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Chapter 5

Individualization as an Interpretive Scheme of Inequality: Why Class and Inequality Persist

Gerd Nollmann and Hermann Strasser

Introduction: Individualization and the Alleged Death of Class

In the 1980s and 1990s, commentators widely debated a possible *death of class* (Marshall, Pakulski, Waters, and Sørensen 2000). Scholars have stressed that contemporary societies appear to be highly individualized, so that the class concept has lost most of its significance. The connection between social origins and occupational destinations is said to have been loosened so that it is no longer appropriate to conceive of modern life as characterized by collective class fates. Scholars depict a new modernity that has replaced the old, industrial class society (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). In what follows, we will not try to list the many claims and counter-claims that have been presented in these sometimes furious debates. Rather, we believe that the “death of class” debate highlights the necessity to establish more systematically the assumptions that contemporary class research makes. Only then will the precise causal assumptions of both individualization theorists and class researchers be clear. In what follows, we want to elaborate conceptually on these assumptions and develop a framework that shows that there is some truth in both the class and individualization theories, since, to some degree, class researchers and individualization theorists make causal statements that, according to Max Weber, need to be combined instead of being considered as irreconcilable (Nollmann and Strasser forthcoming).

Hence, we will begin with some less controversial statements about individualization. We will then take a closer look at the theoretical foundations of the controversy about the impact of individualization on class and show how contemporary notions of individualization and class might be reconciled in both theory and empirical research. In order to illustrate our points, we will present results of an exploratory survey on contexts and domains of class-specific causal attributions in the life course. Finally, we will discuss results and conclude that the raging debate between individualization and class theorists may not have produced a definite outcome, but it has nevertheless contributed to more epistemological reflection in the social sciences.

Debates about Individualization

The historical process of individualization can be divided into several stages. The historical foundations of individualization lie in the process of enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Instead of exploring the natural order of the world, philosophers began to stress the importance of individual action and the possibility of change in society. As such, this train of thought is usually referred to as "individualism" (Lukes 1973). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a second stage of individualization began with the formation of civil society and an increasing division and industrialization of labor as described by Georg Simmel. Simmel (1897), in his essay *Roses: A Social Hypothesis*, tells a fictitious story of a "terrible" form of inequality. All people have their own piece of land and can live from it. However, some of them grow roses. For a while, this difference is accepted like the natural distribution of beauty and ugliness. But slowly, the anger grows. Agitators say that all humans have a natural right to roses. With allusions to the famous writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx, Simmel shows how envy is generated. A revolutionary party is created that sees itself in opposition to the owners of roses who try legally to assure their rose monopoly. However, in the name of justice, the revolutionary party manages to equalize the rose property so that everybody—at least for a while—is happy. Unfortunately, new differences become visible. Some roses are bigger and more beautiful than others. Again, anger grows about the unequal distribution of such differences and another revolutionary situation emerges. As in a fairy tale, the story can go on, and on, and on.

Simmel's sociological fairy tale makes clear what is really interesting about the study of social inequality: it is not only the change and continuity of the absolute distribution of goods, but also the change and continuity of

people's *interpretations* of differences that have significant consequences in modern society. This position matches Weber's insistence on the *meaningful* character of modern human conduct that needs to be studied in combination with "structural" distributions. Also, Simmel's rose hypothesis stresses that further attempts to promote equality will lead to a higher consciousness of remaining inequalities. As humans are sensitive to differences, social inequality represents a useful instrument for political leaders aiming at popularity through the promotion and introduction of redistributive programs. Nevertheless, as Simmel points out, revolutionary attempts at more equality will not be successful and do not necessarily lead directly to more happiness.

Simmel's early study takes into account only two typical interpretations of differences. At first, people interpret the unequal distribution of roses as natural and traditional; that is, external to their own and others' behavior. In the following stage, the distribution is interpreted as unjust. Here, there is an expression of an assumed common will that sees the distribution as unwanted, prompting calls for change. In this way, Simmel shows how people develop a more "individualized" view of inequality. He implies that the latter attribution will become more frequent in modern society.

