Grounded theology: A new method to explore luck

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Abstract
The idea of luck has been explored, but not well developed, in three disciplines: philosophy, psychology, and theology. This article uses grounded theory to explore the theme of luck through 15 qualitative interviews with subjects aged between 60 and 75. The sample represented a variety of agnostic and Christian perspectives. The idea of luck was found to be a messy concept, but revealed aspects of participants' worldviews and how they make meaning. This led to two conclusions. The idea of luck is subversive and emotionally messy. This article introduces the idea that grounded theory might be useful as a theological methodology, which could be termed grounded theology.

Keywords
grounded theology, luck, theological methodology, grounded theory

Almost everyone does ‘theology.’ We look for or construct meaning, a universal task, with religious people looking beyond the ordinary to see transcendence or indications of the divine.1 Perhaps we understand less about the process of establishing a worldview and making meaning. This article is an attempt to examine this through the eyes of ordinary people.

This study focuses on luck and considers concepts relevant to theological themes. The approach is guided by grounded theory, one of the most influential of qualitative research methods. The intention of what I am calling grounded theology is to use qualitative data to investigate the process of believing and finding what is of ultimate meaning.

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Towards a grounded theology

Grounded theory has influenced social science research for nearly 50 years and has produced countless theoretically innovative studies. Potentially this is a powerful methodology that employs a range of strategies to gather rich data, and allow the “emergence of conceptual categories” with careful analysis to produce explanations and potentially new theories. The “theory making” potential of grounded theory might prove relevant to theology.

Over the years grounded theory has employed techniques such as interviewing and theoretical sampling. Data are analyzed using coding: initial, focused, possibly axial, and then theoretical coding. The process of theorizing “as you go” is facilitated by memo-writing and sorting categories then finally proposing theory. It is an inherently adaptable process and possibly well suited to theological research.

The study

Grounded theory uses interviews to gather qualitative data. This study used an approach of purposeful sampling with the “snowball technique” of approaching potential subjects. I asked a group of friends, including clergy, to approach some older people they knew who are articulate and thoughtful about questions of meaning. This method of gathering a sample is also known as “chain referral,” which has limitations since it is not a random selection but is useful to identify people with specific traits or interests. I provided information about the study and asked my contacts to forward an email outlining the project to people who might be interested. The sample was restricted to the following criteria: (1) aged 60–75; (2) not in residential care; and (3) not formally trained in theology.

I gained ethics approval through Charles Sturt University and interviewed 15 people aged between 60 and 75 years (mean = 67). The interviews lasted about 20 minutes and were transcribed. Each person chose a pseudonym to preserve anonymity. The following 15 people consented to be part of the study:

- Bill age 68 Agnostic
- Nell age 72 Agnostic
- Sarah age 62 Agnostic
- Anselm age 75 Liberal Protestant
- Hannah age 69 Liberal Protestant
- Campbell age 70 Anglo-Catholic
- Annie age 67 Anglo-Catholic
- Rowan age 65 Anglo-Catholic
- Jean age 67 Charismatic
- Frances age 62 Charismatic
- Anthony age 65 Charismatic
- Ruth age 63 Charismatic
- John age 69 Reformed
- Elizabeth age 67 Reformed
- Susan age 66 Pentecostal

The sample was purposeful to investigate views associated with aging. This is consistent with grounded theory, to begin with a general topic and no predetermined research problem. The sample interviewed represented a range of perspectives: agnostic/atheist (3), Liberal Protestant (2), Anglo-Catholic (3), Reformed (2), Charismatic (4), and Pentecostal (1). These classifications are mine but generally reflect church allegiance if present. There was no attempt to include people of other faiths. The sample comprised those well-educated, financially secure and living in Canberra, the national capital of Australia.

The questions explored themes such as the influence of aging, meaning, significant or unusual events, and attitudes to luck. This study on luck is the first of four from these interviews. I have since followed up with further interviews to explore additional topics. This exploratory approach is consistent with grounded theory.

In grounded theory the researcher is encouraged to approach data without preconceptions. However, this is impossible, so it is better to accept the pragmatic principle that an open mind does not mean an empty head.5 There is no initial literature review but other perspectives will be brought into later discussion. I approached the study on luck with a general view of luck as a descriptive concept, and I was surprised at the range of meanings which emerged from participants.

