joy, serenity), Fredrickson reassessed the claim that emotions lead to what theorists referred to as ‘specific action tendencies’ (e.g., Frijda, Kuipers, & Schure, 1989; Levenson, 1994). This term refers to the idea that emotions lead to “urges to act in a particular way” (Fredrickson, 1998, p. 302), such as anger might lead to attack, or fear might lead to escape. Fredrickson argues that it is clear how this might apply to these kinds of negative emotions, but less so in the context of positive emotions where any urge to act is not so specifiable. As a way of resolving this disparity between positive and negative emotions, she proposed instead that it may be more helpful to consider how emotions lead to ‘thought-action tendencies’, in which negative emotions would typically be associated with a narrowing of the thought-action repertoire and positive emotions with a broadening of the thought-action repertoire. From this perspective, we still might see fairly specific action tendencies associated with emotions like anger and fear, whereas positive emotions such as joy or amusement may lead to a wider range of ways of thinking and acting that are more open and playful. She goes on to propose that this broadened way of thinking and acting may, over time, serve to build a range of resources that can be subsequently drawn

on. Thus, playful behaviour may develop intellectual resources as we often learn through play, and may develop social resources as we seek to connect with others through play.

Fredrickson and her colleagues have undertaken a number of studies examining different aspects of this theory that have broadly supported the possible broadening and building effects of emotions (e.g., Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Fredrickson, 2013).

In the context of the present discussion, the question is to what extent might this model impact upon our understanding of ‘luck’ experiences? We speculate that to the extent that the model accurately explains some of the consequential thoughts and actions of positive emotions, then there may exist a mechanism by which positive emotions are an antecedent of experiences that may be attributed to luck. Let us consider first the proposed broadening effects of positive emotions upon the scope of one’s attention, thinking and action. A broadening effect on attention might mean that the focus of attention is softened, and our peripheral attention is widened, meaning that we may become more aware of our wider environment and therefore notice stimuli and opportunities that were previously ‘hidden’ to us, or outside of our awareness. Daniel Simons and colleagues’ work on inattentional blindness reveals how we can often be ‘blind’ to stimuli that should be quite obvious if our attention was not narrowly focused on some other task (e.g., Simons & Chabris, 1999). We might hypothesise that broadening effects of positive emotions on attention would result in a lessening of susceptibility to such inattentional blindness.

Assuming our broadened attention allows us to increase our awareness of possible opportunities in our environment, a broadening effect on how we *process* such opportunities may result in us being more likely to recognise these as opportunities that are relevant and potentially beneficial to us (i.e., as possible sources of fortuitous events). One way this might manifest itself is that broadened thinking processes lead to us being more willing and able to make connections between events and therefore increase the incidences of what appear to be meaningful occurrences and coincidences. If all this also leads to broadened action then we have a greater chance of action that capitalises on the opportunity that has presented itself and been interpreted as an opportunity.

We can therefore see that any possible broadening effects of positive emotions could have consequences for how we make sense of, and interact with, our environment. We speculate

that these could be instrumental in creating circumstances that form the basis of experiences that many of us might describe as lucky or fortunate.

If we turn to the second part of the proposed broadening and building consequences of positive emotions, we might further elucidate how these might lead to luck experiences. Fredrickson (1998) argues that the broadening effects of positive emotions serve to also build lasting resources. As noted above, these resources may be drawn upon sometime after the initial experience of the emotion itself. For example, social resources, in the form of friendships and acquaintances are ones that may be borne out of somewhat fleeting shared emotional experiences, yet they become a long-term feature of one's life that can be the source of comfort, support and love. They may also be the source of unexpected opportunities (e.g., job offers) that some would see strokes of luck. As these kinds of benefits are not likely to be perceived as being overtly connected with the original emotion then their occurrences are, instead, likely to be construed as 'merely' fortuitous.