The age of individualization generally enacts more utilitarianism of economic relationships, weakening of social bonds, and the decline of large families and of local communities. At the same time, scholars stress the self-determination of the individual. Autobiographies become more common. The concept of romantic love advances to a dominant norm of intimate relationships and the relation to God is personalized, especially in "protestant individualism" (Weber 1905b). More recently, scholars have emphasized a second process of individualization that, since the 1960s, has modified traditional understandings of the self. According to Anthony Giddens (1991) and Ulrich Beck (1992), contemporary societies generate a new radicalization and universalization of the individualization process. Old concepts like status and class tend to become obsolete. There is a growing social pressure toward reflexive lifestyles and higher education. With pluralized lifestyles and individualized life courses, meaning and identity need to be found individually.

Looking at this short history of individualism, we would not overstate the case by attributing a relatively high degree of consensus across the behavioral sciences about some of the following meanings of individualization:

1. First, there is agreement that individualization refers to a process in modernity that makes people attribute the reasons for behavior more often to themselves than to external factors. People believe they make

- their own decisions instead of perceiving their life course as natural fate or as determined from outside.
2. Second, scholars generally agree that such beliefs may not accurately reflect the social forces that social scientists observe from outside. Even if people consider themselves as more or less independent decision makers, there is no doubt that their behavior is subject to external restrictions. For example, inequalities in the distribution of income and wealth have steadily risen in many countries since 1970 (Alderson and Nielsen 2002).
 3. Third, there is also clear evidence that different degrees of individualization must be imputed to people. Not everybody attributes the reasons for outcomes and behavior equally often to internal factors, and individuals may combine a high degree of internal attribution in some parts of their lives with external attributions in other life situations. External attributions to nature, fate, God, luck, or the state are still widely used (Yengar 1991; Kluegel and Smith 1986). Our thesis is therefore that it does not make sense to present class society (in which class members might attribute their life courses to a common class fate) and individualized society (in which people tend to see themselves as the source of destiny) as opposing concepts. Rather, both concepts denote ideal-typical interpretations, and elements of each will be present in varying degrees in most modern social formations. The extent of such attributions must be worked out empirically.
 4. Fourth, explanations in behavioral sciences must combine seemingly contradictory causal assessments because only then the outcomes of human behavior will be understandable. Especially those with higher education may consider themselves self-determined, individualized decision makers in control of their life courses. They describe their behaviors in terms of choosing partners, deciding on the occupation and careers that best fit their own desires and capabilities, voting according to their political beliefs, and pursuing personal happiness. And yet, social-scientific observers note that the influences of social origin, educational degree, institutions, resource distribution, occupational groups, and structural constraints are still more or less present.
 5. Fifth, there are some hints that the influence of social origins and class might have diminished to some extent in recent decades in some cases (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992b). Such a decrease is, of course, a further indicator of progressive individualization. But let us stress that the individualization of social structures, on the one hand, and the continuing effect of class- or tradition-bound social structures, on the other hand, do not constitute alternatives, such that we could select one side as the exclusive truth. Rather, it is a question of degree. We do not come from the class society of the nineteenth century, in which socioeconomic strata penetrated all areas of life; nor have we moved into a completely individualized society in the twenty-first century. Max Weber wanted social scientists to be aware that they deal with ideal types that need empirical

specifications of degree (1905a, 90). Individualized society and class society are two such ideal types.

6. In all societies, there have always been "individuals." This is not a specific feature of modernity. Being an "individual" simply means that, in practical communication, it is to some extent common to attribute the causes of behavior to an individualized person, as in the following phrase: "You have done this, hence you are responsible for that." The far-reaching change associated with modernity is the extent to which people usually address persons as causes of behavior and thereby "individualize" them. Note that this process is inherently social and interactive from the beginning. Also, it is important not to equate "the individual" with the corporeal substance of a person. Rather, "the individual" represents a linguistic operation of attributing causes of behavior—no more, no less than this symbolic and linguistic process.

We will now take a closer look at the theoretical basis of this consensus. With Weber, we will argue that a combination of insights from class and individualization theories should be at the heart of social-science explanations.

