Naming Oneself in the Social Mirror: A Vignette-Based Survey

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Abstract

In order to understand the way in which people self-identify in society and as a contribution to debates about class identity in Latin America, in this article we assess how individuals categorize themselves and others socially, and discuss whether a significant portion of the population classifies itself as middle class. We address the question of whether or not individuals' representation of their social position is linked to social class, examining whether that position incorporates a socio-economic dimension, a hierarchical dimension, or even an element of moral value. We focus on how individuals name their own social position by means of a vignette-based survey applied in 2016 to a randomized sample of 2,000 people in Chile. The results show that the theoretical notion of class is still of relevance to subjective positioning criteria, and that such criteria are specific to individuals who self-identify with lower or higher social positions.

Keywords: Stratification, Social Inequality, Social Class, Subjectivity, Vignette Analysis, Latin America, Chile

1. Introduction

Durkheim and Mauss (1903) noted the importance of classifications in collective representations and social life. They argued that individuals establish relationships of inclusion and exclusion between social categories, beyond a single gradation. They theorized that individuals assign an implicit value to social categories because of their shared sensitivities and identities. For this reason, subjective classifications within society are relevant to understanding how social inequality is structured.

In both academia and society itself, classifications based on social class are an important point of reference regarding perceptions and social representations of inequalities (Moscovici and Duveen, 2000). However, although during the 1960s this was almost the sole means of reading social hierarchies, it has become less relevant in recent decades. Some authors have proclaimed the death of social class (Nisbet, 1959; Pakulski, 2005), but the notion remains relevant to the issue of inequality. However, the decreasing relevance of class-based classifications poses the question of how individuals subjectively define their social position. It is especially important that research concerning reflection by individuals on social positions be based on their own criteria rather than on predefined social categories (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). The present study addresses the subjective dimensions that underlie self-identification, an issue about which less is known than the correspondence or non-correspondence between objective and subjective social positioning.

Latin American societies, including that of Chile, are characterized by sharp inequalities.[1] These inequalities are rooted in history and have established enduring differences based mainly on class, sex, and race. This has influenced the study of social inequalities as a structural and objective phenomenon, although the present article focuses on achieving a better understanding of the subjective appreciation of social differences by individuals themselves. A series of studies have shown that people in the region tend to identify as middle-class (Castillo, Miranda and Madero-Cabib, 2013; Lora and Fajardo, 2011; Neri, 2008), although other research has tempered this assessment (Elbert and Pérez, 2018; Mac-

[1] Chile is a middle-income country with a Gini index of 47.7 (2015).

Clure, Barozet et al., 2019; Salata, 2015). The discussion regarding subjective belonging to social classes posits fundamental questions that have not been sufficiently examined. Our research addresses a pair of key questions: What aspects do people consider as defining their position, and to what degree is this definition based on social class? Our goal is to describe how individuals from different social strata synthesize their subjective social position. Considering the central dimensions implied by a classical definition of social class, this entails detection of variations in individuals' perception of the substantive criteria that define their position, their place in the social hierarchy, and the moral value they ascribe to their position. Thus, our specific research questions are: What are the meanings attributed in each of these dimensions to social position? What is the proximity between the dimensions that together define a subjective social position? Do subjective dimensions differ between socio-economic strata?

The data was obtained by means of a vignette-based survey applied in Chile in 2016, which used a game of classifications designed by Boltanski and Thévenot (1983). We explore how people define their social position using their own language and at a low level of reflexivity in daily life, based on the notion that we generally do not elaborate complex discourses when considering our position. Specifically, we focus on the name assigned by each respondent to the social position with which he or she identifies. This is an innovative approach compared to those adopted in other studies, and the survey constitutes the basis of quantitative analysis of the dimensions that underlie the name used to define respondents' subjective positioning.

The present article thus contributes theoretically and empirically to understanding individuals' perception of social stratification. The analysis is also relevant from the perspective of the legitimation of social inequalities (Jost, Banaji and Nosek, 2004; Schwalbe et al., 2000). For those who occupy a lower position in society, a lack of identification with their objective group may be a reaction to social denigration (Skeggs, 1997). As Sennett and Cobb state, a "hidden system of class" is a functional subjective representation for those who hold subordinate positions (1972: 187). The correlation between subjective position and objective social class has been widely explored (Evans and Kelley, 2004; Hout, 2008; Poppitz, 2016), but a descriptive analysis of the subjective dimensions constitutes a relevant sociological problem in itself.

In the first part of our article, we propose a theoretical-conceptual approach regarding social self-positioning. The second part presents the survey, the procedures used to identify subjective social positioning, and the codification and statistical analysis processes. Finally, we provide a quantitative measurement of the dimensions related to self-identification.

2. General framework: Subjective position in society

According to different sociological traditions, the study of how people name themselves vis-à-vis a social position covers different aspects, from identification with social classes to varied forms of socio-economic status. We focus here on a more general notion of self-identification, understood as a set of attributes that give shape and content to the subjective idea of belonging to a social position. In the present article, our starting point is the classical notion of class, which provides a framework within which to analyze subjective social

positioning. Thus, we distinguish between three aspects of the name given by individuals to their position in society: substantive criteria, hierarchical order and attributed value.

