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Autor*innen/Author(s): Patrick Sachweh

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Zusätzliche Informationen/Additional information:

The author can be contacted at:
sachweh@uni-bremen.de

Unequal by Origin or by Necessity?

Popular Explanations of Inequality and Their Legitimatory Implications*

Prof. Dr. Patrick Sachweh
Bremen International Graduate School of Social Sciences (BIGSSS)
Forschungszentrum Ungleichheit und Sozialpolitk (SOCIUM)
Universität Bremen
Postfach 330 440
28334 Bremen

sachweh@uni-bremen.de

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Abstract: According to an implicit assumption underlying stratification theory and research, citizens in modern societies are supposed to regard inequality as caused by social factors, and therefore in need of legitimation. Based on qualitative interviews with people from both lower and upper social classes in Germany, the article questions this assumption. From the interviews, I reconstruct two divergent interpretive frames that are used to understand the causes of inequality. While one indeed highlights social origin as a prominent social-structural factor and suggests critical normative orientations towards the status quo ('inequality by origin'), at the same time explanations regarding inequality as an inevitable element of social order exist which suspend legitimatory pressures ('inevitable inequalities'). Importantly, both interpretive frames co-exist and are used simultaneously within respondents' reasoning; to the extent that this is the case, the critique evoked by the 'inequality by origin' interpretation is eventually undermined.

Keywords: interpretive frame; social inequality; social stratification; social structure; stratification beliefs; qualitative interviewing

Unequal by Origin or by Necessity? Popular Explanations of Inequality and Their Legitimatory Implications

1 Introduction

One of the core premises within the sociology of stratification is that in modern societies, it is not possible to justify inequality by referring to a natural order. Instead, with the advent of modernity, the social causes of inequality are assumed to have moved to the fore of élite and public thinking about inequality (Bottero, 2005, p. 19; Moore, 1978, p.462). More specifically, the rise of the ideal of equality during the era of Enlightenment and the French Revolution are supposed to have dramatically altered people's perception of the roots of stratification (Dahrendorf, 1968; Parsons, 1970). Inequality is no longer thought to be seen as a God-given fact or a natural state of affairs, but instead as a product **(← p. 323)** of human action – and as such, as potentially subject to change and thus in need of legitimation (Eder, 1989; Koller, 1987). This line of argument represents the core of what I call the 'liberal premise' within stratification research. Importantly, it not only refers to the perception of inequality among intellectual élites but also contains a tacit assumption about ordinary citizens' beliefs about stratification.

Based on in-depth qualitative interviews with people from different social classes in Germany, where the recent rise in inequality has been especially fast (OECD, 2008), the article questions this implicit assumption. Analyzing upper- and lower-class members' perceptions of stratification, I investigate how their views relate to the reasoning implied in the liberal premise. Thus, I formulate two research questions: First, how do interviewees explain inequality? Is the attribution of inequality to social structural causes – such as class background or power imbalances – a dominant theme in the interviews, as liberal assertions might suggest, or do

respondents also draw on alternative explanations? If so, what are these? Second, do different explanations of inequality also go along with specific normative orientations? Do explanations stressing social-structural factors invoke a critical stance towards inequality among the respondents?

The findings suggest that in fact a discrepancy appears to exist between (a) *theoretical expectations* about ordinary people's beliefs about inequality as contained in the liberal premise and (b) the *actual explanations* of inequality expressed by people themselves in semi-structured interviews. I reconstruct two alternative interpretive frames on which my respondents draw. While one indeed highlights social-structural causes ('inequality by origin'), at the same time 'pre-Enlightenment' explanations stressing the inevitability of inequality persist in interviewees' reasoning ('inevitable inequalities'). According to this latter interpretation, stratification is not seen as the outcome of social processes and human action but instead as an inescapable necessity inherent in every social order. However, while these interpretations can be located on contrasting poles of an underlying theoretical dimension differentiating whether inequality is seen as necessary or socially constructed, the interviews show that both frames co-exist within respondents' reasoning and illustrate how they are combined. Moreover, the findings suggest that while social-structural explanations indeed tend to involve more egalitarian normative orientations towards inequality, their coexistence with interpretations regarding inequality as inevitable may constrain their potential for critique of the status quo.

The article proceeds in five steps. First, section 2 gives an overview of what I term 'liberal premise' from theoretical writings in stratification research. Thereafter, section 3 develops a theoretical framework for investigating citizens' stratification beliefs empirically. Section 4 describes the data and methods used here, and section 5 presents two contrasting interpretive frames of inequality – one referring to its social

structural causes, the other to its inevitability – and asks what their implications for respondents' normative orientations are. Moreover, I discuss in how far these two different interpretive frames compete in practice, i.e. whether **(← p. 324)** interviewees draw upon one rather than the other in explaining inequality. The conclusion considers implications for sociological theorizing about inequality as well as for future empirical research.

2 A 'Liberal Premise' in Stratification Research?

The core assumption of the 'liberal premise' is that with the advent of modernity – as marked by the rise of the ideal of Equality and culminating in the French revolution – , citizens and intellectual élites increasingly began to view *inequality as being caused by social structural factors*. Before this, inequality was predominantly seen to reflect 'natural' differences between people, or God's will. During the middle ages, inequality was primarily perceived as an expression of a Godly order, for example, peasant rebellions arguing otherwise were decisively quelled. For instance, despite the impetus to equality in the Christian tradition to which Hegel points,[1] in practice the conception of a 'great chain of being' conceived of society 'as a hierarchy of finely graded social ranks' (Bottero, 2005, p. 15) in which all components had a clearly assigned role, ultimately contributing to the fulfilment of God's will.

The intellectual dominance of such conceptions was challenged when the idea of equality gained ground during the course of Enlightenment (Eder, 1989) and when, in the wake of the French Revolution, social order began to be viewed as subject to change through human action and political intervention (Kreckel, 2004, p. 27f.; Parsons, 1970). Thus, questions about the origins of inequality were posed anew. 'If

[1] Early Christianity, for instance, postulated the equality of all the faithful in and through faith, which was open to everyone (cf. also Rossanvallon, 2013, pp.27-29).

men are equal by nature,' Dahrendorf (1968, pp. 156-157) notes, 'then social inequalities cannot be established by nature or God; and if they are not so established, then they are subject to change, and the privileged of today may be the outcasts of tomorrow […].' From now on, the causes of inequality were more widely seen to be rooted in social circumstances, for instance the distribution of power and privilege in feudal society. The most prominent expression of this idea was probably formulated by Rousseau. At the beginning of his discourse on the origins of inequality among men, he distinguishes between 'natural' or 'physical' inequality on the one hand and 'political' (i.e., social) inequality on the other hand (Rousseau, 2009 [1755], p. 23). This latter kind of inequality is produced by men through an act of land-grabbing ('*Landnahme*') and sustained by the acquiescence of the rest of society (Rousseau, 2009 [1755], p. 55).