Some Controversies

The abyss between theories of individualization and class seems to be deep. Individualization theorists argue that individuals no longer consider themselves as class members with a common fate and destination. At the same time, empirical studies show a more or less unchanged effect of class membership on education and life chances (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Shavit and Müller 1998). These two points of view do not necessarily indicate irreconcilable assumptions. Rather, they refer to two different objects of sociological research. Individualization theorists refer to the causal assumptions people seem to show more often in their attitudes and behavior, whereas class researchers refer to causal knowledge that scientific observers can see from the outside (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Shavit and Müller 1998).

Social scientists, beginning with Max Weber, have always stressed that the causal assumptions people make in practice are often wrong, or at least one-sided. They also emphasize that even if they are "wrong," they would be a good predictor of behavioral outcomes because they help researchers *understand* the intended and unintended consequences of action. Like Simmel, Weber was concerned with the problem of social order in the age of individualism, but in a different way. As he did his dissertation and habilitation thesis in law, he started off with a completely different view on social life. The breakdown of social order is not his starting point; rather, it

is the simple observation that human conduct shows certain regularities that can be documented. If sociologists want to explain such regularities and their consequences, they need a complex theory about human behavior that Weber (1905a) developed gradually in his scattered methodological writings, later known as *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*. Weber's mature social theory, expounded in *Economy and Society* (1968) and *Some Categories of Interpretive Sociology* (1981), calls for a combination of the following three elements:

1. "objective" regularities ("devoid of meaning"), that is, all kinds of regularities, including unknown influences on human behavior as indicated in public statistics, for example, by distributions of income, education, resources, and health;
2. the meaning of human behavior that is, as is known today, the subjectively believed reason for one's behavior and the way people usually internally or externally attribute behavior, especially as internally set goals ("I want to") and values ("because it means so much to me"), but also emotions and traditions ("we always did it this way");
3. the selection of a typical social relationship or *type of situation* the explanation refers to (in contrast to the unclear term "society" that Weber refused to use). This element refers to such questions as: Which audience is listening? How many people are present? Is the situation formal or informal? What is the time horizon of the situation? What is the problem to be dealt with? Do people typically act in a consensual or conflictual manner in such situations?

Weber (1981) sees the fulfillment of all three requirements as crucial to deriving valid statements on the consequences of human behavior. Even though all three elements may be closely connected in practical research, they need, however, separate efforts of empirical proof. In Weber's time, such data were not available, as there was no social research as exists today. Weber wants us to be more concerned with local, that is, microscopic ideas (Weber 1981). For example, Marx neglected requirements two and three by focusing on objective regularities of surplus-value distribution and exploitation, and by simply maintaining that the typical motives of workers were "false." For Marx, it seemed that behavior in nineteenth-century society looked as if it could be understood from such distributions by themselves. The use of language unavoidably results, as Weber stresses, in statements about regularities of behavior *and* meaningful, that is, attributional, ideas. Even simple sentences imply far-reaching assumptions about behavior that are difficult to prove empirically (Weber 1981, 160–66).

In his methodological writings, Weber prefers to illustrate the *selective* function of causal statements. To use a contemporary example, some have

claimed that, in contrast to upper-class students, lower-class students do not believe as strongly in effort (Becker 2003). From Weber's view of causality, such a statement suggests that there is both an "objective" influence on behavior (for example, the social class of the student's parents) and a selective meaning of behavior (for example, limited belief in the causal significance of one's efforts). Furthermore, Weber wants sociologists to locate specific social relationships in which such statements actually and typically apply (Weber 1981).

Modern society is differentiated into many types of situations. Depending on where people display specific kinds of conduct, these have different consequences. Weber was well aware that the rules that guide conduct vary considerably from one situation to the next. A science that was to elaborate upon the consequences of meaningful behavior would have to pay attention to such situational differences as the example in the previous paragraph demonstrates: even lower-class students may agree to try harder in the classroom because effort attributions are highly institutionalized within school, while in the afternoon at home—the next type of situation—this attribution may well lose its plausibility if the lower-class family and peers do not impose equal pressure for more effort. The consequence of such different behavior in and out of the classroom may well be that lower-class students are not as successful in education because they cannot get rid of their social origin and unintentionally continue the structural disadvantages intergenerationally. In the end, their attitude and behavior at home may be causally decisive for the outcome in their life course—despite all efforts on the part of teachers and the state. This is a consequence of unequal attributions of behavior. This inequality of explanatory practices needs to be measured.

