



13th Annual
Research
Conference
2021

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

Background

- 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

New measure

- 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

Agency

- 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?

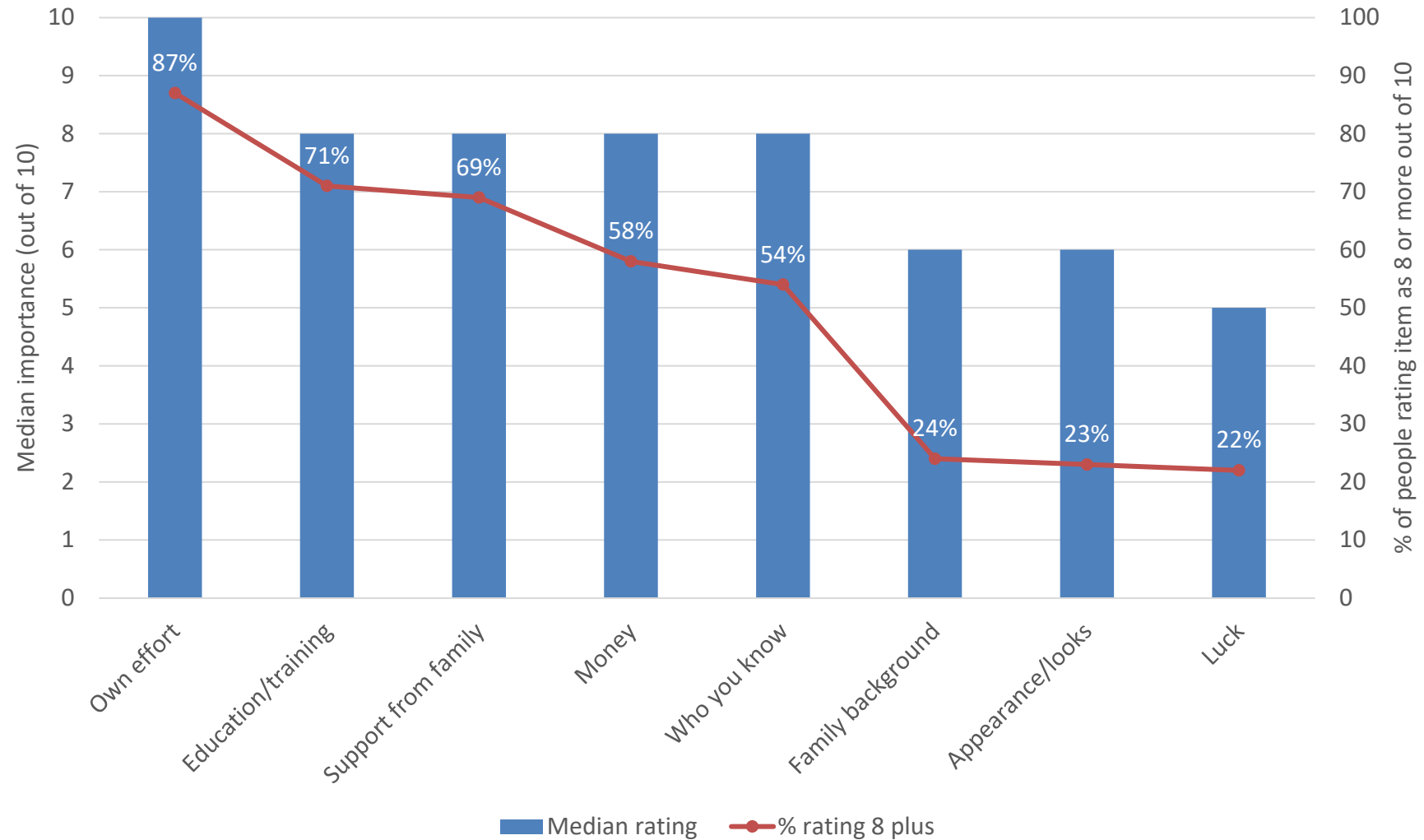
Linked lives/Time and place

- **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

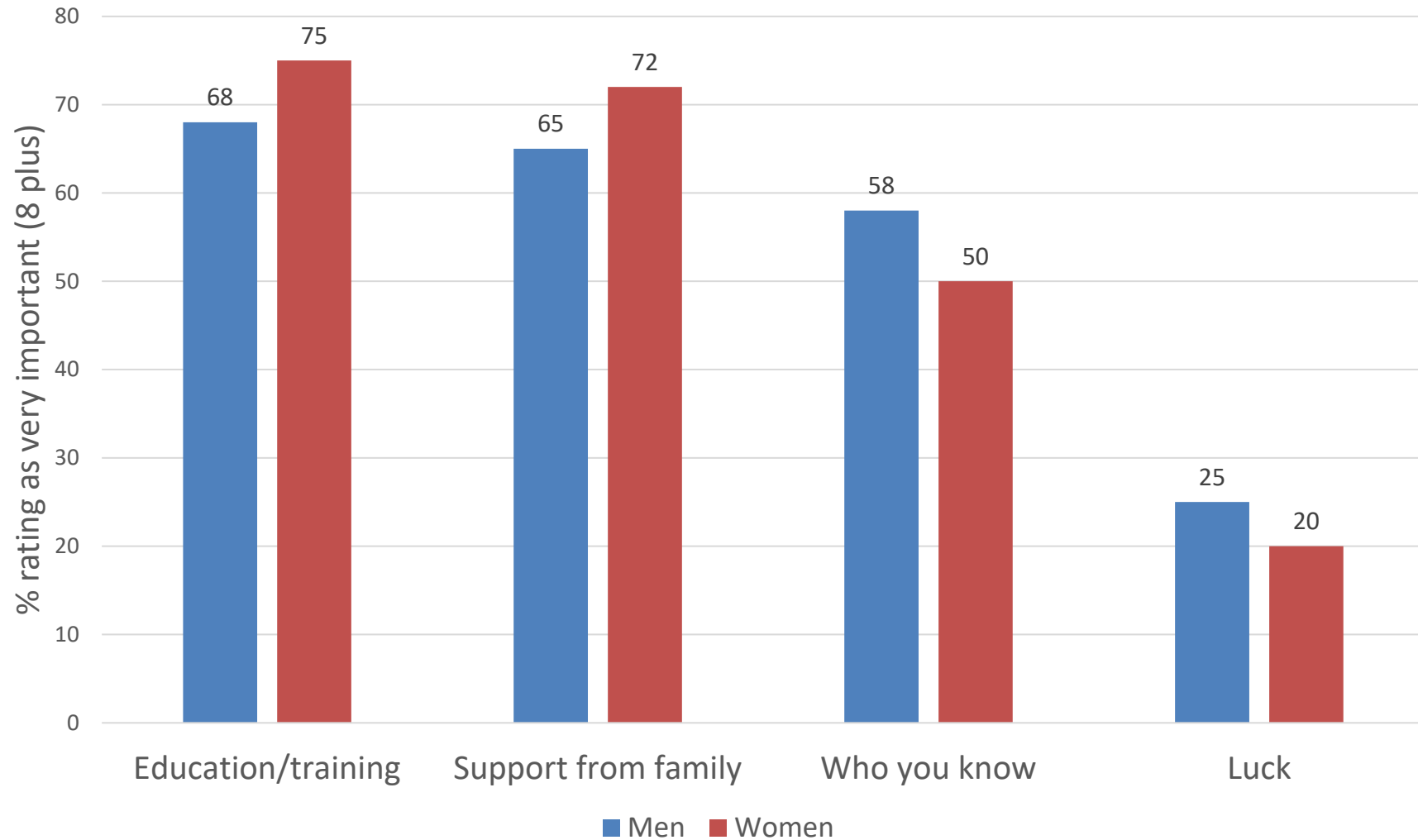
Items in perspective

- 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