Optimism

Psychological work on optimism has tended to conceive of optimism in the context of either having favourable generalised expectancies about the future (e.g., Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010) or making adaptive attributions about how events have turned out in the past (e.g., Seligman, 1991).

Whilst it may be that both conceptions of optimism have relevance in our discussion of 'luck' experiences, our focus here is on optimism for future events. When considering our expectations about how a future event might turn out, where there is some degree of uncertainty and we are not fully in control of the outcome, we may adopt an optimistic outlook that is characterised by an expectation that we may 'be lucky', in that we expect things will work out well. Smith (1998) found a link between perceived luckiness and optimism. Participants were administered a 'Perceived Luckiness Questionnaire' that allowed respondents to rate themselves in terms of how lucky or unlucky they perceived themselves to be, alongside an established measure of dispositional optimism, the Life Orientation Test (LOT) (Scheier & Carver, 1985). This latter measure aims to assess people's general expectancies about the future by having respondents rate their agreement with statements such as 'In uncertain times, I usually expect the best' and 'I rarely count on good things happening to me' (reverse scored).

Not too surprisingly, perceived luckiness was found to be strongly positively correlated with optimism, with the participants classified as ‘lucky’ on the PLQ obtaining significantly higher scores on the LOT than participants classified as ‘unlucky’. This pattern tells us that perceived luckiness and optimism are related, though it tells us little about any possible *causal* relationship between them. Is it that a broadly optimistic disposition, as reflected in higher scores on the LOT, might lead one to develop a perception of oneself as a lucky person? Alternatively, is the causal relationship the reverse... with a personal belief in one’s own luckiness being a *cause* of an optimistic outlook? This view seemed to be an underlying assumption behind the development of the LOT, with the authors suggesting that “a person may hold favorable expectancies for a number of reasons – personal ability, because the person is lucky, or because he is favored by others” (Scheier & Carver, 1985, p. 223). A further possibility is that there is some other factor that influences both perceived luckiness and optimism. For example, there may be an underlying aspect of personality that is at least partly responsible for both of these. A separate line of work has explored the relationship between beliefs about luck, optimism, and psychological wellbeing, suggesting that believing luck to be a positive and stable influence in one’s life may have adaptive consequences for wellbeing, and that this relationship is mediated by optimism (Day & Maltby, 2003).

The focus here has been on the relationship between optimism and *perceived* luckiness and *beliefs* about luck. In the context of the present discussion, we wish to go a step further to propose how optimism might play a role in *creating* luck experiences. We see this working in the way proposed by Wiseman (2004), in that a positive expectation about a future event, perhaps manifesting as a belief that one will be lucky, may play a role in bringing about the very event that one expects. In this regard it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: a belief in being lucky leads to the experience of being lucky.

Environmental mastery

The concept of ‘environmental mastery’ features within one of the major theoretical approaches to psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). It is presented as one of six distinct key dimensions of psychological wellbeing or positive functioning and is defined as a “capacity to manage effectively one’s life and surrounding world” (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; p. 720).

Environmental mastery, as conceived by Ryff and Keyes (1995), relates, in part, to the extent to which we are able to exert some kind of control over our environment, and includes how we might be able to take advantage of or create environmental opportunities. We must also ask whether the notion of environmental mastery also involve to some extent our willingness and capacity to seek influence and be open while relinquishing control? We note that many aspects of our environment are indeed beyond our control (e.g., traffic, the weather) and other aspects of our environment may be potentially controllable, yet we question whether they are aspects that we *need* to seek control over (e.g., other people's actions).