The perception and explanation of inequality in modern society is thus supposed to have become 'de-naturalized' (Giesen, 1987, p. 315). Instead of being an inherent part of a natural or Godly order, inequality is allegedly seen as a product of human action – and thus, as subject to potential change. This recognition is an important precondition for de-legitimizing critical ways of looking at society to emerge (Bottero, 2005, p. 19). Such a critical perspective demands that 'good reasons' are given in order for the disadvantaged to accept the status quo. It involves 'somehow convincing non-elites that inequality is morally right, and **(← p. 325)** that the most advantaged are justified in giving orders and receiving a greater proportion of valued goods and services' (Kerbo, 1996, p. 368). Consequently, those who are relatively disadvantaged must consent to this social order for inequality to be legitimated and reproduced (Della Fave, 1980; Hochschild, 1981).

This line of reasoning forms the core of what I call a 'liberal premise' in stratification research. Although it is rarely spelled out explicitly, it is a tacit

background assumption in many introductory texts to the field of stratification and inequality (e.g. Bottero, 2005, pp. 18-23; Crompton, 2008, pp. 9ff.; Fischer et al., 1996; Kerbo, 1996). But how plausible are its conjectures about ordinary people's interpretations of inequality? Do people in modern societies in fact view inequality as mostly determined by societal circumstances, and does this imply more critical orientations towards inequality?[2] In order to answer these questions, we have to turn to ordinary citizens' stratification beliefs.

3 Common Sense Interpretations of Social Inequality

Looking at survey data on stratification beliefs in Germany indeed suggests that the majority of Germans appears to consider inequality to be caused by social structural factors, including power imbalances and social origin (Svallfors, 2006). Thus, their perceptions seem to be what would be expected according to liberal suppositions. For instance, data from the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) from 2000 show that 75 per cent of the respondents agree with the statement that inequality 'continues to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful' (own calculations, see table A.1 in the appendix). In 2004, about 58 per cent thought that there are still big differences between different social classes and that what one can achieve in life depends on one's family background. Yet, while these perceptions clearly stress social-structural explanations for inequality, they are not entirely unambiguous, as a large majority of respondents (almost 80 per cent) thought that Germany is an 'open' society and that one's achievements mainly depend on one's education and skills (see table A.1).

[2] Here one could contend that the supposed changes in the perception of inequality's causes only affected a small educated elite and did not extend into the population as a whole. Even if this argument were true, the idea that inequality has social (as opposed to natural) causes still has to circulate into the wider population – probably steered by an elite – in order for sufficient legitimatory pressure to unfold.

Contradictions and ambivalences of this kind are well documented in the literature. For instance, Svallfors (2006, p. 63) finds that people simultaneously draw on power- and conflict-centred explanations of inequality as well as on ones that emphasize its function as an incentive. Similarly, Kluegel and Smith (1986, p. 87-88) in a survey of attitudes towards inequality in the USA show that a high proportion of Americans uphold individualist as well as structural explanations of poverty (Lepianka, van Oorschot, & Gelissen, 2009; Will, 1993). Along these lines, Mayer, Kraus & Schmidt (1992, p. 72) have pointed out that one and the same actor can hold logically opposing views of the stratification order. Hence, a review of existing survey research concludes that attitudes towards inequality are 'complex, ambiguous and contradictory' (Orton & Rowlingson, 2007, p. 40). However, these ambivalences are not easy to disentangle within the frame of quantitative survey research. In order to resolve the apparent contradictions in ordinary people's perceptions and to see **(← p. 326)** how these are reconciled, a qualitative approach is fruitful. Thus, Orton and Rowlingson (2007, p. 42) emphasize that '[f]uture research also needs to focus more on people's underlying values, the discourses they draw on and how they understand concepts such as inequality […].' Hence the present study adopts a qualitative approach in studying stratification beliefs.

Social inequalities are defined as relatively durable patterns of privilege and disadvantage that individuals or groups face in accessing valued resources or societal positions (cf. Kreckel, 2004, p. 17; Wright, 1994, p. 21). In line with the qualitative-inductive research approach pursued here, what precisely these resources and positions are and which groups are particularly privileged or disadvantaged is deliberately left open. While the 'relevance' of specific dimensions of inequality can ultimately only be justified from a normative standpoint (see Schmidt, 2004), the empirical sociological perspective adopted here allows us to determine which aspects of

inequality people themselves consider problematic, and therefore 'relevant' (Mau, 2004).

Theoretically, this study starts from the notion – taken from the sociology of knowledge – that people require socially-shared repertoires of knowledge and meaning to interpret their experiences (Schütz, 1964, 1967). With respect to perceptions of inequality, Katherine Newman's study on downward mobility from the middle class in the USA (Newman, 1999) shows that downward social mobility is not only problematic because of the economic restrictions it entails but also because individuals lack the respective *cultural frames* with which to make sense of their experience. As a result, they cannot but interpret downward mobility as an individual failure, even if there are structural reasons for it. Because no 'myths' or 'ceremonies' exist which could help downwardly mobile individuals in their transition to a lower social status, 'they mourn in isolation and fail to reach any sense of closure in their quest for a new identity. Their disorientation suggests how critical culture is in "explaining" to individuals the meaning of their fate' (Newman, 1999, p. 9). Thus, socially-shared cultural frameworks are crucial for individuals' ability to make sense of their experience of inequality.

In order to theoretically capture this 'ideational embeddedness' (Somers & Block, 2005, p.263) of individual experiences of inequality within overarching repertoires of interpretation, or 'collective representations' (Durkheim, 1974), I use the concept 'interpretive scheme' or 'interpretive frame' (cf. Oevermann, 2001b; Schütz, 1967, p.120). Interpretive schemes represent collectively-shared frameworks of interpretation that relate to a specific problem people face in everyday life (here: explanations for privilege and disadvantage). They mostly take on the form of unspoken, taken-for-granted assumptions about the world and can therefore not be called on reflexively. Furthermore, they provide actors not only with cognitive

information about the world as it is but also with normative standpoints about how it should be (cf. Oevermann, 2001a; Oevermann, 2001b). Socially-shared cultural repertoires of interpretation are thus constitutive of individual definitions of one's situation and orientations towards action (Oevermann, 2001b, p. 19; Swidler, 1986; Ullrich, 1999, p. 429). Empirically, however, interpretive frames **(← p. 327)** manifest themselves only in specific individual adaptations and applications, which is why they cannot be observed directly. Instead, they have to be reconstructed by comparing these individual applications and adaptations (see section 4).