Weber's writings on meaningful behavior postulate the distinction between objective ("devoid of meaning") and subjective ("meaningful") regularities both theoretically and empirically, and combine them, as both regularities become causally effective in the end. Subjective understanding refers to typical situations in which people show differential expectations about the assumed causes of their behavior. In contrast, by elaborating objective causes, researchers may detect forces (especially resource distributions, class positions, and educational levels) whose societal effects may overlap considerably although they may be in explicit contrast to socially visible attributions. For example, people may think of themselves (and say this in surveys) more than ever before as being self-determined, individualized decision makers of their life courses. And yet, social-scientific observers see that the influences of unequal origins, class positions, educational degrees, access to institutions, and resource distributions (which are

often very difficult to change through individual behavior) have not vanished. Therefore, sociological explanations must combine seemingly contradictory elements.

However, this paradox of the self-presentation of modern behavior is not new. Weber has a solution for the analysis of such a social formation by distinguishing between the *material* and the *ideal* aspects of human behavior. This distinction is indispensable because both dimensions have their own evolution in modern society. Material welfare has risen incredibly, and, at the same time, the causal ideas that people have with regard to their practical behavior have changed even more dramatically. More than ever before, people conceive of their behavior as self-determined and individualized so that, "subjectively" speaking, the world will increasingly appear to be ordered from inside rather than from outside, as is the case through tradition, God, nature, or the collective fate of class. The elective affinity between religious ideas and capitalist materialism, discussed in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1930), is just one example of the type of analysis Weber had in mind.

Today, many more examples could follow. "Understanding" therefore means doing research on selective causal ideas that people show in their behavior. "Explaining" refers to the detection of the structural regularities that accompany such behavior. Both views combined reflect the entire situation appropriately under causal auspices. This two-part model of an explanation will be convincing only as long as it is complemented by a statement on the meaning of behavior as the major source of social change in modern times. Therefore, Weber wants social scientists to analyze human behavior by means of *both* the observer's and the participant's concepts of causality.

Evidence for the argument that people have causal ideas about situations and behave accordingly has usually derived from the tradition of attribution research established by Fritz Heider's (1958) analysis of everyday concepts of causality. While attribution research has flourished since Heider's time, from a sociological point of view, it is amazing how little attention sociologists have given to Weber's (1905a) discussion of causality. Weber insists that human behavior can be explained causally to a greater degree than natural phenomena because behavior can be "understood." He therefore stresses that causality is not an objectively given feature of the external world but rather a practical tool of language that is used in behavior. Individuals understand both the historical and contemporary world by selectively attributing certain causes and effects to it. The emphasis is on selection from a horizon of different possibilities that makes these views meaningful in a phenomenological sense.¹

Weber's contribution to theories of class and individualization is crucial for understanding that the clash of their representatives does not indicate incommensurability, but rather the necessity to collect more valid data about both objective regularities that indicate outcomes and antecedents of behavior and subjective regularities of human behavior itself. This would help researchers to understand how social structures—just as theorists of individualization argue—become individualized instead of being swept away. Debates about individualization show the necessity to make more intelligible the relationship between human behavior and social structures. Social research of the twentieth century, especially in sociology, has elaborated much more upon the structures of society in terms of class typologies, social status, educational degrees, and income and gender inequality than it has measured the meaning of individualized human behavior that actually constitutes both continuities and changes of such distributions (cf. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