Once the data from interviews was collected and transcribed, I coded the data using NVivo 10, which was helpful to identify what I consider micro-themes. However, I found this less useful than grouping general themes, then “match and compare” analysis of themes, idea mapping with sheets of paper, and my thoughts expanded through memo-writing. I tried to include the emotional reactions of participants in what might be considered data. The emerging themes tended to be large and it was better to visually represent ideas relevant to an individual’s beliefs. This helped the final stage of sorting and refining ideas to inform theoretical conclusions. Grounded theory encourages a flexible approach in working with a range of data in order to facilitate the emergence of themes, findings, and ultimately theory-building.

**Results**

It is trite but true to assert that people bring their assumptions to understanding something. But this is not the whole picture. Everything about being human is brought to “meaning making,” including experiences, attitudes, values, expectations about how things are, and of course emotions. This richness was obvious in the interviews.

The question of how we understand luck is interesting. On the surface it is just a concept, but for some people it seems to have some kind of substance. It is also linked to worldview, so luck is relevant to an understanding of the process of believing and finding ultimate meaning. An initial question for this study was, How do attitudes to luck reveal the process of forming theologically relevant beliefs? But with grounded theory this was just the start of the journey.

Some in the study identified the neutral concept of luck, for example Annie saw luck operating “when I play cards” or Hannah while playing golf. Nell defined it in descriptive terms: “I mean, what is luck? I mean, luck is where you find yourself without your own doing.” Responses indicated a range of views of what is random and what determined.

No imposed order

The more agnostic participants accepted that life was ordered and best described by scientific laws. Order is not imposed by God and there is something random in the fabric of reality. Bill asserted, “There’s no one rolling the dice.” He added, “Imagine that I was going to be born tomorrow and I could be any of the 100,000 people who are going to be born this year, what sort of laws would I want under those circumstances not knowing who I was going to be…And so, yes, in that sense I have been lucky but is it random? Well that depends on whether you believe the universe to be deterministic or not.” Bill might consider a version of scientific determinism but not an imposed order. Sarah struggled with the many tragedies of her life, including the birth of a disabled son, and concluded that things are random, “W [her son] wasn’t sent to me, he was just born and he’s got a mutation on the 27th chromosome.” She also rejected the idea of luck: “I don’t think I believe in luck at all. I think there’s serendipity.”

Both an imposed order and random events

A number of the Christians saw it differently. Rowan observed, “Well yes, it must have been wisely ordered.” Campbell saw an overall providence: “I’m not alone in the universe. I’m not an isolated ego in a bag full of skin you know, that there is a providence.” He added a qualification: “It appears as random but it’s not perceived as random. You sense a happening or a kind of a nudging of events.” This implies some control by God, at least at the edges. Campbell’s life had been affected by cancer: “I see cancer as a random part of (reality). I accept it as part of a flawed cosmos.” Annie also acknowledged that random bad things happen, “but what’s going on the world?...and much more personally about when bad things happen to good people; random things happen.”

What contributes to this randomness? How is it bounded? Anthony wanted to include a dimension of free will in influencing how things turn out: “Um, I don’t really...there are random events that happen in life, God has made the universe as such that a lot of the time you make your own way but there are also random events that are superimposed upon that and really then it is how you respond to those events.” Anselm saw a challenge to shape one’s fortune:

I mean, you’re dealt a pack of cards but the one you turn over is random and what you do with what you’ve turned over is not necessarily what is meant to be. You can be dealt a pretty bad deal but that doesn’t mean to say that it wasn’t always meant to
be that you would get that bad deal. You turned the card over and it’s what you made of it.

Anselm continued, “I tend to resist the word ‘luck’ because that’s just chance… Yeah, whereas with fortune you can make it, you can help it to happen.” He concluded, “Lots of good fortune, you know, we have three perfectly healthy children, no serious problems at all during childhood and so on.” Susan said, “No, not at all. I believe that my life wasn’t an accident at all, that my life was destined and purpose[d] before I ever came onto this Earth and so, because I belong to Jesus, my life and times are in his hand and he guides my step and he guides my way. Yes, I make choices and I make decisions, but overall his hand is guiding my life.

She emphasized both divine order and her responses. With Jean there was a theological objection to luck:

I can see things that have happened that some people might call luck that I would probably call providence or God. But on the other hand I don’t like… the converse of that is that if something bad happens then God has allowed that to happen and I don’t like that either. So, no I don’t think so. I don’t think I believe in luck.

Frances found the idea foreign: “No, luck has no meaning for me. Well, I wouldn’t say, I guess I wouldn’t use the work luck in relationship to my own life because I guess I’m looking to God to my life and trust in him for the things that happen and I guess I, yes, the choices that I make will affect my life.” Annie was also relational: “an overwhelming feeling of being embraced by God’s presence.” But luck, “it’s just, it is utterly random. Whereas I see grace quite differently.” She identified an “active presence.”