2.1 Substantive criteria: Social class, socio-economic inequity, and identity

Usually, the empirical foundations of classes are centered either on possession of economic resources (Marx) or emphasizing differentiation of status (Weber). Bourdieu (1979) proposes a combination of these approaches, distinguishing social classes based on the possession of economic, cultural and social capital. Considering the multiple resource types that differentiate classes, quantitative surveys have used individuals' occupation to provide a synthetic indicator (Wright, 1985; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993). Specific indicators of economic, social and cultural capital also have been incorporated (Savage et al., 2013). The general trend in contemporary stratification is thus to consider the distribution of various types of resources (Grusky, 2001).

In contrast to these approaches, economic literature highlights income as the main differentiator in contemporary societies. Since the 1970s, it has been argued that education is one of the most influential determinants of income (Mincer, 1974), but some economists emphasize patrimony as a crucial element of inequality (Medeiros and Ferreira de Souza, 2015; Piketty, 2013). However, there is little evidence as to the relevance of these objective variables to subjective social positions. This has led to a broader discussion in social sciences about the inconsistency of status and its potential to generate ambivalences in today's perceptions of class position (Hout, 2008). This would be even more acute in countries that have been experiencing strong changes in their labor and economic markets in recent decades (Araujo and Martuccelli, 2014). As such, rather than simply identifying differences between categorizations based on subjective versus objective indicators, an important element of the debate is *how* subjective ambivalences can be understood (Devine and Savage, 2005).

The discussion as to whether class inequality takes precedence over identity or should instead be considered a multiplicity of interests is also important, even from a political perspective (McCall and Orloff, 2017). In Latin America, there is discussion over whether researchers have focused disproportionately on socio-economic and class inequities, treating sex/gender, race/ethnicity, skin color or urban segregation as a secondary concern. There is therefore a need to expand our knowledge of the degree to which these different aspects of identity are incorporated into self-identification by individuals.

2.2 Hierarchical order: Rank and ranking patterns

Classical social class theory establishes a hierarchical system of superior and inferior groups (Ossowski, 1963; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1993). Bourdieu (1979) poses that hierarchical order consists of a combination of gradations: each position is defined by hierarchies in the possession of diverse types of resources or capitals. According to Bourdieu: "there is no space, in a hierarchical society, that is not hierarchized and which does not express social hierarchies and distances in a more or less distorted or euphemized fashion (…)" ([1991] 2018: 106). In empirical terms, hierarchy may be understood as the measurement of distances between social classes, and in Latin America and Chile there is substantial inequity between the extremes of the social hierarchy. A more diffuse differentiation in the middle of the distribution implies strong barriers to mobility towards the upper stratum and greater fluidity

within the rest (Torche, 2005; Espinoza and Núñez, 2014). In this context and from the perspective of daily life, the way in which individuals comprehend and express their position within social hierarchies is crucial to understanding social order. Each individual seeks to answer the often very personal question of whether he or she is as socially valuable as others (Sennett and Cobb, 1972) in a hierarchical order (Castillo, Miranda and Madero-Cabib, 2013; Elbert and Pérez, 2018; Salata, 2015).

Usually, surveys ask individuals to position themselves on a standard scale (Evans and Kelley, 2004; Lindemann and Saar, 2014; Poppitz, 2016) or to choose their class from a set of options (Andersen and Curtis, 2012; Hout, 2008). Such studies have sparked an intense discussion regarding the size of the middle class that is situated between the two hierarchical extremes. In the case of Chile, we should add that vigorous social mobility processes over the past four decades have displaced large numbers of individuals from their social origin, provoking a debate about whether the perception of a clear social hierarchy has become diluted.

Even without the assumption of a shared representation of a hierarchical scale, studies of various countries, including Chile, clearly describe hierarchical structures reported by people when requested to propose their own classification of positions in society (Penissat et al., 2016). However, individuals define these ordinary representations according to various hierarchical patterns that have not yet been analyzed in sufficient depth (Mac-Clure, Barozet et al., 2019). In light of these assertions, we will assess whether people perceive themselves to be within a collective hierarchy or a more horizontal and individualized frame.

2.3 Values: Moral and ethical anchoring of social stratification

In Latin American sociology, social classes have historically been linked to the idea of exploitation and social injustice (González, 2006; Hinkelammert, 2007). Social scholars discuss whether inequalities have become naturalized as an effect of globalization (Souza, 2004). The neoliberal model also seems to dilute collective images and emphasize individual construction of social position. As a means of dealing with inescapable social inequalities in their daily lives, people often justify social differences. Parsons noted that social stratification inequalities constitute a major problem in terms of integration in modern society and must therefore be legitimized through a principle of equality of opportunity, that is, in an "egalitarian ethic" (1970: 39). Indeed, a narrative based on meritocratic positions has become deeply ingrained the world over (Duru-Bellat and Tenret, 2012; Janmaat, 2013; Mijs, 2019). This poses the question of how inequalities come to be naturalized. Individuals elaborate cognitive assertions intended to be concrete, specific and factual in relation to their surroundings, before developing more elevated ideas such as modes of categorizing similarities among individuals (Hacking, 1999), and naturalizing them at a higher level (Swidler and Arditi, 1994).

In addition, it has been argued that the way in which people position themselves and others socially is also based on moral reasonings regarding what is good and bad, and not only on assessments of level of resources. This leads to an examination of moral values relative to social positions (Lamont, 2000; Skeggs, 1997; Sayer, 2005). Indeed, subjective social positions have moral and even affective weight when individuals deny membership of a specific social class in order to avoid discrimination (Reay, 2005; Sennett and Cobb, 1972;

Skeggs, 1997). As such, people develop moral values, disassociating their objective status from their moral worth (Lamont, 2000).