This is not to deny that individualization theorists are right in pointing to the loss of overlapping societal consensus in modernity. It is well established in social thought that modern society is highly differentiated and therefore structurally disintegrated (Luhmann 1977). This is not a new story. Rather, it is necessary to make more specific statements about continuity and change in domain-specific developments. This is also the reason why the discussion about the death of class took off from the wrong starting point. Weber's real contribution to class theory is overlooked if one focuses on his brief elaborations on class, status, and party instead of recognizing his way of causally analyzing human behavior. Therefore, John H. Goldthorpe's (2000) and Aage Sørensen's (2000) detachments from Weberian thought do not take into account his theory of causality. According to Weber's explanatory concept, success and failure of the class concept not only depend on which elements are used as part of the definition of class, as discussed by Sørensen (2000), Goldthorpe (2000), and Erik Wright (2000). Class research must also pay attention to the following elements: What specific behavior is chosen by the researcher? Which consequences does it have? What is typical about the situation? Weber considers social relationships an adequate object of analysis because modern society is irreversibly torn on the level of *behavior* and not on the level of *causal influences* that a scientific observer can detect and that the participants are often not aware of.

We will now demonstrate our view empirically by presenting the results of an exploratory survey on context-specific causal attributions in life courses.

A Survey of Individualization

Attitude and attribution research has shown how sensitive humans are to context-specific clues that guide causal assumptions. Modern society and the courses that lives take in it are differentiated into many types of situations: work organizations, work meetings, market interactions, informal gossip, public presentations, educational instruction, situations in which educational and career decisions are made, public protest, watching mass-media news, family activities, and leisure-time contexts. In fact, recent research has focused on the *split consciousness* of modern man, who sometimes believes in individualistic explanations for inequality and sometimes prefers structurally accounting for it—depending on the context and issue dealt with (Kluegel and Smith 1986). In order to know more about how social structures are being individualized today, researchers need more data on actual human behavior in different types of situations and on issues dealt with at different stages of the life course. Global and unspecified attitude measures commonly used in panel studies will not show in what way people develop individualized life courses.

There are, of course, some relevant hypotheses about class and individualization. Members of lower classes are said to be less open toward achievement goals or are more likely to take a fatalistic position, perceiving better education as a risk rather than an opportunity (Becker 2003; Gam-beta 1987). In view of their limited economic and social capital, they are believed to be “over-adaptive” and to sell their labor for less than its value (cf. Goldthorpe 2000, 241ff). Assumptions concerning achievement and effort are not the sole product of individuals’ wills, but rather underlie the class-specific attribution of causes that people expect from each other. Hence, students from different social classes differ in the extent to which they believe they can influence the grading of teachers by their individual efforts, and employees see the reasons for their successful or failed promotions in differing degrees according to their class position. The higher their position, the stronger seem to be their internal attributions. Only those who authentically believe that they can influence their life course mobilize appropriate efforts and develop normative claims for higher positions (Dunifon and Duncan 1998).²

In contrast, external attributions toward constant characteristics perceived as uncontrollable suppose a fatalistic perception of one’s life course. Persons from lower classes speak in a less abstracting way so that, to them, it seems that the social world is simply the way it is. Consequently, external attributions of behavior will happen more frequently, and the possible impact of one’s own behavior will not be recognized properly. In contrast,

the more elaborate one's linguistic skills are, the more it will appear possible and sensible to influence one's life course by personal efforts (Bernstein 1971).

Goldthorpe's more recent efforts in class theory and the theory of social action have approached such a view, yet without any methodological combination of class and attribution concepts. Goldthorpe (2000, 172-78) conceptualizes class-specific educational preferences as internal or external "subjective beliefs" about desired and undesired outcomes without noting that his entire concept of the differentiation of employment contracts and the logic of work situations has the same attributional foundations.

According to Goldthorpe (2000, 214), the labor contract is restricted. It provides money for simple efforts and their outcomes, which are not difficult to monitor. This spot contract implies simple causal chains, both objectively and subjectively. The degree to which a worker sees the causes of occupational outcomes in his or her own behavior is relatively low. The worker certainly knows that the work is done by herself. However, she does not attribute general outcomes of the work organization to her own person as much as higher positions can and will, for many reasons. The central difference between labor contracts and the service relationship is, as Goldthorpe (2000, 217) notes, the degree of diffuseness, that is, the assumed causal relationship between employees' behavior and its assumed effect on organizational outcomes, or, its believed contribution to goal attainment. The larger the work organization, the more indirect the relation between organizational goal attainment and the subjective causal beliefs of one's own contribution will be. The higher the vagueness, the more likely it is that other criteria will apply. This is true for managerial, administrative, official, professional, and proprietary presentations, which usually stress the importance of efforts, motivation, abilities, and internal factors in general. The higher the position, the more individual work attributions will stress internal factors for structural reasons. This is because the class structure of organizational hierarchies provides diverging world views in terms of the assumed causal processes at work.