Researchers have long understood many aspects of the psychology of the extent to which we perceive personal control over our environment. Rotter's early work on locus of control revealed individual differences in how we tend to perceive the extent of control we have over what happens to us in our lives (Rotter, 1966). He argued that some of us have a tendency to perceive ourselves as instrumental in bringing about events (internal locus of control), whilst others may have a tendency to regard events as being due to factors that are beyond their control (external locus of control). His work heralded a wealth of research around the locus of control construct, much of which focused on specific contexts, such as health or occupational settings (e.g., Wallston, Wallston, & DeVellis, 1978; Spector, 1988). One theme of this body of work was to examine the relative benefits of an internal vs. external locus of control, with a consensus emerging that an internal locus of control was preferable, especially in the context of health outcomes, as this was associated with health-promoting behaviours over which each of us as individuals do have control, such as diet and exercise. In this context, it therefore seems that a bias in which our focus is towards seeing outcomes as something within our control is likely to be beneficial to our health. This may be especially true when we take into account that some people have a greater 'desire' for control than others, and when a high desire for control is combined with a tendency to perceive events as beyond one's control (i.e., an external locus of control) then this can have detrimental implications for mental health and has been found to linked to proneness to depression (e.g., Burger, 1984).

However, it seems likely that one would not want to be exclusively focused on our own agency in terms of bringing outcomes about, including health outcomes. There is value in being aware of when events are beyond our control and that we must accept them as such.

Acting as though we have control over an environment or events that are objectively beyond our control is to some extent human nature. Indeed, this ‘illusion of control’ has been observed in dice players who throw dice hard for a high number and more softly for a low number (Henslin, 1967). In a series of classic studies, people were consistently found to act as though they were exerting skill and control in a situation that was objectively determined by chance (e.g., Langer, 1975; Langer & Roth, 1975).

This apparent confusion or ambiguity with what we regard as potentially within or outside of our personal control is in fact central to our discussion of positive psychology in relation luck experiences. It is the essence of why we believe that these ideas have relevance to the broader theoretical discussion surrounding luck in the first place: events that appear out of our control may in reality, at least in part, be influenced by our interactions with the world. The perhaps surprising aspect of this, we argue, is that this influence may be brought about most effectively by our willingness to relinquish any direct attempts to exert control over these events. Instead, it is through practices such as cultivating gratitude, positive emotions, and an optimistic outlook that allow the space for us to recognise and appreciate the role of luck in our lives.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have attempted to draw out possible links between theoretical and research approaches that currently sit within positive psychology and how these may aid our understanding of luck experiences. Our focus has been on links between luck and gratitude, positive emotions, optimism, and environmental mastery, with an emphasis on how these might increase what might typically be described as ‘good luck’ experiences. Before we leave this discussion, it is important to note how these ideas may play a role in how we deal with ‘bad luck’ experiences. For example, an illness or an accident that leaves us restricted in how we go about our business may be construed by many as a case of bad luck. Losing one’s job through redundancy might be another common experience that would often be characterised as something that is bad luck.

Ways of coping with adversity have been explored by researchers whose focus has been on processes associated with resilience (e.g., Masten, 2001; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000). In the context of this work, Lyubomirsky and Della Porta (2010) have argued that proactively

adopting the kinds of approaches outlined in this chapter, such as cultivating gratitude or optimism, as a way of developing a resilience towards adversity. If we see experiences of misfortune as one form of adversity, then this approach reflects our own in terms of highlighting the role that positive psychology can play in how we cope with (bad) luck.

It is an approach that throws into question whether luck is indeed the untameable beast it might first appear. As we noted earlier, our everyday lives are a myriad of events that are to some extent with our control and to some extent beyond our control. Our acceptance and appreciation of this at a fundamental psychological level could be an important first step in bringing luck on our side. Further, when we start to consider the relationship between luck and the discipline of positive psychology, not only do we see how positive psychology might add to our understanding of luck experiences, we also see how introducing luck to the discipline of positive psychology may allow for a deeper awareness of the relationship between luck and psychological wellbeing. As reflected in the words of Cohen (1960) that opened this chapter, luck is experienced personally, not in the abstract, and the influences on our lives have personal nuances and locations and the meaning attributed to it reflects personal stories and lives. If we bear this in mind, then further psychological assessments of luck have the capacity to more fully unpack the link between luck, psychology and health.

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