Thus, a fundamental distinction lies in whether self-identification is based on purely cognitive, descriptive and factual judgments, or whether it expresses a value judgment supported by moral ideas. We will therefore assess *how* self-position is evaluated by individuals beyond *what* (subjective criterion) positively or negatively describes this social position. In other words, it is important to consider "test formats" or procedures used to qualify oneself and others (Boltanski, 2009: 55). This can be transposed to whether, when defining their social position, the expressions used by people are denotative, that is, intentionally formal and objective, or connotative, evoking subjective meanings (Barthes, 1990). This issue will be analyzed later.

3. Methodology

3.1 Methodological approach

Our methodological approach assumes that capturing the daily perception and experience of individuals regarding their position in society is problematic, as it requires exploration of a semi-reflexive sphere and thus rules out research methods situated in an explicit sphere. Choice of method is crucial when soliciting descriptions of everyday representations: people may reject a personal position that is considered inferior, or even deny privileges associated with a superior position. They may also elaborate prejudices and stigmatizations in private spaces but not voice them in public. This can explain a lack of articulated or systematic reasoning communicated to an external agent. Nonetheless, at a low level of reflexivity, social comparisons with others who seem familiar allow people to express their experience and ideas concerning their social position. This is a central and innovative aspect of our research, differing from methods that induce individuals to position themselves within the researcher's frame of reasoning. Based on these premises, we adopt a quantitative methodology inspired by the "pragmatics of judgment" and applied to social classifications by means of cards or vignettes (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1983; Penissat et al., 2016).

Designs based on vignettes are increasingly used in empirical research in social sciences (Finch, 1987; Wallander, 2009). A vignette displays a profile or description of a person or situation combining key characteristics, and each respondent assesses each profile (Atzmüller and Steiner, 2010). Vignettes present a selection of dimensions, factors or variables, the levels or attributes of which can be systematically varied (Auspurg and Hinz, 2015). In general, surveys involve the presentation of a set of vignettes with differing information, and respondents are requested to assess the various combinations. This allows researchers to discern the cognitive and normative criteria applied by individuals to complex situations involving various possible choices, such as judging their social position (Rossi, 1979; Coxon, Davies and Jones, 1986; Lorenzi-Cioldi and Joye, 1988). In the present research design, the use of vignettes contributes to the validity of measurements of people's opinions because they are based on realistic scenarios, allowing various aspects to be considered simultaneously by respondents (Finch, 1987; Auspurg and Hinz, 2015).

In "factorial surveys", an experimental variant of vignettes is presented to one group of respondents, and another to another group. However, a survey based on vignettes may present a single set to all respondents (Finch, 1987; Auspurg and Hinz, 2015). Factorial surveys are

theoretically framed and therefore limited to a moderate number of dimensions, levels and vignettes. This produces an experiment with well-defined samples, ensuring a high level of internal validity. A non-experimental survey based on a single set of vignettes may provide external validity regarding a heterogeneous population (Auspurg and Hinz, 2015), as in our research, allowing us to learn more about people's everyday perception of their position. One of the main advantages of this method is that the vignettes used refer to third parties, thus moderating social desirability bias (Schoenberg and Ravdal, 2000). It also limits defensive reactions when people are asked to refer to their own position.

3.2 Data: A survey based on vignettes

In 2016, we applied a vignette-based face-to-face survey to a statistically representative sample of the economically active population of Chile aged 25 years and over in order to establish how people classify individuals in society and self-identify. The sample (N=2,000) was randomly drawn and stratified according to place of residence. It is probabilistic in its three stages, randomly selecting residence units (primary sampling unit), then households (secondary sampling unit), and finally a person in the household (tertiary sampling unit). Response rate was 98.3%. The analysis included 1,507 active cases, whose random selection contributes to enhancing the external validity of the survey.[2] The answers were registered using a tablet, allowing us to measure time: the mean time taken to conduct classifications, determine self-classification, and to provide a name for that classification was 4 minutes and 39 seconds.

The method followed a sequence based on the design developed by Boltanski and Thévenot (1983) and consisted of a classification game where people in Chilean society were represented in vignettes. We used a set of 33 vignettes defined according to segmentation variables that reflect the composition of the country's population. This was based on variables from the leading official national household survey[3]: socio-occupational group, educational level, income level, place of residence, sex, age group and ethnic origin. The first four factors were presented textually on each card, while the last three factors were communicated by means of a facial photograph. The faces depicted correspond to real people selected according to the segmentation variables. The photograph contributes to the realism of each card.[4] Three of the 33 cards used are shown below. The faces are blurred for the purposes of the present article in accordance with ethics rules.

Figure 1
Examples of vignettes from the survey

[2] The active cases correspond to respondents who identified themselves according to a pile of vignettes. We eliminated cases in which a self-identification name and/or a response regarding income level was not provided. Both were defined as missing cases, but income was the main exclusion factor (22.0% of respondents). The socio-demographic distribution of the sample and the missing cases, along with that of the country's population, are presented in Table A1 in the Appendix.

[3] 2013 CASEN survey.

[4] A control question showed that physical appearance did not significantly affect classification of the vignettes.

Translation: (72) Cafeteria food handler; lower secondary education; Mostazal, O'Higgins region; monthly income between CLP 150,000 and CLP 200,000. (24) Sales manager for a pressure washer and vacuum cleaner company; technical training; Antofagasta; monthly income between CLP 300,000 and CLP 500,000. (34) Manager for a technology and industrial processes company; tertiary education; Valparaíso; monthly income above CLP 2,500,000. USD 1 = CLP 675 (2016).