Theoretically, interpretative frames of social inequality can be expected to differ between social groups, in particular between social classes (Svallfors, 2006). Insofar as the social-structural conditions in which people live differ, they are also in need of different interpretive frames in order to interpret and meaningfully structure their experiences. Therefore, different and (partly) competing interpretive frameworks of social inequality should be found (Berger, 1988, p. 508).

Moreover, it is important to differentiate between the cognitive and the normative dimensions of interpretive frames of inequality. The *cognitive dimension* refers to the representation of the 'landscape' of stratification and the perceived causes of inequality within people's minds. It contains the mental maps they draw in order to locate themselves and others within social space and the explanations they formulate in order to account for patterns of privilege and disadvantage. The *normative dimension* refers to how actors evaluate and legitimatize inequality. It asks what their normative orientations with regard to stratification are, including conceptions of social justice (Hochschild, 1981; Miller, 1999) as well as justifications referring to external circumstances (Schmidt, 2000).

This distinction is primarily an analytical one. Empirically, an interpretive frame may contain both cognitive and normative elements. Thus, while interpretive

frames about the *causes of inequality* refer primarily to the cognitive dimension, certain cognitive attributions may also go along with specific normative orientations. For instance, according to the liberal premise of stratification research an interpretation that sees inequality as being caused primarily by social-structural factors evokes more critical normative orientations than other causal attributions. Yet, in order to empirically reconstruct such interrelations between cognitive and normative views, it is important to differentiate between both dimensions in the first place (Mau, 2004, S. 186).

4 Data and Methods

Ordinary people's explanations of inequality are depicted here using data from twenty qualitative, in-depth interviews with respondents from both privileged and disadvantaged social classes. The interviews were conducted in and around Bremen, Germany, between April and September 2007. In order to reconstruct collectively-shared interpretive frames – which are implicit, taken-for-granted views of the world – from individual interview data, this study adopts interviewing techniques suggested by Ullrich (1999) in the context of the 'discursive interview.' Compared to traditional qualitative approaches, these involve a stronger structuring of the interview guide and a more directive style of interviewing which aims to tap into the justifications and lines of reasoning underlying respondents' cognitive and normative views on specific issues. **(← p. 328)**

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). First, institutions where potential respondents could be found, such as community centres for the unemployed or local Rotary clubs, were contacted and sent a letter explaining the topic and purpose of the study. When potential respondents made contact, they were screened for eligibility and an interview was scheduled.

Several respondents also referred to other potential respondents. The ultimate selection of interviewees was based on their current or last occupation, thus approximating a selection in accordance with the EGP-class scheme. With respect to respondents from privileged classes (interviews B-1 to B-6 and D-1 to D-4), the sample includes five employees of the higher service class and five self-employed professionals. Regarding respondents from disadvantaged classes (interviews A-1 to A-4 and C-1 to C-6), two skilled manual workers, four lower-grade routine non-manual employees (three of whom were receiving supplementary social assistance), three long-term unemployed persons and one housewife are included in the sample.[3] The respondents not integrated into the labour market were included in order to overcome the labour-market bias inherent in many class schemata. The average age of this sample is 46.5 years.

All interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The topics in the interview guide included general and factual perceptions of inequality in Germany as well as its perceived causes; the respondents' assessments regarding their own position in society and that of others; and, finally, the perceived consequences of inequality. Generally, a short conversation about the recent rise in inequality in Germany would start off the interview, asking respondents whether they thought this was true and, if so, how they could 'observe' inequality in their own experience. Subsequently, interviewees were asked about who they think the winners and losers in current German society are; what they would regard as the causes of inequality; how they would interpret specific distributive principles and whether they

[3] The construction of the sample was based on the assumption that respondents from the higher and lower classes – and thus individuals relatively distanced from one another within social space – should have a higher need for legitimizing and rationalizing their own socio-economic position as well as that of others, as compared to members of the middle classes. Indeed, quantitative analyses based on data from the German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) in 2004 show that skilled and unskilled workers, routine non-manual employees and the unemployed are more likely to respond that they receive less than their 'just share' in the overall standard of living than respondents from the service class or self-employed persons. These class differences persist while controlling for socio-demographic variables (analysis not shown here).

regard current socio-economic disparities as fair; and, finally, what they think the (individual and collective) consequences of inequality are. The analysis presented here is based on interview segments dealing with the *causes* of inequality as perceived by the respondents. Furthermore, I also analyze interview segments on respondents' views on justice and their *normative evaluations* of inequality in order to investigate whether specific causal attributions go along with particular normative orientations. During the entire interview, and especially when addressing respondents' evaluative and normative judgments, care was taken to elicit judgments in a non-leading way (i.e. evaluative terms such as 'just' or 'fair' were avoided, and evaluations were asked for in a neutral way).[4]

The translated quotations are edited for the sake of readability. All interview transcripts have been coded thematically using a qualitative data analysis software package (MaxQDA) (cf. Gibbs, 2007, p. 38ff.). Codes were developed both deductively and inductively, reflecting topics from the interview guide as well as new themes and issues that emerged during the analysis (Kelle & Kluge, 1999; Kuckartz, 2006). The codes were used for thematic retrievals in order to systematically compare respondents across groups (Gibbs, 2007, p. 73ff.). Based on **(← p. 329)** thematic comparisons of the interviewees' statements and viewpoints regarding a particular topic (here: the causes of inequality), similarities and differences in respondents' statements were analyzed, a process during which the underlying interpretive frameworks gradually emerged (Ullrich, 1999).

[4] At the end of each interview, respondents were asked to fill out a short standardized questionnaire collecting socio-demographic information (age, marital status, current or last occupation, occupation of father at the age of 15 etc.), as well as their political orientation (self-placement on a left-right scale) and their subjective social class location. While differences with regard to political orientation existed, these did not vary systematically with respondents' class position. Subjective social class varied more clearly with respondents' class location, albeit with some exceptions.