The conclusion to be drawn from this structural variance of work behavior is that subjective work roles objectively influence subjective explanatory styles. It would seem obvious to assume that such behavioral variance is not confined to organizational borders but rather diffuses into other life domains as well. Most importantly, it will be passed on as a primary explanatory *habitus* in social origins and will later, even after expanded education, be reproduced in life courses by adapting to objective positional structures. This theory assumes that the relation between work,

class, and society is not a question of all or nothing, but rather one of empirical gradation to be uncovered using attributional scales.

It is not this thesis that is new, as Bernstein (1971) has already shown, but rather the prospects of linguistic and survey measurement that appear novel and promising. If researchers assume that behavioral variance of classes varies itself at different stages of life courses, and that such variance has important consequences for stratification outcomes, then they must increase the specificity of survey questions about actual behavior. It should be clear that survey items like "In the long run, hard work usually brings a better life" or "Hard work doesn't generally bring success, it's more a matter of luck and connections" (used, for example, in the World Value Surveys) should be a starting point, leading to additional items that try to retrieve the variance of class-specific conduct and its change between cohorts in greater detail.

From here, the connection to stratification research is obvious. The career concept of "high potential" clearly demonstrates the meaning of a causal attribution to someone who is *believed* to have the power "to move something" on his or her own. This attribution of causes and effects arguably exaggerates personal effects in order to justify unequal careers (Rosenbaum 1984, 268–70).

In order to contribute to a better connection of individualized beliefs and social structures in social research, we have conducted an exploratory survey ($n = 262$). We tested class-specific causal attributions in different types of situations, problems, stages of the life course, and possible audiences of the situation.

Keeping Weber's emphasis on the context-bound meaning of behavior in mind and with Niklas Luhmann (1990), we assumed that it is crucial to distinguish between the time dimension, the social dimension, and the substantive dimension of human behavior. The time dimension of life courses encompasses different stages, that is, the stages of social origin, education, the transition to work, and early and later work experiences. The social dimension refers to the audience that is listening: the family, peer groups, classmates inside and outside of the classroom, front and back stages at work, and the public realm. The substantive dimension refers to the topics and problems dealt with in some specific context, for example, requests for more effort in work meetings, one's own and other colleagues' promotions, pay inequality, grades, marriage and divorce, collective bargaining, and strikes.

We framed our questions specifically enough for respondents to match personal experiences with survey items and retrieve their actual causal experiences validly and reliably.

The following examples present two item blocks:

Example 1:

When your teacher requested you to make more efforts in class, how did you react?

1. agreed because I wanted to have good chances later in life;
2. did not take them seriously because I knew I could not do any better;
3. did not take them seriously because greater efforts in school do not help in the future; or
4. I was not challenged that way by my teacher because I mostly had good grades.

(agree strongly, agree, disagree, disagree strongly)

Example 2:

Now we refer to a typical situation in a work meeting: your superior requests more efforts to meet the budget objectives. How do you react?

1. say there is no incentive for me to do more;
2. agree because I participated in the budget talks;
3. say that I already do as much as I can and that competition is tough; or
4. agree because I am obliged to follow official goals.

This way, we designed a questionnaire with twenty-five item blocks and then asked the respondents to provide the usual demographic data that contain information about social origins and class membership. Class membership and educational level were defined according to standard procedures in comparative social research and in household panels. Categories were taken from the so-called Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero (EGP) class scheme, which, in the last twenty years, has become a standard measure for determining the class position of workers (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992b; Goldthorpe 2000). Figure 5.1 presents a summary of the results.

All items were scaled from one to four. Higher values usually mean stronger agreement with the internal, “individualized” beliefs of respondents. We have summarized class membership of our respondents into low, middle, and high. The x-axis represents the life course. From left to right, we have placed item blocks that are intended to reflect the time dimension of the life course. By doing so, the reader can form an imaginary “individualization curve” of the life course.

