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I Justify Myself, Therefore I am. Regimes Of Justification In Chilean Elite Universities

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Abstract

Few studies focus on understanding the role of universities in the elites' legitimation processes. This article examines how elite universities -in the context of Chilean tertiary education massification- actively create privileged statuses. Focusing on eight case studies, we examine how these universities justify their roles and existence, generating distinctions that promote highly exclusive spaces, replicating elite privilege. Through 48 semi-structured interviews, this article focuses on understanding the justification arguments employed by faculty and deans from these elite institutions. Following Boltanski's and Thévenot's theoretical model, the results illustrate three different justification regimes: i) arguing for their elite status within the university system; ii) justifying the role they fulfil within Chilean society; and iii) defending their existence in the social structure. These regimes combine arguments relating to social justice, efficiency and market system performance in an eclectic and pragmatic way.

Key words

Higher education, elites, justification regimes, Chile.

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Me Justifico, Luego Existo. Regímenes De Justificación En Las Universidades De Élite Chilenas

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Resumen

En la literatura, existen pocos estudios focalizados en entender el rol de las universidades en los procesos de legitimación de las posiciones de élite ocupadas por los sujetos. Este artículo explora esta dimensión, analizando cómo las universidades de élite – en el contexto de masificación de la educación terciaria en Chile – son instituciones centrales en los procesos de producción de *status*. Focalizados en ocho casos, se analiza cómo estas universidades justifican su rol y existencia, generando distinciones que permiten mapear estos espacios cerrados de reproducción de los privilegios de las élites. A través de 48 entrevistas semi-estructuradas, este artículo analiza los discursos de justificación adoptados por directivos y académicos de estas instituciones. Siguiendo las teorizaciones de Boltanski y Thévenot, los resultados muestran cómo los actores combinan distintos regímenes de justificación, estructurados en tres dimensiones: i) justificación sobre su estatuto de institución de elite en el sistema universitario; ii) justificación acerca de su rol en la sociedad chilena y; iii) justificación de la importancia de su existencia en la estructura social. Estos regímenes combinan, de forma ecléctica y pragmática, argumentos relacionados con la justicia social, eficiencia y performatividad del mercado de trabajo.

Palabras clave

Educación Superior, elites, regímenes de justificación, Chile.

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One of the principles of social justice in modern industrial societies is that an individual's social status must be achieved rather than inherited. Thus, meritocracy – a system in which compensation is proportional to a person's talent and effort rather than inheritance, lineage, or coercive control- is one of the strongest models of legitimation of social status in Western societies (Young, 1958). In this process of legitimation, educational systems play a key role, as these systems validate meritocratic processes through what Bourdieu (2011) calls institutionalized cultural capital: a form of capital that is determined by university degrees and diplomas. This kind of cultural capital is particularly important for a specific group - the elites.

Since the mid-20th century, the elites use meritocratic speech to justify their social status and achievements, building one of the central foundations of identity and self-representation (Gérard and Wagner, 2015). Since the seminal papers written by Bourdieu, various studies have focused on understanding how these institutions produce symbolic, social, and cultural patterns to maintain elite privilege (Khan, 2011; Van Zanten et al., 2015), and the impact of educational background on the students' future social positions (Wakeling and Savage, 2015).

This article analyses how elite university institutions in Chile justify their role and existence within the higher education system, producing institutional, social, and symbolic distinctions that allow them to build highly exclusive and hermetic places for the elites. Chile can be understood as a *sui generis* case of the tertiary expansion. Through privatization, the heterogenization of university offer and the integration of students with different socioeconomic background, the Chilean massification process has created a system where the access mechanism creates both opportunities and barriers. This is a paradigmatic case of what Merle (2002) has called “segregated democratization”, with hundreds of mass universities and a small and select group of elite universities.

These elite universities can be defined by three basic features: over-representation of students who have high socioeconomic status (Khan, 2011); demanding selective mechanisms for their students, with high entry barriers (Draelants, 2010); and high-quality education, with a global outlook and high academic requirements (Bourdieu, 1989).

The main focus of this article is on understanding a precise type of discourse shared by the directors and faculty of these universities: justification discourses, based on the contributions of Boltanski and Thévenot (1991). This specific theoretical framework is relevant to explain our main research because it is a current and general theory that can be adapted to several social realities, such as the Chilean one. It also allows to reflect on the regimes of justification while taking into consideration the social and economic structure, which is our main goal. The results show that institutions develop different regimes of justification through discourses that allow us to argue the status of the elite universities in the university system, the role that these institutions play in Chilean society, and the need for their existence in the country to maintain and/or change the social structure. These justifications are combined in an eclectic and pragmatic way, joining arguments of social justice, efficiency and the market. While the neoliberal politics that have been in place in Chile since 1980 can explain the emphasis given by institutions to the efficiency and market arguments (essential to ensure the elevated economic, political and social positions of their alumni in an highly competitive society), the principle of the social justice can be understood as a value-added of certain elite

universities which play an active role on social and economic development of the Chilean society, educating leaders who will use their leadership skills to serve the common good.

As has happened in France with the *Grandes Écoles* (Bourdieu, 1989), and in the United Kingdom with Russell Group universities (Bathmaker et al., 2016), the results show that, in Chile, elite universities also seem to be shaping themselves into leading players in the processes of production and creation of elites. Thus, the results help us to understand the relations between elites and higher education, showing how some institutions become active agents in the creation of privileged statuses and socially exclusive places, in a context of tertiary democratization. This allows us to understand more clearly how elites exert their power (Cousin et al., 2018) and how educational institutions act as key agents through processes of identity reshaping in contemporary societies.