Since the aim of the empirical section is to reconstruct these collectively shared interpretive frames, the emphasis here is less on an in-depth analysis of single cases as such. Rather, the analysis highlights the recurrent and collectively shared themes in respondents' explanations of inequality. Despite this focus, however, I also consider the possibility that individuals from different classes vary in their perceptions of inequality. Even so, prior studies suggest that these are more likely differences of degree rather than kind (Hochschild, 1981; Svallfors, 2006).

5 Inevitable Inequalities or Inequality by Origin? – Ordinary People's Explanations of Stratification

The empirical part of this article investigates how people from privileged and disadvantaged social classes account for the existence of inequality. Thus, I reconstruct two different interpretive schemes that can be located on contrasting poles of an underlying theoretical dimension (see Table 1) that indicates whether inequality is regarded as a societal construct produced through human action ('inequality by origin') or as an inescapable necessity of social order ('inevitable inequalities') (cf. Terpe, 2009, p. 102).[5]

Moreover, I ask what the implications of these diverse interpretive frames are for respondents' normative orientations. Do interpretations that regard inequality as caused by social structural forces go along with a more critical stance than interpretations that view stratification as a universal necessity?

[5] The literature usually distinguishes between individual and structural explanations of inequality. While in the first case inequality is seen to be rooted in people's individual attributes (e.g. effort, ambition), in the latter it is regarded as being caused by social structure (e.g. economic conditions) (van Oorschot & Halman, 2000; Will, 1993). Furthermore, Feagin (1975) has pointed out 'fatalistic' explanations which view the cause of, for instance, poverty in non-social factors beyond individual control (e.g. bad luck, fate). Yet, these distinctions are analytical abstractions that are not shared by my interviewees.

5.1 'Of course this isn't fair, that's totally unfair. But that's just the way it is.' – Inequality as Inevitable Necessity

Table 1: Interpretive Frames of the Causes of Inequality

Inevitable Inequality	**Inequality by Origin**
- inequality as sheer fact	- material conditions of social origin (direct/indirect)
- inequality as historical continuity	- socio-cultural influence of social origin
- inequality due to differences in abilities and talents	
- inequality as a part of human nature	

necessity	← social inequality as →	societal construct

The view that inequality represents an inevitable part of social order forms a recurrent theme among interviewees from both privileged and disadvantaged social **(← p. 330)** classes. The reasons that respondents gave in order to support this view range from the sheer fact of inequality over historical arguments to interpretations that link inequality with human nature.[6] Thus, pre-Enlightenment (or essentialist) interpretations of the causes of inequality seem to persist, apparently contradicting the implicit assumptions of the liberal premise. Specifically, four variants of such an 'inevitable inequalities'-interpretation can be distinguished (cf. also Table 1):

(1) In its most simple form, the interpretation of inequality as inevitable refers to the *sheer fact* of inequality. The unequal distribution of valued goods, resources and positions is viewed as a social fact which forms a regrettable, but nonetheless existing part of social reality that is unlikely to be fundamentally altered (let alone abolished).

[6] The interpretation of inequality as inevitable is not exclusively related to inequality in the abstract but is also applied to specific instances of privilege and disadvantage, as will become apparent later on (e.g. when respondents emphasize the importance of personality characteristics for overcoming unemployment).

Thus, the present reality of inequality is extrapolated into the future. Some respondents compare the reality of inequality with an ideal of equality that appears all the more unfeasible in light of this contrast. For instance, Christian Berger, a young business administrator says:

> 'It would be nice if all people were equal and everybody could enjoy the same standard, but that is just not the case. I'm not trying to judge this; I just see this as a fact. Of course, when you really start thinking about it and wonder: "Is it really fair that someone born as the son of a CEO has completely different opportunities than the child of a single mother on welfare?" – of course that's not fair, that is totally unfair. But that's just the way it is.' (Interview B-1)[7]

While the implications of this interpretive frame for the respondents' normative orientations can be discerned in the last sentence of this quote ('But that's just the way it is'), Margit Rupp, a 46-year-old housewife explicitly expresses her scepticism when asked what can be done about inequality: 'There's nothing you can do about it. That's just the way of the world, huh?' (Interview C-4). Thus, although this interpretation of inequality as inevitable contains no explicit legitimation, it nevertheless appears to render some normative force to the status quo, as the respondents cannot imagine a society with less (or no) inequality within this interpretive frame.

(2) A second variant of the 'inevitable inequalities' frame addresses the *historical continuity* of patterns of privilege and disadvantage. Within this line of interpretation, respondents argue that social inequality has always existed and will therefore continue to exist. For instance, some interviewees argue that in former times, there also have been 'the poor, those in the middle, and the rich' and this continues

[7] The number in parentheses after the quote refers to the anonymised code number of the interview transcript. Speech pauses are marked by '…', cuts from the quotes are marked '[…]', insertions by the author are put in brackets [ ]'. For the sake of readability, all quotes have been edited and respondents were given pseudonyms.

today. Thus, the argument that is used here to 'explain' inequality is based on its sustained persistence over a long period of time. This is expressed by Beate Thielmann, an unskilled female employee in the following quotation:

> 'Because the origin of all that goes back for millions of years, or something like that… Why do some people have a house and lots of land while others don't have anything? That is … well, you can't even think back for so long... One person has 500 acres of land and another one doesn't have anything, he's a peasant without a maid. **(← p. 331)** Yeah, how did that come about? That has always been that way, you could say, plainly speaking.' (Interview C-5)

This view is shared by other respondents as well. For instance, the female letter carrier Anneliese Küppers argues that 'there has always been inequality and there will always be [inequality]' (Interview C-2). Because the status quo is seen as a continuation of past patterns of privilege and disadvantage, the interviewees see little prospect for change in the future. The perceived continuity of inequality underpins its (supposed) persistence and universality, raising doubts about whether it can be changed at all.

Yet, both interpretations – inequality as a sheer fact and as historical continuity – appear unsatisfactory as an explanation, not only from an analytical perspective but also to the respondents themselves. Hence, hardly any respondent leaves it at that.