There is a tension between asserting a divine order and acknowledging individual choice and random events. This tension is avoided in the final category.

**All determined and nothing random**

Some resisted any notion of randomness and consequently luck. Elizabeth said in response to the question of luck, “Not really. If God knows how many hairs I’ve got on my head, why would he not be in charge of everything?” She added, “I might call it luck, I might say ‘That was a lucky thing’ but in fact I don’t truly believe it.” Ruth reflected, “My primary reality is that I’m here because God has a purpose for me and I’m God’s person.” She added, “I don’t like the term luck because that speaks to me of superstition or something.” John saw God determining reality: “No randomness whatsoever.” And he rejected any notion of luck: “No, not at all. No such chance.”

How did these views develop? There were indications of the process. In the “no imposed order” group, Bill explained, “I’m evidence-based so if there’s evidence
one way I’ll go one way, if there’s evidence the other way I’ll go the other way.” He valued his scientific training and a rational process. This was similar to Nell: “I wasn’t pursuing meaning; I was pursuing truth.” Sarah showed more of an emotional basis in her reasoning. She could not accept the tragedies in her life being allowed by God. She added, “It doesn’t make any sense to me when people talk about a benevolent God or the horrible, cruel random things that happen in the world and I’m part of the people who think ‘What kind of a God would allow those kinds of things to go on?’”

In the paradox group, for want of a better term, reality was ultimately personal, so relational, with God in overall control. Ruth was confident: “My understanding of God is that he is relationship. He embodies relationship—Father Son and Holy Spirit.” Campbell expressed this in terms of providence and illustrated it with a saying of his mother: “Trust Life.” He continued, “Luck I see as a kind of secular kind of fatalism, a disguised fatalism really, you know, that ‘shit happens’ or ‘what will be will be’. . . I think, no, to me the concept of providence as I have just explained, felt through serendipitous experiences looks like luck.” In this group there seemed to be at least two factors influencing the view expressed: free will and not attributing bad events to God. Anthony emphasized free will: “There are random events that happen in life. God has made the universe as such that a lot of the time you make your own way but there are also random events that are superimposed upon that and really then it is how you respond to those events.” Susan asserted, “My life is ordered and planned by God.” But this includes, “I make choices and I make decisions, but overall his hand is guiding my life.” Anselm thought he could contribute to positive outcomes in life: “There are other things that other people might just say that that was just pure chance but somehow or other you know that it’s not pure chance, that something was behind it, that something led up to it and something followed it.” Jean wanted an overall sense of God-in-control, but also some randomness to allow tragedy: “something bad happens then God has allowed that to happen and I don’t like that either.” Ruth allowed for mystery: “I’m happy holding a paradox because it doesn’t worry me that I can’t fully explain that while believing that. Life is like that and if you want explanations and clear-cut answers or whatever, then you are going to be very dissatisfied because that isn’t really what life is like.”

In the “nothing random” group God was in control down to the smallest details of life. This was based on theological belief but also essentially a trust in God’s goodness. Elizabeth believed, “Life is a precious gift from the Lord I guess and He gives and takes as he sees fit.” John was clear that God was in control of “Every detail. Yes, yes. I think that’s absolutely [the case]. I wouldn’t say that I worried about that perspective but as I look back, my perspective now and in recent years, utterly and absolutely for sure.” John added, “There are things that have been meant to be on account of the way the Lord is sovereign so that means he is going to make sure you get home tonight or you are going to go and meet him.” This group expressed a clear trust in God who would either determine or allow everything that happens.


Discussion

Luck has nuanced meanings. Cohen said,

The idea of luck is ubiquitous but by no means simple, in the sense that it means the same to everyone, everywhere. Expressions for “luck” in different languages introduce 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.6

This diversity of understanding of luck was born out in this study.

It was surprising that people reacted to the idea of luck. I consider the term to be broadly descriptive, like gravity, which simply describes something, so how can the concept be offensive? This was interesting—and begs the question “Why?” The implications of this study are that luck is both metaphysically subversive and emotionally messy. This will be discussed after considering various approaches to understanding luck.