Source: Vignettes used in classifications survey, Chile, 2016.

The steps in the application of the survey were:

1. Classification of vignettes into groups; 2. Naming the groups; 3. Self-identification

Each respondent was initially asked to consider the information on the 33 cards and to organize them "into groups that you believe best represent Chilean society." This design avoided terms that might lead respondents to apply representations based on social class, income or any aspect imposed *a priori* by researchers. Each respondent was told that he or she could create as few or as many piles as they wished, and that each pile could contain one or more cards. Most respondents made two piles of vignettes, followed by those who made three and four piles. The average was 2.9 piles. After classifying the cards, respondents were asked to name their piles and then to point to the one with which they identified. This procedure facilitates a stringent analysis of colloquial expressions used by people in reference to their own position in society.

While the method applied is innovative, it is important to stress its limitations. In qualitative terms, the greater spontaneity involved in the vignette classification game can only be understood in the context of this design. The procedure allows the emergence of representations that people mobilize during their daily lives, but is unable to achieve

complete alignment with the way in which each individual represents him or herself or generally talks about differences between social positions. The methodology also enables an exploration of the mechanisms that operate at the level of personal life, although other methods are required for the study of dominant public discourses in society. Finally, the method applied cannot be directly compared with previous surveys based on standard scales.

3.3 Variables: Ways of naming social position and respondent characteristics

In the present study, the variables are dimensions of subjective self-identification used to name respondents' own social position and define their socio-economic characteristics. In order to categorize the names used by respondents, following a usual method (Payne and Payne, 2004), we iteratively examined the words employed to identify the piles of vignettes, conceptually connecting the categories created by the respondents. We coded the names attributed to the piles of vignettes—including the pile with which each respondent identified—according to the three dimensions described earlier: the substantive criteria to which they referred, their hierarchical order, and the existence of underlying values.

The initial purpose of the codification was to identify whether the logic used by the respondent in name assignment alludes to social class, to a socio-economic dimension, or to another criterion. The coded categories were social class, occupation, income, sex/gender, and other differences that were mentioned less frequently, relating to place of residence, age and appearance in the photo. Two other categories were also coded: a name that alludes to everyone in the vignettes being similar (such as "all equal") and the designation of the piles without identifying a specific substantive criterion, using names like "alpha".

An analogous procedure was applied to achieve our second categorization of the names given by respondents: the hierarchical rank of the pile of vignettes. When the name assigned to a group of vignettes implies that the group is inferior to others, it was categorized as "lower", and as "higher" when superior to others. In order to ensure that the respondent identified an effective hierarchy, we determined that he or she should establish a comparative judgment with at least one name coded as "lower" and another as "higher". If there was no comparison between the names of the piles, for example "A", "B" and "C", or "young" and "old", or when the respondent made only one pile of vignettes, they were categorized as "without hierarchy".

Our third and final coding procedure consisted of determining whether respondents attributed values, that is, whether they reinforced its meaning as good and just. To establish the existence of that meaning, we distinguished between the referential and predicative designation strategies in the construction of social representations (Wodak, 2001). We focused on the meaning attributed to the name based on the canonical distinction between denotation (referential) and connotation (predicative) (Barthes, 1990). Using this indicator of value in the names, denotation involves formal expressions that seek to be objective—a socially accepted standard—in reference to someone or something. This included colloquial expressions in which the name has a neutral meaning, that is, it clearly groups together similar individuals, such as those who receive "high" salaries. For its part, connotation consists of subjective meanings related to personal values or emotional evocations. The purpose is predicative: assigning an explicit moral value (such as "women who are fighters"), a negative or positive qualification (such as "bad salaries"), a rhetorical figure (such as "the excellent

ones"), a condition or noble action (such as "hardworking people" or "people who make sacrifices"), an imagined community (such as "Southerners"), a judgment regarding lack (such as "no opportunities"), and other similar meanings. The last category registered the lack of denotation or connotation in the name (such as "blue"), which was labeled "without meaning".

In regard to the respondents' socio-economic characteristics, we analyzed several variables: educational level, income level, socio-occupational group, sex, and place of residence. Socio-economic characteristics of respondents, along with their ethnic origin and age, are compared with official Chilean population data in Table A1 in the Appendix. Respondents were characterized using the variable of income level, chosen for its marked association with subjective social position as analyzed in a specific study of the issue based on data from the same survey (Mac-Clure, Barozet et al., 2019).

3.4 Data Analysis

Analysis of the data is based on a qualitative and quantitative mixed method whose first stage consists of the coding described in the previous section, with flexibility to incorporate categories that arise from an inductive analysis of names such as "no hierarchy" and "all similar". In a second stage, the frequency of the coded categories is calculated, generating valid quantitative results for the population of the country. Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) is especially suitable for describing multidimensional data, analyzing the frequencies of categorical variables and summarizing them, allowing for non-controlled sources of variation (Le Roux and Rouanet, 2010). In contrast, a regression analysis allows the examination of differences between the observed values and the values predicted by a model. The description provided by the MCA is of value in itself, as it provides information on global aspects that allow progress from the raw data to possible models (Greenacre, 2017; Le Roux, 2014).