(3) In a somewhat more complex version of the 'inevitable inequalities' interpretation, the interviewees refer to *differences between people in their innate abilities and talents* in order to explain inequalities between them. In doing so, they presume that differences in individuals' abilities and talents, e.g. their intelligence, also influences their position within the social hierarchy (cf. Lamont, 2000, pp. 219ff.). Thus, contrary to what liberal suppositions within stratification research would lead us to assume about ordinary people's stratification beliefs, this interpretation explicitly 're-naturalizes' inequality. Differences in people's innate abilities or skills are seen to

imply that those with less 'advantageous' abilities fall behind, thus forming a kind of negative selection. Heinrich Stolberg, a 70-year-old entrepreneur, for instance, expresses this view explicitly as he explains why – in his opinion – people are unemployed and elaborates his own experiences from job-interviews with unemployed job-seekers:

> 'Then there are reasons that simply have to do with people's knowledge and skills. When you test them and realize that one is more intelligent than the other and has a better grasp on things, then you take the first one. That's a kind of selection, which also leads to some form of negative selection – that is, in the end there will be a certain share of people who are never going to make it, for whatever reason.' (Interview B-6)

Thus, in the eyes of this interviewee, differences in people's in-born skills and talents lead to the formation of a 'remainder' of people who are disadvantaged with regard to their abilities ('people who are never going to make it') – and thus, to inequality.

Furthermore, besides people's cognitive skill the respondents also refer to certain personality traits which they deem relevant for one's positioning in the social hierarchy. Along these lines, people in disadvantaged positions are attributed lower levels of aspiration, a lack of determination, introversion, alternative values or different conceptions of success (in the sense of a 'value stretch', cf. Hyman, 1966; Rodman, 1963). For instance, the 30-year-old Christian Berger **(← p. 332)** regards low personal aspiration as a key reason for inequality. He thinks that 'there are some people who say, "I don't want to be on top. […] I'm here in this class, and this is where I belong." People are different, and because of this there will always be inequality' (Interview B-1). In a similar vein, the entrepreneur quoted above says that

> '[…] one of the biggest mistakes is to content yourself with little, to be easily satisfied. That is, you have a job, you start at 8 and go home at 5, you receive

> your pay-check which is just about enough to feed your family, and that's it. If you're satisfied with this, then there's little wonder if this state prevails for almost your entire life.' (Interview B-6)

The female personnel consultant Barbara Fuchs-Willmann holds a similar view. She believes that 'some people have just received less, in terms of their personality, and others more. And we will always be able to see how that plays out in society' (Interview D-2). These examples illustrate how the interviewees draw a link between personality characteristics and a position within the social hierarchy. In particular, low levels of aspiration and ambition are regarded as (partly) responsible for being located in disadvantaged positions.[8] Importantly, these personality traits are viewed as purely individual characteristics.[9] Roland Bargen for example, a 38-year-old entrepreneur, when speaking about the difficulties of unemployed people dealing with repeated rejections of job applications, says:

> 'Well, one person may have more self-discipline and say "Come on, life goes on, you always have to get back up again once more than you fall down". And the other person says, "I've written enough job applications, it's pointless anyway." Of course, these are individual attributes, they're not related to education or social standing. I think these are character traits, some people are just more disciplined than others […].' (Interview B-5)

Here we see that certain traits, such as discipline, are viewed as important for occupational success. Thus, this interpretation of the causes of inequality ascribes the reasons for being in a privileged or disadvantaged position to individuals themselves, thereby indirectly contributing to the legitimation of inequality.

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[8] By contrast, those occupying privileged positions in social structure are ascribed positive attributes – such as goal-orientation, effort, ambition, determination, commitment, flexibility, discipline, or assertiveness – which are viewed as a reason for their privileged position.

[9] This contradicts research which shows that personality characteristics are also influenced by people's social structural location (see Kohn, 1977; Kohn, 1980).

(4) Finally, the inevitability of inequality is justified by referring to *human nature*. Here the interviewees assume that human nature is characterized by traits such as envy, ambition, egoism, individualism and greed which are incompatible with a striving for greater equality. Hence, the persistence of inequality is attributed not only to individual differences in abilities and personality but also to elements of human nature regarded as universal. Some of the interviewees here refer to the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) which, according to their view, could not live up to their egalitarian ideals due to these supposed anthropological 'constants.' The following statements on the former GDR's (failed) efforts to create a 'classless' society are typical for this view: **(← p. 333)**

> 'But that we all should eat crisp-bread now, so to speak, just to make it equal, I think that should not be. That would not work. That means, in the GDR, where it was tried out, or in communism, everybody had the same car, but still others drove a Mercedes. […] I think it is just part of human nature that this won't work. [*Int.: Which elements of human nature are responsible for that, in your view?*] Envy, ambition, the striving to make one's mark, these kinds of things. Only very few people are happy with what they have, not matter how much they have.' (Roland Bargen, entrepreneur, Interview B-5)

> 'Well, in the German Democratic Republic, the idea was that if all people had the same, then everybody would be happy. That didn't work either, did it? Even if they had their Trabbi [Trabant, standard car within the former GDR] after some 18 years or so, one person wanted plastic wheel caps while the other one still had his steel wheel caps. […] That means that it won't work to give the same to all people. They will never be content.' (Reinhold Weiser, skilled worker, Interview A-3)

Thus, while these quotations indicate a general recognition of the *social construction* of inequality, the respondents' reference to a universally 'greedy' and 'envious' human nature at the same time underlines their assessment of the futility of such attempts. Although not explicitly legitimating inequality, these interpretations illustrate the difficulties interviewees associate with efforts to create greater economic equality. Hence, this interpretation may foster a sense of acquiescence with the status quo.

In sum, the common core of these four variants of the 'inevitable inequalities' interpretation is the view that social inequality is inextricably linked with human existence and thus forms an inescapable necessity of social order.[10] What are the consequences of this interpretive frame for respondents' normative orientations – and thus for the legitimation of social inequality? In his classical study on injustice, Barrington Moore has formulated a strong proposition about the consequences of this 'sense of inevitability' (Moore, 1978):

> 'People are evidently inclined to grant legitimacy to anything that is or seems inevitable [...]. The conquest of this sense of inevitability is essential to the development of politically effective moral outrage. For this to happen, people must perceive and define their situation as the consequence of human injustice: a situation they need not, cannot, and ought not to endure.' (Moore, 1978, pp. 458-459).

Following Moore, one might conclude that by interpreting inequality as a universal and necessary element of human societies, an important prerequisite for the de-legitimation of inequality is suspended at the cognitive level, namely the insight that social structures are constructed – and thus changeable – through human action. While not all of the interviewees quoted above seem to deny the notion that inequality is to

[10] The 'inevitable inequalities' interpretation differs from *fatalistic* views, as they have been described by Feagin (1975) and others (Wegener & Liebig, 1993), in that it emphasizes features *inherent* to all people (e.g., human nature) while fatalist views refer to *external forces* beyond individual control.

some degree also a societal construct, all variants of the 'inevitable inequalities' frame, by linking inequality to human existence, appear to limit in respondents' thinking the extent to which creating greater equality seems a realistic possibility. Thus, interviewees are able to discharge a pressure for **(← p. 334)** legitimation that would be greater if they saw inequality as a societal construct, and therefore subject to change (cf. Terpe, 2009).