The idea of luck has been explored, but not well developed, in three relevant disciplines: philosophy, psychology, and theology. Luck has not been well defined, but a reasonable proposal using the philosophical notion of “possible worlds” has been advanced.7 It has been observed that chance seems to apply to events but in some way luck attaches to people affected by an event. In philosophy the most attention has been given to how the idea of luck undermines moral responsibility. Nagel raised ethical issues.8 He asked us to consider two moral agents, both of whom drive home intoxicated. The “unlucky” driver kills an innocent bystander, the “lucky” driver gets home safely and without injuring anyone—or even getting caught. The difference is luck. But we would condemn the unlucky driver more than the lucky one. So luck has an influence on our moral judgments, which is ethically problematic. There has also been some thought about how our understandings about how we know something can co-exist with the presence of luck.9

Perhaps more relevant to the discussion here has been the consideration of luck in psychology. Attributional research has investigated how individuals describe an event in terms of luck.10 Darke and Freedman developed “The Belief in Good Luck Scale” with high scorers having a stronger belief that luck is a personal and stable

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influence in daily life. Ideas about luck and whether you are lucky can influence mental health. There are negative consequences to believing you are unlucky. Indeed, a belief in personal good luck can be regarded as an adaptive cognitive process.

Gamblers often have idiosyncratic views of luck. Both chance and luck are considered real, but different causes of events. In a study by Keren and Wagenaar 28 gamblers were interviewed with only 6 seeing no difference between luck and chance. Luck functions as a kind of agent. The gamblers tended to see a lucky streak as determined and that a successful gambler can discern this to their advantage. Sometimes this reflects a belief that a person has a hidden skill to manipulate events, for example to “choose the horse that will win.” It seems common in some East Asian cultures to see personal luck as a source of security and optimism. Some researchers have turned to parapsychology to investigate this further.

Generally participants did not embrace such notions. There was a denial of any substance in their understanding of luck. Many said that they did not believe in luck. The closest to the idea of luck attaching to a person was Rowan, who described someone who seemed to be lucky:

It’s funny, I don’t really believe in it but I’ve been amazed at people’s wins with chocolate wheels and meat trays in pubs and things, ambulance fund raising activities. I remember a sister-in-law who was walking to a gaming place and one drop of a coin and pull of a handle as it was in those days and she would win the jackpot.

But then her life worked out badly: “She became morbidly obese and I saw her at one of my brother’s funerals recently and she’s on oxygen and you know, electric wheelchair but she manages to attract people to her.” It appears that luck is a messy concept with unclear boundaries, and is not clearly defined.

There has not been much theological interest in luck. Perhaps amusingly a Google search located the Church of Good Luck, which has “the laws of nature” in its credo but maintains that “luck has well established technologies such as hoodoo and lucky items,” and suggests that “you can change your luck for the better—using various rituals and traditional methods.” Fringer and Lane have written Theology of Luck: Fate, Chaos and Faith. The main concern of these authors was to answer the question, “What kind of God exists?” They examined

various views of God, some traditional, to conclude that God is part of a relational system in which there are random events. The authors argue that for a genuine relationship there has to be human choice, and in order to achieve this God limits his control with real consequences—which can be described as good or bad luck by those affected. In creation everything is intrinsically interrelated. In the brokenness of the post-fall world there will always be uncontrollable forces that affect us. This impedes choice while not being divinely ordained. The paradox is the place of luck or chance.

A theological discussion will lead to the question of God’s sovereignty. A more traditional view that “God-controls-everything” has been restated by Wayne Oates who presented a choice between believing in luck as a secular faith or to trust in God’s providence. But are these the only two options? The Bible recognized chance (Ecc 9:11–12). David Bartholomew, former professor of statistics at the London School of Economics, argued that God uses chance, which is inherent in creation.

Sanders contrasted views of providence in which God either takes risks or doesn’t. The risk-taking God only makes sense if he is personal and enters into genuine give-and-take relations with his creatures. In his model of relational theism, God’s intention in creation was for us to experience triune love and to respond with love of our own; God in his sovereignty has decided to make some of his actions contingent on us; God exercises general rather than meticulous providence, allowing space for us to operate; and God has granted us the freedom necessary for a relationship of love to develop.

How do we understand luck? Had the group been a sample of gamblers, perhaps recruited at a local casino or race track, then the views might have been very different. Generally people in this study reacted negatively to the idea of luck being a force or having a reality of its own. Ruth expressed this: “I think the term good luck or bad luck is sort of, how can I describe it, a kind of construction people have made to explain how they feel or what’s happened to them. No, I don’t like that term at all. Yes, so I don’t like the term good luck or bad luck.” Luck emerged in this study as a metaphysically subversive idea. If we are to accept that luck implies something operating to favor some and not others, then it becomes challenging to all perspectives. First the agnostic tended to see reality as ordered, ultimately impersonal, and random. The notion of luck challenges this and asserts that there may be ways to exercise a magical control over desired outcomes. The idea of luck also challenges a concept of divine order. Curiously for the “limited random” group, it challenges overall order and, as for the agnostic, is disruptive of areas of randomness. It is also an affront to strong sovereignty views. So luck it

would appear is a subversive idea to all the perspectives in this study, because if it were to possess any substance it would undermine various understandings of the nature of reality.

