Together with desires and opportunities, beliefs are fundamental to explaining action (Hedström 2005). In order to assess people’s reasons for why they act the way they do, we have to take their beliefs (i.e., their ‘knowledge about the world’) into account. If these beliefs were always congruent with reality, that is, if beliefs could be inferred from people’s structural situation in a perfect way, belief formation processes would be transparent and of little interest to explanatory sociology. On the other hand, if beliefs were always incorrect and flawed in a uniquely idiosyncratic way, beliefs would also be of little interest to analytical sociology because what needs to be explained is not the concrete actions of single individuals but rather the typical actions of typical individuals. This fact points to the need to identify patterns in belief formation processes because although beliefs, as we will see below, are often biased and flawed, these biases are not always random and unpredictable. It moreover points to the usefulness of staking out a middle ground between subjectivist approaches and universalistic ambitions. Although few beliefs are unique to a specific person, most beliefs are not shared by everyone else. A more reasonable assumption is that most beliefs are, to a varying extent, intersubjective, and it is important for sociologists to identify the boundaries of this intersubjectivity. In this paper, culture, structural equivalence, social category belonging, and social network belonging will be discussed as important parameters of such boundaries. It is important—both for consensus-oriented sociology and conflict-oriented sociology—to understand the reasons for intersubjective uniformities in beliefs: shared beliefs are one important mechanism holding together social entities (e.g., societies, organizations, groups) (Bar-Tal 2000), and differences in beliefs between social entities are an equally important reason for conflict (e.g., Rydgren 2007).

This paper will in particular focus on the importance of beliefs about the past, and shared beliefs about the past in particular. People’s predictions about future events, and their strategies for dealing with
new situations, are often based on beliefs about similar events and situations in the past. As will be discussed below, analogism plays a crucial role in these processes.

In contemporary sociology, shared beliefs about the past is often, in my view rather unfortunately, discussed in terms of collective memory. In this literature, autobiographical memory, social memory, and collective memory are often confused. First, the concept collective memory is misleading; it is important to emphasize that only individuals, and not collectives, do the remembering. However, this does not mean that memory is “completely personal” and non-social, as Gedi and Elam (1996: 34) have suggested. There is a common misapprehension in the literature that memory is either individual or social (see, e.g., Schudson 1995: 346). This is a false distinction; the real distinction is between individual and collective memory, on the one hand, and between social and anti-social (atomistic) memory, on the other. In my view memory—as other beliefs about the past—is individual and social. More specifically, the position taken in this paper is that we all have some autobiographical memories that we do not share with others (which nonetheless may be social in some sense, not the least because they are mediated through language) but that we also have many memories that we share with some people but not with others (see Zerubavel 1996: 284). In this sense, it is more appropriate to talk about intersubjective rather than collective memories (cf. Misztal 2003: 11). What we do find are collective sites of memory (archives, history books, commemorative rituals, etc.), which people draw upon, and which direct people’s memory in certain directions by indicating which past events are considered important. Susan Sontag (2003) calls this collective instruction. However, there are no analytical reasons for calling such collective sites or instructions collective memories. Second, the literature on collective memory not only treats autobiographical memories as memories, but also other kinds of beliefs about the past—such as popular conceptions of the French revolution and other historical events of which people lack living memory.1 This is untenable from an analytical perspective. In this paper popular conceptions about history and autobiographical memories will be treated as distinct subcategories of the wider category of beliefs about the past. The reason for treating autobiographical memories as beliefs

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1 In this context we may define autobiographical memory as ‘knowledge’, subjectively held to be true, about events that individuals ‘know’ they have experienced personally.