“Origin” refers to questions that aimed at personal experiences in the family at early stages of the life course. “Education” refers to memories of situations in schools and tertiary education. “Occupation (early stage)”

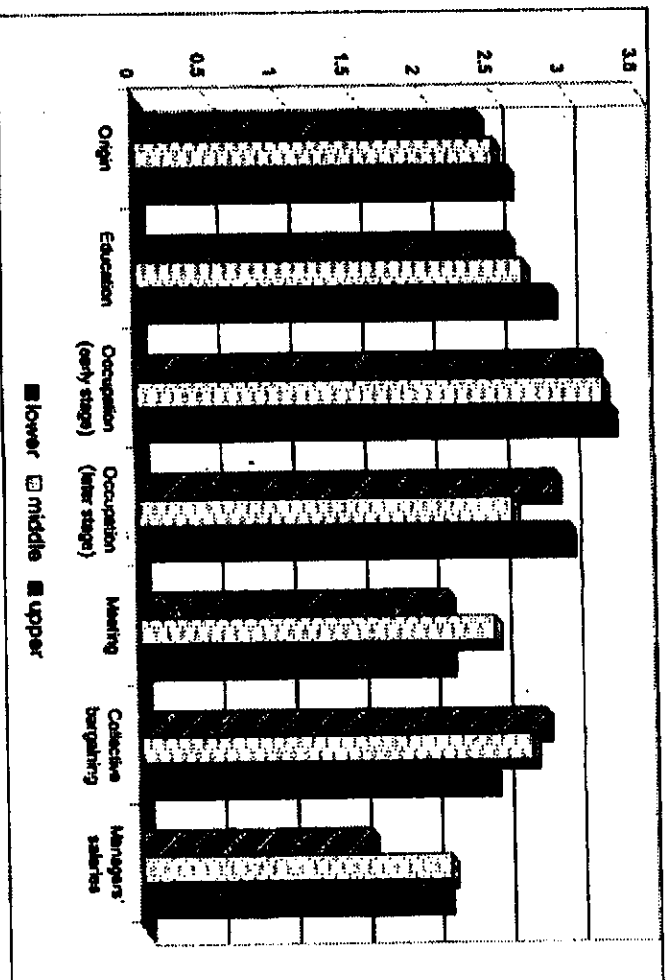


Figure 5.1 Individualized beliefs in the life course

means the first years of work after education, while “Occupation (later stage)” refers to situations after 10–20 years of work. The bar labeled “Meeting” represents items that asked about how effort attributions in work meetings were accepted or rejected. “Collective bargaining” refers to items that asked interviewees how they perceived the justice of collective bargaining results in relation to individual efforts. “Managers’ salaries” asked whether such salaries were justified by individual efforts. Differences of mean values were statistically significant (at least) at the 5 percent level for “Origin,” “Education,” and “Occupation (early stage),” whereas they were not for the rest.

The following two major results should be mentioned:

1. At all stages of the life course and for all topics dealt with, there is a class-specific degree to which respondents agree with individualized, internal attributions of crucial life events. Hence, we can conclude that individualization is not a uniform feature of modern life. Rather, there are structural differences in the extent to which people see themselves as individualized decision makers at work.
2. This evidence tentatively suggests that the individualization curve begins at relatively low levels in early stages of the life course. During education and early stages of the occupational career, it reaches its maximum. Later, that is, after ten to twenty years of occupational experience, the actual belief in the self as the decisive determinant of the life course decreases and structural explanations of occupational outcomes become more

common again. Nevertheless, class-specific degrees of subjective attribution remain present.

From such a perspective, it is easy to see how individualized beliefs and the constraints of class structure actually cooperate in bringing about a society that appears as highly individualized on the front stage, whereas the back stage still looks much like a class society with fairly strict processes of intergenerational mobility. The seeming contradiction between individualized self-presentations and class-structural constraints is dissolved in the life course, as, step by step, people learn about their personal limits. Since individual beliefs become more and more common, especially with higher education, the life course will produce many disappointing experiences. But it also provides a lot of time to get used to one's place in the class structure. As Bourdieu (1984, 1990) has stressed many times, people must sooner or later adapt to their professional fate and attribute it properly so that tensions will be minimized. Believing in individualism is such an effective strategy for both successful and unsuccessful candidates. Those who do not advance to higher positions can reduce cognitive dissonance by assuming that others have displayed superior efforts.