Luck also seems emotionally messy. Most people expressed feeling fortunate. Bill said,

I am very fortunate . . . being born into the family . . . mostly come from fairly affluent families, families who have a decent education, families who, relative to their society and their group of the time have been comfortably off and we are like a sort of minority I think you know, 1% or 2% of the world’s population.

John expressed, “I don’t think He’s favored me but he’s been very graceful about it.” But unfair things happen in life. The good die young, the wicked prosper, as the psalmists observed long ago (e.g., Ps 73:3). Misfortune affected the people in the study in various ways. This included traumatic childhoods, including sexual abuse, Nell’s father leaving her family when she was five, the death of two of Annie’s children, the profound disabilities of a child born to Sarah, the suicide of Sarah’s husband, the loss of a partner of many years (Rowan), and unhappy marriages (Hannah and Susan). Most of this is beyond our agency, so it feels like “it happens to us” in a mindless way.

And we must make sense of it even without a belief in God. Sarah recalled, “And when my son W was born, I don’t believe in God, but when he was born I definitely felt I was being punished by whoever, it was not God, because I’d been an evil and bad person, I mean you’re just trying to make sense of it and I couldn’t make any sense.” Sarah reflected, “I never believed in God. I mean, I would dearly [have] loved to have had a religion to turn to, something to give me some solace.” This is perhaps even more difficult for those who believe in God. Hannah said, “Sometimes I think, Why am I here?, and They’re over there and suffering in that way, no, but you use the word loosely but I don’t really believe in it.”

While the people in this study described their own lives as fortunate, this might not sit well when we all know others who have suffered “bad luck.” I will try to express the emotional dissonance in starkly religious language: Why am I blessed? Why are they cursed? And these questions have no obvious answers.

Jesus was asked about an accident in which the tower of Siloam fell and 18 Galileans died. The question to Jesus was whether they were worse sinners than those who survived unscathed? Jesus answered, “I tell you, No” (Luke 13:3). They were not worse sinners, which was a theological idea of the time to explain bad luck (and undoubtedly held by some today). Some issues never go away. We cannot neglect the conceptually subversive and emotionally messy qualities of luck. Both touch on theodicy, but sharpen the dissonance. Theologically, what do we do with the messy? It seems natural to have a measure of avoidance, with the concept remaining unformulated. This seems true both at the formal theological level and the level of lay belief.
A grounded theology?

Grounded theology is a postmodern methodology constructing and incorporating different perspectives. It listens. The central focus is on the contributions of those interviewed—to analyze and understand. The participants provided their understanding based on life experiences and principles of understanding.18 At this point this theological method is similar to ordinary theology.19 But the ordinary theology approach to lay beliefs is more like mapping and then comparing this to the theological tradition. The focus is on a description of their God-talk.20 Christie concluded from her interviews, “in matters christological, ordinary believers only take what they need.”21 In this study I used grounded theology to investigate the process of believing. The contrasts are sharpened, not resolved.

Indeed what has emerged in this study is more a focus on believing than beliefs. Grounded theology is far better suited to the investigation of how we believe rather than judging or smoothing out inconsistencies in beliefs or assessing in terms of the theological tradition with ordinary theology. In this study there was space for processes of both constructing and discovering meaning.22 This may provide an empirical investigation of what Graham Ward has proposed in his recent book Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don’t.23

Additionally, in considering luck, the people interviewed generally had an emotional reaction. This carried some implications which were explored with luck being metaphysically subversive and emotionally messy. Both aspects were supported in the interview data and reflected a range of perspectives. This is what grounded theology as a method delivered—emergent concepts to consider further and possibly use the way we ascribe substance, with ontological implications, to build theory, or theology. Hopefully this will further develop in later studies.

It seems unlikely that grounded theology will ever deliver a coherent systematic theology. It does not provide a methodology to move from many perspectives to a single viewpoint. There is a stopping point at personal beliefs. It explores the credo or “I believe.” Perhaps it is a methodology that can apply to messy concepts such as luck. It is well suited to the discipline of practical theology—it has a low center of gravity. It is grounded.

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