The purpose of MCA is to analyze multiple associations between variables and variable categories based on the information provided by frequency tables. In visual terms, a Cartesian diagram is built within which each category is represented by a dot, and the distance between the dots represents similarities and differences. In the present work, we apply a basic or elementary—rather than full-scale and structured—analysis using MCA (Greenacre, 2017; Le Roux and Rouanet, 2010), since the data refers to an open question coded in three variables and the results depend on that initial coding, so that the analysis cannot go beyond the nature of this data. As such, these three variables, along with level of income, are used as active variables in the analysis, and no others are included. This procedure enables us to efficiently describe and explore the way in which individuals from different income levels define their subjective social position within these three dimensions.

4. Results

The results are based on the name of the pile of vignettes with which respondents self-identify. Here we distinguish the three aspects connected with previous theoretical and methodological considerations: the substantive criterion, the hierarchical order, and values

in naming. We also analyze the relationship between these dimensions and respondents' income level.

4.1 Substantive criteria of self-identification

First, we compare the frequency of the substantive criteria used by the respondents to define their own position in society.

Figure 2. Self-identification based on substantive criteria in names

Source: Developed by the authors based on the Classifications Survey, Chile, 2016.
Note: Unweighted data. N=1,507

Regarding self-identification criterion, 50.1% of respondents use socio-economic criteria: income (such as "low income"), occupation (such as "employees"), or education (such as "high school"). The most frequently referenced socio-economic criterion is income, followed by occupation and education. The latter receives less attention than might be expected given the relevance of education as a mechanism for access to opportunities and upward mobility, according to Chilean public opinion.

Surprisingly, one of the least frequently used criteria is social class. It is worth noting that among those who use a social class reference to name the pile of vignettes with which they identify, two thirds refer to it as "middle class", while only a small number use a name like "lower class", "working class" or "exploited". Terms like "upper class" are even scarcer. This confirms that although "middle class" is the class-related term most used for self-identification, very few people explicitly refer to themselves using a class lexicon. These results suggest that individuals' self-identification with social classes is lower than expected compared to surveys that directly measure the perception of class belonging.

Regarding adscriptive variables, the frequency of self-identification with sex is notable (12%). Physical aspect and age—suggested by the photographs in the vignettes—along with place of residence were used by respondents as other self-identification criteria, together

constituting another 12% (other differences). Interestingly, very few people explicitly refer to ethnic or racial characteristics.

Finally, a small number of respondents (8%), generally those who made just one pile of vignettes, use a term such as "all the same" or simply "Chileans" or "workers", or emphasize the existence of generalized inequality, i.e. by not identifying differences between the individuals represented.

The substantive criteria of self-identification expressed by respondents do not predominantly refer to a notion of social class based on the possession of multiple socio-economic resources, but to one or another specific socio-economic criterion. Nevertheless, in regions marked by acute inequalities, such as Latin America, different objective socio-economic dimensions tend to coincide. Thus, we are inclined to interpret that whatever the socio-economic criterion perceived by a respondent as the main reference of his or her social position, it points to a synthetic and multidimensional representation closely linked to the concept of social class.

4.2 Hierarchical order in self-identification

We then analyze whether the name attributed to the group of vignettes with which respondents self-identify involves a hierarchical rank.

Table 1. Self-identification based on substantive criteria and hierarchy in naming

	Hierarchy			
Criteria	Lower	Higher	No hierarchy	Total
Class	41%	57%	3%	100%
Occupation	38%	47%	15%	100%
Income	57%	30%	13%	100%
Education	17%	70%	13%	100%
Sex	2%	0%	98%	100%
Other differences	13%	19%	68%	100%
Similarity	0%	0%	100%	100%
No criteria	3%	4%	93%	100%
Total	26%	28%	46%	100%

Source: Developed by the authors based on the Classifications Survey, Chile, 2016.
Note: Unweighted data. N=1,507

Many of the respondents self-identify with a position—whether lower or higher—in the social hierarchy, but almost half of all respondents refuse to acknowledge a social hierarchy at all.[5] It is worth noting that self-identification based on income is mainly linked to lower

[5] Given that in the coding procedure we established that position in a hierarchical order is relative to other positions, those who self-identify with a lower status tend to classify others (other piles of vignettes) as a higher rank. Our coding procedure began with identification of names used for the lowest position before using that as

self-positioning. On the one hand, those who self-identify according to income tend to allude to low salaries or define themselves as "poor". On the other hand, respondents who identify with a pile of vignettes whose name refers to education frequently indicate that they have advanced university or technical qualifications, or "good education" in general. To a lesser extent, respondents who identify with occupation allude to a higher hierarchical position.

While respondents who focus on socio-economic criteria (income, occupation and education) refer to a social hierarchy, identity criteria such as sex, age, or physical appearance tend to be linked to rejection of a hierarchical order. This is a significant finding. Self-identification according to a hierarchical order thus varies depending on whether it is based on socio-economic criteria or adscriptive identity. According to the reviewed literature, rejection of a social hierarchy can be interpreted as denial of a classical notion of social class, which can also be understood as an attempt to hide a lower personal situation experienced as painful.

4.3 Values in self-identification

The way respondents name their own social position also casts light on the extent to which they assign a moral value to it, based on the notion that subjective classifications convey a normative assessment. We therefore analyzed whether names given allude to denotation or connotation.