Some interviewees even appear to be aware of these implications. The self-employed graphics designer Angela Elster, when asked if she thinks inequality is inevitable, responds:

> 'I think it is, but I'm a little afraid to say so, because this can easily be utilized. [*Int.: Why?*] Because then one can easily dismiss the issue and say "Well, then that's just the way it is, and it remains this way, and that's that." And I think, [...] then the issue of justice arises [...]. I believe it is good to strive for an ideal, but in the end, I think it is just an ideal, equality.' (Interview D-4)

This quotation illustrates how the 'inevitable inequalities' frame can circumscribe this respondent's normative orientations. While the implications of the view that inequality may never be abolished are apparent to her, and she therefore supports striving for an ideal, at the same time she points out that after all, equality may not be much more than an (unrealistic) ideal. Thus, within the context of the 'inevitable inequalities' frame, the policies or political strategies interviewees deem appropriate to counter inequality rarely go beyond granting a minimum standard-of-living for the disadvantaged. Far-reaching demands, e.g. for a more extensive transformation or social change, are not articulated. The view of the business administrator Christian Berger is not atypical:

> 'Against inequality...that's a given, there's not much you can do. It has always been there, and it will always be there. What you can try to do is to raise the

floor for those at the bottom in society, to try and lift their standards. But you should not try to squeeze everybody into the middle, instead you should provide a higher standard-of-living to those at the bottom.' (Interview B-1)

The next section describes an alternative interpretive scheme that foregrounds in respondents' reasoning how patterns and structures of inequality are socially constructed – and thus, potentially subject to change. Furthermore, it asks to what extent such an interpretation may facilitate more far-reaching egalitarian demands.

5.2 'I think to some people it's just handed on a plate...' – Inequality by Origin

Although the 'inevitable inequalities' frame represents a dominant interpretive scheme within the interviews, respondents also pointed out the disparities in life-chances and opportunities related to social structure, particularly to one's social origin. The corresponding interpretations and views can be condensed into an overarching interpretive frame I term 'inequality by origin.' It stresses the importance of social inheritance for people's life-chances and their location within the social hierarchy. Thus, respondents appear to be aware of the social structural roots of inequality. From the interviews, two different ways in which **(← p. 335)** they understand the influence of social structure can be distinguished: first, an interpretation that primarily refers to the material conditions of one's social origin, and second, a view that stresses socio-cultural factors of the familial milieu (cf. Table 1).

(1) Within the eyes of the respondents, the most obvious and direct way in which social origin operates is through the *material conditions* of one's family. Along this line, several respondents – especially from the lower classes – refer to the inheritance of material goods, such as wealth or real estate, as a reason why people live in privileged material situations. For instance, Anneliese Küppers, a female letter-

carrier receiving supplementary social assistance, views this as practically the only way to achieve a superior standard-of-living:

> 'Nowadays, you can only become a millionaire, so to speak, if you take over something. Maybe the father already had a business, and now the son or daughter [are taking over], so it remains in the family. Or maybe if you've inherited some money, and put that into the business as well…' (Interview C-2)

According to this interviewee, socio-economic privilege can only be attained through the direct transmission of material advantage, but not through one's own effort: 'You're not going to become a millionaire just by your own work, for instance if you have a car repair shop or a painting service, you're hardly going to make that today' (Interview C-2). She thinks that people who are in privileged material positions 'will already have brought some money with them.' While other respondents similarly emphasize the significance of intergenerational transmission of wealth and material possessions for socio-economic privilege, some point out social disadvantage can also follow from the material situation of one's family, for instance if debt is inherited.

Furthermore, the interviewees point out indirect ways in which the material conditions of one's family may influence one's location within the social hierarchy, for example by facilitating or hindering educational opportunities which influence occupational outcomes further down the line. Specifically, children from disadvantaged social backgrounds are seen as having fewer opportunities for further education, with the respondents' views here following established findings from stratification research (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Müller & Pollak, 2004). Again, material background appears to play an important role within the eyes of the interviewees. For instance, some refer to the role of money for financing attendance at expensive private

schools, private tutoring or a university education. Sonja Michalke, an unskilled employee for a private security company, says:

> 'If you had a child and became unemployed, then the child would feel that too, it would grow up differently than if you worked as a doctor, or some such, and had some more money […]. Then you would pay private tuition for the kid, but not when you're unemployed. […] You can't pay for that when you're unemployed.' (Interview C-6) **(← p. 336)**

(2) Although perceptions of this kind are also articulated by respondents from the upper classes, in their eyes the material conditions of one's family are only one aspect of the way social origin operates. To them, socio-cultural factors appear equally – if not more – important. In particular, interviewees from the upper classes point to specific aspects of parents' behaviour and attitudes in accounting for disadvantaged or privileged positions, such as a lack of familiarity with higher educational institutions, being of little help with or uninvolved in children's educational trajectories or having lower educational aspirations in general. Günther Schulze, an engineer from the upper service class, puts it the following way:

> 'I think a lot [of disadvantage] can be traced back to one's upbringing, or one's parents, respectively, since there are certainly many families that do not place much emphasis on education, or who don't have as high aspirations for their children as others do. And then they don't support their children in a way that would be good for them, and then one thing leads to another.' (Interview B-2)

Beyond that, interviewees from the upper classes also refer to more indirect ways in which social origin influences the aspirations and ambitions of children. For instance, the self-employed graphics designer quoted in the previous section finds that 'if you're not familiar with certain living conditions, […] then you don't have that knowledge, and then you might never get there. […] And if you don't know about certain things,

then you're not pulled towards them' (Interview D-4). Thus, respondents from the upper classes not only refer to material conditions in explaining educational disparities in Germany but also point out the behaviour and mentality of (lower-class) parents. Thereby, the potential for agency on the part of the family is accentuated and responsibility for disadvantaged social locations shifted: while inequality still appears to be influenced by social origin, material conditions alone are not sufficient for explaining disadvantaged social locations, as educational achievement also appears to be influenced by parents' aspirations and ambitions.

