What is important for getting on in life – money, looks, who you know or your own effort?
The beliefs of 20-year-olds
Aisling Murray, ESRI
• Cohort ‘98 at age 20
• Bespoke questions on ‘what is necessary for getting on in life’
• Emerged as a new topic from focus groups with young adults: what ‘helped or hindered’ them
  – Increasing awareness that multiple factors influenced, or appeared to influence, opportunity – especially for jobs
  – ‘Who you know’, social background (e.g. ‘wrong address’), money (e.g. capacity to take up an unpaid internship), looks
• Combined with other ‘expected’ factors: own effort, family support, to form new item
• How important do you think each of the following is in getting on in life for a 20-year-old in general. Please give a score of 0 to 10 for each, where 0 means ‘not at all important’ and 10 means ‘very important’.
  – Your own effort
  – Your education/training
  – Money
  – Who you know
  – Your appearance/looks
  – Your family background
  – Support from your family
  – Luck
A whistle-stop tour of the life-course perspective

• Following summary based on the work of Elder and colleagues – and a recent keynote by Jeylan Mortimer (SLLS, 2021)

• Agency

• Linked lives

• Time and place
• Projective agency: imagining future possible trajectories for self — influenced by individual’s hopes, fears and beliefs about capacity to make things happen

• Set goals, come up with strategies and put resources into making them happen

• Interaction between agency (freedom of choice) and structure (constraints) — to what extent is agency moulded by social structures especially if inequality of opportunity?

Summary based on the work of Elder and colleagues — and a recent keynote by Jeylan Mortimer (SLLS, 2021)
Linked lives: an individual’s trajectory is influenced by other people in their network

- Encouragement for particular choices (e.g. in education)
- Benefitting from others’ resources (e.g. ‘who – parents – know’)
- Events in linked lives that alter your trajectory (e.g. parental illness)
- Observation of how things panned out for people close to you

Time and place: geography, social and historical context, special events (such as the Great Recession and the COVID pandemic)

- Sense of agency may influence how an individual copes with a catastrophic event
  - Concrete plans may be more likely to be followed through; self-belief to control outcomes; flexibility

Summary based on the work of Elder and colleagues – and a recent keynote by Jeylan Mortimer (SLLS, 2021)
Items in perspective

• Agency (or lack of)
  – Your own effort
  – Your education/training
  – Your appearance/looks
  – Luck

• Linked lives
  – Money
  – Who you know
  – Your family background
  – Support from your family
Frequency distributions

- Own effort: 87% rating 8 or more out of 10
- Education/training: 71%
- Support from family: 69%
- Money: 58%
- Who you know: 54%
- Family background: 24%
- Appearance/looks: 23%
- Luck: 22%

Median importance (out of 10)

% of people rating item as 8 or more out of 10
Main gender differences

- Education/training: Men 68%, Women 75%
- Support from family: Men 65%, Women 72%
- Who you know: Men 58%, Women 50%
- Luck: Men 25%, Women 20%

% rating as very important (8 plus)
Main social class differences

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<td>Luck</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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Summary of findings

• One’s ‘own effort’ was almost universally recognised as being highly important
• Education/training was also important but young women were more likely to rate it as ‘very’ important (75% vs 68%)
• Women, and those in middle and lower class groups, attached more importance to ‘support from family’ than men or those from the highest family social class (overall median of 8 out of 10)
• Most 20-year-olds attached at least some importance to ‘who you know’ (median 8/10) – just over half rated it ‘very important’. More important for men – but no social class differences
Potential next steps

- Factor analysis of items to potentially identify ‘agency’ and ‘linked lives’ factors
- Contrast new item with other theoretically-related GUI instruments
  - Locus of control (age 17/18)
  - Autonomy subscale of ‘basic needs’ measure (age 20)
- Compare with higher/lower aspirations (age 20; earlier waves for job aspirations)
- Longitudinally compare with childhood/adolescence measures that might have shaped sense of agency: parental education, self-concept, traumatic events, impact of recession on family finances
Acknowledgments

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• GUI staff and interviewers
• DCEDITY and CSO