Table 2. Self-identification based on substantive criteria and value in naming

	Value			
Criteria	Denotation	Connotation	No meaning	Total
Class	95%	5%	0%	100%
Occupation	59%	40%	0%	100%
Income	53%	44%	3%	100%
Education	61%	34%	6%	100%
Sex	81%	14%	5%	100%
Other differences	44%	51%	6%	100%
Similarity	7%	93%	0%	100%
No criteria	1%	23%	76%	100%
Total	49%	39%	12%	100%

Source: Developed by the authors based on the Classifications Survey, Chile, 2016.
Note: Unweighted data. N=1,507

Almost half of respondents (49%) use denotation to refer to the pile of vignettes with which they self-identify; that is, they apply an objective and formal expression. By contrast, 39% name their position with a connotation, thus assigning an explicit moral value.

the basis for coding the other names. As such, we categorized an intermediate level as higher than the base reference; for example, if a respondent classified one pile as "poor" and another pile as "middle class", we categorized the latter as a higher position.

When we examine meaning according to substantive criteria, social class terminology is mainly expressed in the form of denotations such as “middle class”, “upper middle class” or “upper class” rather than connotations such as “middle class without rights” or “the exploited”. It is also common to see denotation in reference to occupation through neutral self-identification such as “workers”, “skilled workers”, “employees”, or “independent contractors” rather than connotations alluding to the “most hardworking” or “entrepreneurs”. Similarly, denotations regarding education refer to labels such as “elementary school education” and “technical school” rather than connotations such as “not very educated”.

In contrast to the dominance of denotation regarding the three socio-economic criteria (class, education and occupation) there is greater balance in the use of denotative and connotative expressions to refer to income as a criterion for self-identification. Denotations are based on a supposedly cognitive and objective description such as “high”, “middle” or “low” salaries, compared to connotations such as “good” or “unfair”. The latter are less frequently used, but reveal that these individuals apply their own values to formulate a positive or negative judgment of their income level through expressions of acceptance (such as “normal income”) or rejection or disapproval (such as “paltry salary”).

Among those whose self-identification is based on sex, use of denotative terms is dominant. They generally identify themselves in a neutral manner (“men” and “women”) rather than using predicative expressions linked to gender inequality. By contrast, the use of connotative descriptors is more frequent among respondents who self-identify with other criteria gleaned from the photographs in the vignettes, such as “good-looking” or “happy”, age groups such as “hard-working young people”, or place of residence, such as “Southerners”.

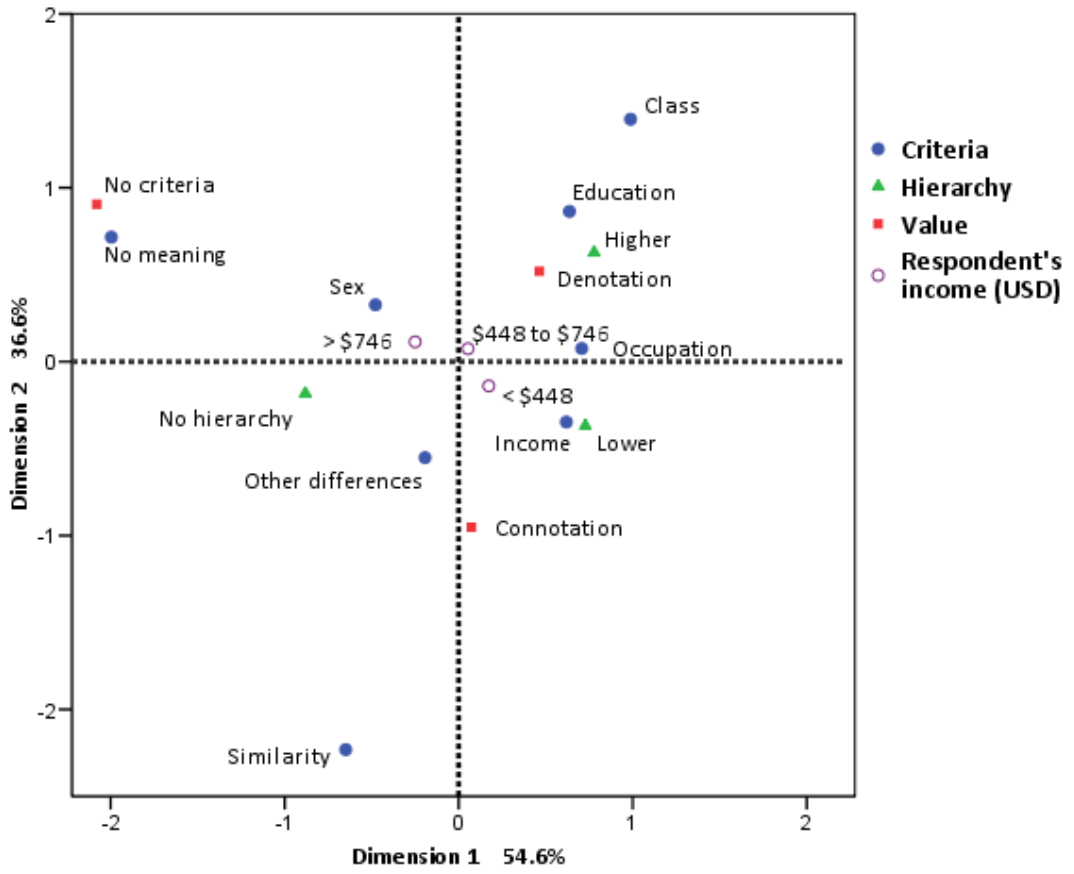
Finally, respondents who define themselves as part of a single group in which everyone is similar describe themselves using expressions with connotations, such as “normal people” or “Chilean”.