Contrasting these views with respondents' accounts of how a privileged social origin operates illustrates that this influence appears to be much more strategic, involving more or less conscious processes of setting the course on behalf of the parents. This becomes clear in upper-class respondents' own biographical accounts as well as their descriptions of how they support their children. In particular, parents (and more specifically, mothers) from the upper classes are well aware of the influence they exert on the trajectories of their children. For instance, decisions on their children's educational career often take on a 'strategic' character[11], implying a greater awareness for the social structural causes of inequality among this group. The self-employed therapist Christina Bruns expresses this very clearly in the following two quotations where she compares the educational career of her son to that of 'disadvantaged' children and reflects upon her own educational trajectory: **(← p. 337)**

> 'When I look at that, this is established step-by-step, eh? These kids are coming to school in a different way, they're also attending a different elementary

[11] See also Lareau (2002) who describes the parenting style of the upper classes as a form of 'concerted cultivation', involving the conscious and planned support for their children. The approach followed by parents from the lower classes, by contrast, is described as 'natural growth' because less emphasis is put on the strategic promotion of talents.

> school than my son. Because also there I am making a choice and saying, "I'm not putting him into *any* elementary school" […].' (Interview D-3)

> 'I see it that way: the situation I'm in, I owe that to my own effort, but I also owe that to a lot other factors. For example my family of origin, where I come from, the way we could grow up, how my parents supported us […]. All this made it a lot easier for me to go through school as compared to other kids who did not grow up this way. […] Thus, it's much more as a part of something that I've ended up in this privileged situation.' (Interview D-3)

Both quotations illustrate that this respondent is well aware of the influence she exerts on the development of her son ('also there I'm making a choice'), and that he has better educational opportunities than children from disadvantaged social backgrounds. At the same time, she sees that her own biography has been shaped by the influence of her parents as well. This is expressed clearly as she reflects upon her own lifecourse. Here, tendencies to attribute her privileged position solely to her own efforts are toned down and the social character of her own trajectory is being emphasized ('It's much more as a part of something that I've ended up in this privileged situation').

In sum, the 'inequality by origin' interpretation implies a greater awareness among the respondents of the social structural roots of inequality as well as one's own social position. Yet, within this overarching interpretive frame, the way that social origin affects one's position within the social hierarchy is understood differently by respondents from lower and higher classes: While respondents from the lower classes refer to the material circumstances of one's social origin, respondents from the higher classes point out the socio-cultural impact of the familial milieu. However, in both cases the emphasis on social background appears to be a crucial prerequisite for formulating critical views on inequality. Thus, in the context of this interpretive frame

we might expect a greater potential for de-legitimation than with regard to the 'inevitable inequalities' interpretation.

Correspondingly, with respect to respondents' normative orientations we find strong support for the principle of equality of opportunity, in particular among members of the higher classes. While both members of lower and higher classes find that opportunities in Germany are distributed unequally, equality of opportunity forms a normative point of reference only for the members of the higher classes. For them, equalizing opportunities appears as a key issue of egalitarian politics and forms the central normative ideal they call upon in criticizing inequality. The graphics designer Angela Elster for instance finds that 'not everybody has the same opportunities, that is, some things are blocked for some people. And that is always a problem, I think' (Interview D-4). Correspondingly, 'justice' for this respondent means 'that everybody should have equal chances' (Interview D-4). Hence, the interpretive frame of 'inequality by origin' appears to be in line with liberal suppositions about people's stratification beliefs. **(← p. 338)**

5.3 Competing or Co-Existing Explanations of Inequality?

The previous sections have reconstructed two distinct lay explanations of social inequality that differ in how far they regard inequality as an inescapable necessity of social order ('inevitable inequalities') or as a societal construct brought about by human action ('inequality by origin'). Both interpretive frames suggest different normative orientations on the part of the interviewees and thus have potentially contrasting implications for the legitimation of inequality. While the 'inevitable inequalities' frame legitimizes inequality, the 'inequality by origin' frame is more critical and suggests an orientation towards greater equality of opportunity. Furthermore, both interpretive frames are used by respondents from the upper as well

as the lower classes, although we find a pronounced class-specific variation of the 'inequality by origin' frame (cf. the discussion in the concluding section). Hence, this section asks whether – and if so, to what extent – these *theoretically* divergent interpretive frames form competing and mutually exclusive interpretations at the *practical level*, i.e. how they are actually used by respondents in their accounts of inequality.

The fact that respondents from lower and upper classes draw upon both interpretive frames simultaneously suggests that these are only partly competing. Rather, we can assume that both interpretive frames *coexist* and that they are used in complementary ways. The respondents thus appear to deal in a pragmatic fashion with the latent tensions implied in these theoretically divergent interpretive frames, thereby displaying some 'creativity' in their adaptation of different interpretive repertoires. This is particularly apparent in their evaluations of the possibilities for upward mobility from disadvantaged social backgrounds. Both the 'inequality by origin' as well as the 'inevitable inequalities' interpretation would suggest that the interviewees should come to rather pessimistic conclusions about the opportunities for upward mobility. Surprisingly, however, this is not necessarily the case. Instead, several interviewees emphasize the possibility of 'working one's way up the social ladder.' In their view, upward social mobility depends on having certain personality traits, such as perseverance, determination, commitment, discipline and assertiveness. The personnel consultant Barbara Fuchs-Willmann, upwardly mobile herself, says:

> 'You have to be incredibly disciplined, you need to have a strong will, and, yes, I would say, be assertive. And you have to believe in yourself. A strong belief in yourself, "You're going to make it." […] But that is something which depends fifty percent on your personality and fifty percent on your family. But

it doesn't matter whether your parents are wealthy or academics.' (Interview D-2)

As this quotation illustrates, the personality traits deemed necessary for upward social mobility appear to be shaped by one's family background, but not by the family's social status – and are thus seen as universal.[12] This way, respondents can sustain the belief that individual upward mobility is possible despite a disadvantaged social background, although it may involve greater effort and discipline. **(← p. 339)** In doing so, they pick up a key variant of the 'inevitable inequalities' frame (inequality as consequence of individual abilities and talents), yet the influence of social background on one's position within the social hierarchy is not denied. It is thus possible for one and the same respondent to draw upon both interpretive frames in explaining inequality in Germany.[13] This way, however, the potential for critique suggested by the 'inequality by origin' frame is undermined.