Discussion: Individualization and Society

Discussions about the "failure of class action" (Crompton 1993, 89–91), the alleged "death of class," and individualization (Beck 1992) have thus far failed to take full account of Weber's complex theory of causality, so contemporary perspectives and limitations of the class concept have often been misjudged. In fact, the proponents of these discussions seem not to be aware of the twofold nature of causal statements so that they treat such facts as incompatible instead of combining them in explanations.

The transformed class concept is therefore related to typical activities of occupational groups; it does not aim directly at collective actors, but rather at the typical behavior of individual actors. This transformed concept helps classify work relations, measure their structural influence on other contexts, and uncover the continuity of life courses in a differentiated society. Looking at the results generated by this approach, one cannot assume the death of class. In which way, to what extent, and with what kind of consequences classes may cause public protest and collective bargaining cannot be inferred from class alone. Social researchers must not confuse individual actors with collective actors such as work councils, unions, employer associations, and political parties. If one leaves the setting of the work organization and looks at human behavior outside of work, the direct

behavioral reference of the class concept is no longer applicable, and the class concept is reduced to an interesting effect *devoid of meaning* but in need of meaningful explication. Researchers need to elaborate on actual subjective attributions in each context, just as Weber (1981) claims. They might find that human behavior is more or less individualized *within* social structures. However, this is not to deny the influence of class on other contexts, but rather to emphasize it.

However, according to Weber (1981), this causal power has a different status as far as sociological explanations are concerned. As a causal "extension" from the field of occupational groups, class offers causal regularities but not the required interpretations of conduct that would make explanations intuitively plausible. This results in a contradictory appearance of society in which the life-world evidence of class seems to have decreased due to increasing wealth and more individualized occupational behavior while, at the same time, as research convincingly demonstrates, classes have a strong influence on behavior. Material welfare has risen incredibly, and yet, the causal ideas that people have with regard to their practical behavior have changed even more. More than ever before, people conceive of their own and others' behavior as self-determined and individualized, so that the world increasingly looks like it is ordered from inside (that is, by "choice" or "decision") as opposed to from outside (that is, by tradition, God, nature, or collective fate). It would be too easy to stress an opposition of the individualization concept, on the one hand, and the concept of class inequality, on the other.

From what we have said so far, it should by now be clear that it would be a complete mistake to identify the progressive individualization of behavior with the step-by-step dissolution of social structures, let alone the death of the social. The process of individualization is—just as Norbert Elias, Zygmunt Bauman, Ulrich Beck, and Anthony Giddens stress—inherently social and interactive from the beginning. Individualization denotes an attribution of behavioral reasons that people expect from each other objectively in interaction. This does not at all entail a loss of social order and consensus, as the example of women with higher education demonstrates: they increasingly believe that having a baby is not a matter of fate and nature but rather an explicit decision they have made with their partner. The more women agree on such an internal attribution, the more it will be possible to observe a new "individualized" consensus along with communities constituted by such individualized beliefs. Again, individualization does not preclude the eventual establishment of social communities built on individualized consensus, as it is the process of change, not the outcome of change, that brings about most conflicts.

This is, finally, also to say that neither sociology nor political science is or should be interested in the individual as such. Rather, the social sciences are interested in the social regularities of practical behavior, that is, in the way that behavior is attributed in interpretive schemes and what structural consequences such interpretive regularities have.

Notes

1. For an early discussion of this practical understanding of causality in Weber's methodological writings, see Goldenweiser (1938). Turner and Factor (1994) present a discussion on the legal origins of Weber's concept of causality.
2. Causality, of course, goes in both directions: it is not just internal beliefs (subjectively) that produce more successful careers (structure), but successful careers also produce more assumptions about efforts being the origin of that success. Bourdieu (1984) and Luhmann (1990) have stressed this duality of agency and structure.