In short, denotations or factual judgments are more common and tend to dominate in self-identification based on socio-economic criteria and sex. This is a noteworthy finding, because it reveals a key mechanism in the definition of subjective social position, which could be interpreted as contrary to the hypothesis that subjective classifications involve a notion of values. However, the apparent rationalization, formality and objectivity of that which is denoted can also be interpreted as an attempt to naturalize self-identification by making use of accepted social standards. Refusal to assign a moral value to the subjective position contrasts with the sense of exploitation and social injustice which, according to the reviewed literature, has historically been attributed in Latin America to the notion of social class.

4.4 Patterns shared between dimensions of self-identification

In order to identify shared patterns in the subjective dimensions, we performed a MCA of the relationships between the categories related to substantive criteria, hierarchical order, and values. We also incorporated respondent income as an indicator of socio-economic status in order to establish whether this is associated with the naming of social position. In Figure 3, categories with a higher degree of association are represented by points positioned in close proximity, while the most disassociated categories are represented by points positioned further apart.

Figure 3. Multiple correspondence analysis: Criteria, hierarchy, value, and income levels



Source: Developed by the authors based on the Classifications Survey, Chile, 2016.
Note: Unweighted data. N=1,507. For detailed MCA statistics, see Appendix.

The data are summarized on two axes that explain 54.6% of the variation in dimension 1 and 36.6% in dimension 2.[6] In the first dimension, subjective socio-economic criteria (social class, occupation, income and education) are located on the right-hand side, along with the perception of belonging to higher and lower positions in the hierarchy. Identity criteria such as sex and other differences are located on the left-hand side.

The quadrants show the specific links between the dominant perceptions involved in self-identification. Respondents who perceive themselves as occupying a higher hierarchical position are located in the upper right-hand quadrant. They attribute this situation mainly to

[6] Discrimination measures are detailed in the Appendix.

education—and to some extent, occupation—referring to denotations or factual judgments related to accepted social standards. This self-identification is also associated with social class—mainly the middle class—although less significantly. By contrast, in the lower right-hand quadrant, we observe an association between respondents who self-identify based on income and consider themselves to be lower down the social hierarchy. These respondents tend to use connotations when positioning themselves, i.e. explicit personal moral values.

The left-hand quadrants show a clear difference between respondents whose self-identification is based on criteria relating to sex (in the upper quadrant) and those who emphasize other differences to do with physical appearance, age, and place of residence (in the lower quadrant). However, both groups reject the existence of a hierarchy, and this is a characteristic which sets them apart from the other respondents.

At the furthest extremes of the graph are found the self-identification categories most differentiated from the predominant ones, namely subjective belonging to a social class, a sense of belonging to a single similar group (on the lower left edge), and a lack of substantive criteria and explicit moral values (on the far left).

It is worth noting that the socio-economic level of the respondents measured in terms of their income is not relevant to their modes of self-identification. The closer a point is to the origin of the axes—as is the case with this indicator of socio-economic status—the lower its capacity to explain other variables. However, regardless of the objective income level, those who subjectively consider that they belong to a higher rank in the social hierarchy express a belief that this is due to factors such as education. The data also show that having a lower income has less influence on subjective positioning than both perception of oneself in a lower position in the hierarchy and the perception of personal income as a social marker.

In short, our analysis reveals a number of clear patterns regarding social self-positioning. First, those who see income as a crucial criterion consider themselves to occupy a lower position in the social hierarchy. Second, education, occupation and, to a lesser extent, social class—particularly the middle class—are associated with a higher perceived position in the social hierarchy. A more advantageous subjective position is expressed through denotations, i.e. factual judgments such as level of education. Third, the other respondents tend to reject the notion of social hierarchies, and some even deny the existence of substantive criteria of differentiation regarding their own position.

5. Conclusions

In the present work we combined qualitative and quantitative data to explore the ways in which individuals define their own social position, particularly at a time when class identities are being replaced by new forms of social identification. Our study contributes to understanding of representations of social stratification by demonstrating that assigning oneself a social position using one's own language and reasoning is different than situating oneself on a scale defined by researchers.

The evidence indicates that a large proportion of individuals define their social position based on socio-economic criteria, ascribe a hierarchical order, and attribute a notion of value to their position. However, although such pragmatic meanings may be linked to a theoretical notion of class, the majority of respondents express a substantive criterion that refers to the

unequal distribution of specific socio-economic resources, and this contrasts with the explicit social class references assumed by previous studies. Thus, when applying a methodology such as the one adopted for the present study, references to "middle class" cease to dominate. Self-identification according to one or other socio-economic criterion shows a lack of a uniform vocabulary for social positions. In this regard, the importance attributed to personal income relative to education is noteworthy given the prominence of the latter within the dominant meritocratic discourse in Chilean society. Sex/gender or ethnicity criteria are used by many respondents to define their position, although to a lesser degree than socio-economic criteria, reflecting an understanding of differences in society that cannot be ignored.

Regarding the way in which people refer to hierarchy, results show that respondents generally establish a hierarchical order linked to one substantive criterion. Those who see themselves in a lower social position tend to link that position to their perceived low level of income, while the perception of having a better occupation is attributed to educational level. The latter is consistent with the meritocratic education-based discourse that prevails among the most fortunate.

The present research shows that categories used by individuals to classify others and to self-identify are not always explicitly based on moral values. Those who believe themselves to be in a higher position assign relevance to factual judgments based mainly on education, which can be interpreted as a means of justifying their self-identification. By contrast, those who declare themselves to occupy a lower position express value judgments which relate to their income and, frequently, to personal effort. This grants moral value to less privileged individuals, but in some cases can imply acceptance of their lack of resources.