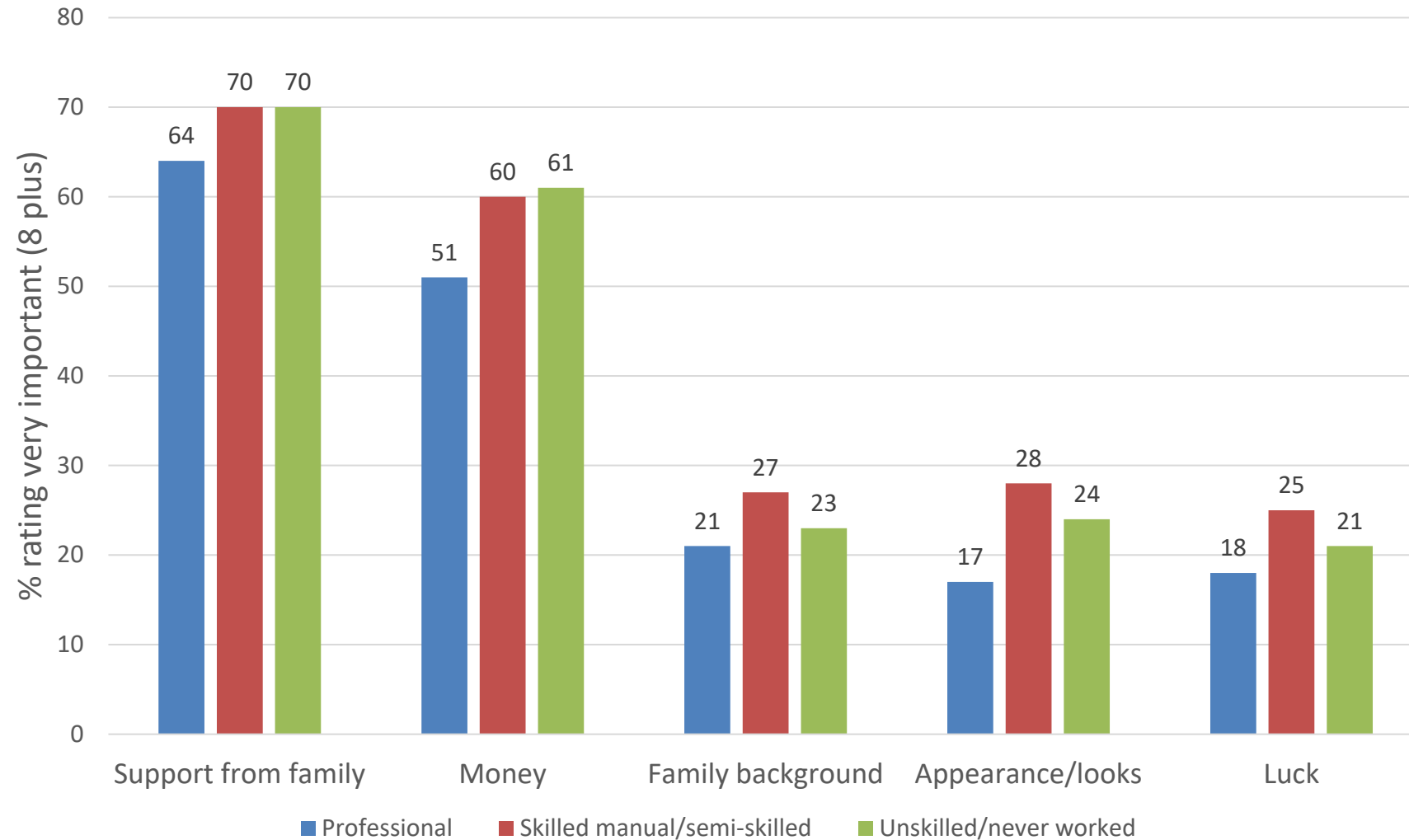
Frequency distributions



Main gender differences



Main social class differences



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

- Participating young people, families and schools
- GUI staff and interviewers
- DCEDIY and CSO