6 Discussion

This article has reconstructed an implicit assumption underlying stratification theory and research, termed 'liberal premise', according to which people in modern societies tend to view social inequality as caused by social structural forces, and therefore in need of legitimation. Based on qualitative interviews with respondents from upper and lower classes in Germany, I have questioned this assumption. The empirical findings suggest that beliefs about inequality as expressed by my interviewees are less clear-cut than what liberal suppositions might lead one to expect. The respondents

[12] This interpretation is not only expressed by upwardly mobile respondents but shared among the interviewees (cf. 5.1)

[13] See also Kluegel and Smith (1986) who find that some of the US citizens surveyed by them draw upon individualist as well as structuralist explanations of inequality. The authors interpret this as a compromise position that acknowledges social structural barriers but at the same time emphasizes that these can be overcome through individual effort and ambition (Kluegel and Smith 1986, pp. 87-88).

interviewed here do not tend to attribute patterns of inequality exclusively to social structural causes. Interviewees across classes do indeed draw upon an interpretive frame which puts the societal processes through which inequality is constructed to the fore ('inequality by origin'), thereby also suggesting critical normative orientations towards the status quo. At the same time, however, respondents also allude to another interpretive frame which regards inequality as inextricably linked to human nature, and thus as an inescapable necessity of social order ('inevitable inequalities'). Hence, 'pre-Enlightenment' views based upon 'naturalistic' or 'essentialist' explanations of inequality seem to persist. Importantly, such a perspective can suspend pressures for legitimation which would be stronger if respondents would see inequality as being caused by social structural forces. Thus, the 'inevitable inequalities' frame contributes to the legitimation of inequality by fading out the social roots of inequality at the cognitive level. The corresponding normative orientations of the interviewees illustrate this, as few respondents can imagine a more egalitarian society within the context of the 'inevitable inequalities' frame. With regard to stratification theory, these results cast doubt on the assumptions implied in the liberal premise about ordinary people's stratification beliefs.

Furthermore, the empirical analysis illustrates that both interpretive frames seem to be compatible and that they are used by one and the same respondents in complementary ways – despite the fact that they can be located on different poles of an underlying theoretical dimension that differentiates whether inequality is seen as inevitable and necessary or constructed through societal processes (see Table 1 in section 5). Thus, the 'inevitable inequalities' frame and the 'inequality by origin' frame are best viewed as *coexisting* rather than competing (or even contradictory) interpretive schemata. The argumentative link between both interpretations is the respondents' reference to the possibility of upward mobility from disadvantaged social

backgrounds if one has the 'right' personality traits. In **(← p. 340)** doing so, the interviewees draw upon a key variant of the 'inevitable inequalities' frame (inequality as consequence of personality traits), but at the same time do not deny the impact of social origin on peoples' life-chances. However, as this view locates conditions for overcoming disadvantaged social situations *within* individuals (and their personality), the critical stance suggested by an interpretation highlighting the role of social structure is thus undermined.

Moreover, neither interpretive scheme is used exclusively by respondents from one social class. Instead of class-specific interpretive frames, as expected in section 3, we rather find *class-specific variations* of one and the same interpretive scheme. While the overarching thrust of an interpretive scheme is shared by respondents from different social classes, its specific content differs between classes. This is particularly apparent in the case of the 'inequality by origin' frame. Respondents from upper as well as lower classes view a person's social origin as an important cause of inequality. Yet, their understanding of the way social origin operates in practice differs: While respondents from the lower classes primarily point out the material conditions related to social background, interviewees from the higher classes emphasize the socio-cultural influence of the familial milieu. Given the material situation of the lower classes, their reference to the material conditions in the family of origin is not astonishing. By contrast, the higher classes' stronger emphasis on socio-cultural factors has to be viewed against the backdrop of their own conscious involvement in the educational careers of their children, making them aware of the agency of parents as well as the general tractability of individual life-chances. Thus, the class-specific variation of the 'inequality by origin' frame appears to be rooted in *different life experiences* and *circumstances*. Different classes' interpretations of inequality are dependent on whether and how strongly certain experiences are part of their life-

world.[14] Thus, the interpretive frames reconstructed in this article form an interpretive repertoire which is broadly shared and on which respondents from higher and lower classes alike base their perceptions, albeit with adaptations to class-specific circumstances.

Given the small sample sizes common in qualitative studies, no firm conclusions can be drawn with regard to the societal reach and distribution of these interpretive frames. However, the findings from an older survey conducted by Kluegel and Smith (1986, p. 104ff.) in the USA point out an attitudinal pattern which resembles the 'inevitable inequalities' frame as it has been reconstructed here. For instance, a majority of the Americans surveyed by Kluegel and Smith think that differences in income cannot be reduced because people will always differ in their abilities and talents (85 percent) and because it is part of human nature to want more than others (81 percent). Although these findings cannot be transferred to the German context due to cultural and historical differences, they nevertheless indicate that it could indeed be worthwhile for future research – especially for quantitative survey studies – to try to establish how widely shared the 'inevitable inequalities' frame is among the German population and what its consequences for the legitimation of inequality are. With regard to methodological practices **(← p. 341)** common in survey research, this would suggest formulating survey items based on the contents of everyday knowledge of ordinary people, and not in an ad-hoc way or by referring to theoretical assumptions about people's stratification beliefs. Such a procedure would not only broaden our empirical knowledge about the content of ordinary citizens' stratification beliefs but could also remind the sociology of stratification to reconsider its own theoretical preconceptions.

[14] The fact that there are no gender differences further corroborates the interpretation that differences in respondents' attributions of inequality seem to be related to life-worldly, biographical experience (that is shaped by social structure) rather than group membership as such.

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Appendix

Table A.1: Perceptions of the Causes of Inequality in Germany

1. Class differences: 'In Germany there are still big differences between social classes, and what you achieve in life primarily depends on your family background.'

	% 'completely agree' and 'agree somewhat'
West Germany	55
East Germany	68,8
Germany	57,5

2. Open society: 'Germany is an open society. What you achieve in life does not depend on your family background but on your skills and your education.'

	% 'completely agree' and 'agree somewhat'
West Germany	81,7
East Germany	65,6
Germany	78,7

3. Inequality benefits the rich: 'Inequality continues to exist because it benefits the rich and powerful.'

	% 'strongly agree' and 'agree'
West Germany	73,6
East Germany	83,1
Germany	75,5

Source: Items 1 and 2 from German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) 2004 (ZA-Nr. 3762), item 3 from German General Social Survey (ALLBUS) 2000 (ZA-Nr. 3450), own calculations. Response categories of items 1 and 2: 'completely agree', 'agree somewhat', 'disagree somewhat', 'disagree completely'; item 3: 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree'.

(← Table A.1 p. 346)