These results could pave the way for further interpretations of the link between subjective positions and the development of critical reflexivity. Subsequent quantitative research could model whether a preference for socio-economic criteria, as well as emphasis on value judgments to identify subjective social positions depends on the objective position or the subjective perception of one's place in the social hierarchy. The scarcity of self-identification with explicit social class criteria found by the present study may be of interest in subsequent comparative studies which could attempt to understand how lower or subordinate social positions are named in society. Finally, the present findings could be of relevance to future studies that consider different time periods, such as the change that took place in Chile following the social uprising of 2019, and to comparative research between countries with different socio-economic conditions.

Appendix

Table A1. Socio-economic characteristics of respondents and country population

Socio-economic variable		Survey respondents: Sample (active cases)	Survey respondents: Missing cases	Country population
Educational level	Primary	23.1%	22.0%	35.5%
	Secondary	55.1%	56.8%	47.9%
	University	21.8%	21.2%	16.5%
Income level (USD)	Low level: < $448	41.1%	33.3%	48.2%
	Middle level: $448 to $746	25.1%	29.6%	27.3%
	High level: > $746	33.8%	37.0%	24.5%
Socio-occupational group	Unskilled manual worker	21.4%	19.8%	27.7%
	Self-employed worker	23.5%	26.3%	18.3%
	Non-manual routine	19.8%	19.2%	21.0%
	Skilled worker	7.5%	9.6%	12.4%
	Professional	27.7%	25.2%	20.6%
Sex	Male	41.7%	48.7%	57.4%
	Female	58.3%	51.3%	42.6%
Age (years)	Up to 45	50.5%	46.9%	55.4%
	46 or older	49.5%	53.1%	44.6%
Ethnic origin	Indigenous	5.1%	5.3%	7.8%
TOTAL by variable (valid cases)		100%	100%	100%
N	Sample	1,507	493	82,527
	Chilean population			6,783,317

Notes: Economically active population aged 25 years and over. Survey respondents: sample, unweighted data. Country population: weighted data.
Sources: Developed by the authors using the Classifications Survey, Chile, 2016 and official CASEN Survey, Chile, 2013.

Table A2. Coding scheme for the names of social positions: codes and most salient expressions

CODE	Most salient expressions
CRITERIA	
Class	middle class, lower class, higher class, exploited, proletarian
Occupation	employees, professionals, skilled workers, workers, housewife, entrepreneurs, hardworking people
Income	paltry wages, high salaries, bad salaries, low income
Education	high school, completed university, primary studies, good education, middle studies
Sex	women, women who are fighters, men, working men
Other differences	young, adults, older, modern, happy, humble
Similarity	all equal, all the same, Chileans, equality, inequality, diversity
No criteria	alpha, blue, water, sun
HIERARCHY	
Lower	lower…, paltry wages, humble, less, badly paid, poor, vulnerable, no studies, lack of opportunities, mediocre
Higher	higher…, businessman, professional, university education, sympathetic, fortunate, bosses, intelligent, rich, scoundrels
No hierarchy	A, B, C; young, old; homemakers. Or one pile of vignettes.
VALUE	
Denotation	middle class, lower class, higher class, employees, professionals, skilled workers, workers, housewife, entrepreneurs, high school, women, men
Connotation	paltry wages, women who are fighters, bad salaries, the excellent ones, hardworking people, people who make sacrifices, Southerners, exploited, proletarian, happy, humble
No meaning	alpha, blue

Note: Codes are applied in the context of the full classification of people in society.
Source: Developed by the authors using the Classifications Survey, Chile, 2016.

Table A3. Multiple correspondence analysis: Model summary

Dimension	Cronbach's Alpha Total (Eigenvalues)	Variance accounted for		
		Inertia	% of variance	Total (Eigenvalue)
1	0.723	2.184	0.546	54.589
2	0.423	1.464	0.366	36.601
Total		3.648	0.912	
Mean	0.602(a)	1.824	0.456	45.595

Note: (a) Mean Cronbach's Alpha is based on the mean Eigenvalue.
Source: Developed by the authors using the Classifications Survey, Chile, 2016.
Note: SPSS. Unweighted data. N=1,507

Table A4. Multiple correspondence analysis: Correlations Transformed Variables

Dimension: 1

	Criteria	Hierarchy	Value	Respondent's income (USD)
Criteria (a)	1.000	.674	.670	.054
Hierarchy (a)	.674	1.000	.408	.053
Value (a)	.670	.408	1.000	.078
Respondent's income (USD) (a)	.054	.053	.078	1.000
Dimension	1	2	3	4
Eigenvalue	2.185	.992	.591	.232

Note: (a) Missing values were imputed with the mode of the quantified variable.
Source: Developed by the authors using the Classifications Survey, Chile, 2016.
Note: SPSS. Unweighted data. N=1,507

Table A5. Multiple correspondence analysis: Discrimination measures

	Dimension		
	1	2	Mean
Criteria	0.842	0.705	0.773
Hierarchy	0.665	0.162	0.414
Value	0.642	0.583	0.613
Respondent's income (USD)	0.034	0.014	0.024
Active Total	2.184	1.464	1.824
% of Variance	54.589	36.601	45.595

Source: Developed by the authors using the Classifications Survey, Chile, 2016.
Note: SPSS. Unweighted data. N=1,507

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