The article is divided in four sections, besides this introduction. The second section shows the conceptual background of the study, focused especially on understanding the notion of regimes of justification used by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991), and their implementation in the educational field. The third section describes the methodological qualitative approach of the study, detailing the sample, data collection techniques, and the analysis performed. In the fourth section, the results are described, divided according to three types of justification applied by elite universities: i) their status in the university system, ii) their role in society, and iii) the need for them to exist within the social structure. Finally, the last section details some findings and implications drawn from the results of the research.

Theoretical Framework

Elites and Justification Processes

Contemporaneously, elites can be defined as social group with greater advantages and privileges in multiple aspects of social life (Savage et al., 2013). Although a generalization, this definition reveals that —unlike most of the population— elites have disproportionate access to social resources. Depending on the nature of the resource, Khan (2012) distinguishes among economic, political, social, cultural, and knowledge elites. Despite the differences, these elite groups frequently develop similar justification processes of their positions and dispositions in the social structure. As social psychology has shown, the development of these processes is a key tool that allows the dominant ones to maintain and reinforce their privileged statuses and, more importantly, to convince the subordinated groups of the moral legitimacy of the social order (Sidanius et al, 2001), leading to structures of inequality in which their social positions as elites are sustained.

While various studies have focused on the elites' legitimation processes, few studies have focused on understanding the role of universities in this process. Gaxie (2017), for example, has shown how elites use the notion of equality among citizens to legitimize their status. This is how elites seek to vindicate and naturalize differences of power, prestige, and capital versus other groups, calling them "fair inequalities", arising from talent or effort. Mension-Rigau (2007) concludes that elites generate a legitimating grammar of privilege based on the principle of distinction. For elites, their social positions are legitimized by a series of moral

and spiritual values, and how-to-live rules that distinguish them from “outsiders”. Thus, elites have and preserve values such as ancestor worship, fidelity to inherited heritage, quality education, proper use of language, respect toward adults and elderly people, and discretion. In this regard, Thumala (2007) has shown how elites in the Southern Cone assume a role of "moral educators" of poor people. Finally, Khan (2011) points out that in contemporary societies the legitimacy of elites is no longer determined by a specific cultural or family ethos. Rather, it is set by acts, consecrating meritocratic fiction as a primary narrative of legitimation of privilege and emphasizing arguments regarding hard work, effort, discipline, and skills.

Types of Justification: Boltanski and Thévenot’s Proposal

One of the most interesting proposals to understand justification processes is the one suggested by Boltanski and Thévenot’s work named *De la justification: les économies de la grandeur*. Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) propose a theoretical model for the various modes of justification that people employ to defend their points of view and legitimize their actions. Although it was initially developed to analyze disputes, the sociology of justification has also been formulated as a tool in the analysis of other public activities, in fields as diverse as urban development, industrial loans, academic research, or social movements (Holden and Scerri, 2015; Albert and Davidenko, 2018).

This model, developed by Boltanski and Thévenot, identifies six principles of justification or orders of worth, which reference classics by authors such as Rousseau, Saint Augustine, and Adam Smith. The six orders identified by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991) are:

- Inspired order: Focuses on creativity as a common superior principle that only artists can access, and it gives them a state of "greatness", which is unattainable to those who have not received the gift of inspiration.
- Civic order: Based on the supreme principle of collectivity. People who position themselves in this order are those that share common values such as equity and solidarity or are driven to represent “a group that expresses the general will” (Boltanski, 2001, p.16).
- Fame order: focuses value on notoriety and distinction. Therefore, "greatness" or "smallness" is derived from others’ views and opinions. Thus, the great are those who achieve recognition and authority, while the lesser ones are those who fail to make a name for themselves.
- Domestic order: is based on the superior principle of respect for hierarchy and tradition. Fidelity and loyalty are its main values. This world values hierarchical status within a structure of personal dependencies (Boltanski, 2001), conferring the corresponding status upon roles such as the ancestor, the elder, or the father.
- Market order: inspired by Adam Smith, is based on the superior principle of competition - a key element in market development. Designed upon the ideas of profit, cost and money, this order measures wealth and focuses on those who become rich,

display coveted goods from a competitive market and do not waste opportunities (Boltanski, 2001).

- Industrial order: considered dominant in modern societies, takes efficiency and productivity as its point of reference. In this case, competence and performance are the attributes of someone who is considered to be “great”.

Sociology of Justification in the Educational Field

Various studies have analyzed how university actors develop modes of justification, using Boltanski and Thévenot’s theoretical framework. Graß (2017) analyzes how Austrian school teachers and principals interpret and justify the recent educational reforms marked by accountability. Interviews show the use of five orders of justification (industrial, civic, domestic, inspired, and market), and two new conventions: flexible and meritocratic. Côté and Simard (2009) use a similar approach in a study on the reasons in the official discourse for the cultural education of students in Quebec, in which the use of civic, domestic, industrial, inspiration, fame, and market justifications are mentioned. This is quite similar to what Leemann (2014) demonstrated regarding the types of justification developed by teachers and principals from Swiss schools on gender equality at school. This work found justifications related to civic, domestic, and industrial orders, by both critics and supporters of these initiatives. These results are also in line with what Imdorf (2017) found on discrimination toward foreign students in Swiss and German technical courses during their professional internship within small and medium-sized companies. Arguments for not hiring are based on industrial, market, and domestic orders, which lead to low expectations regarding the students’ effectiveness, resentment of how clients treat them, and issues in the students’ ability to integrate work teams.

In higher education, Boltanski and Thévenot’s theory of economies of worth has been less used. In his reflection on the role of universities in a democratic state, White (2017) analyzes various justifications behind the actions these institutions take in a scenario marked by competition and the reign of international rankings. Also regarding higher education, Nielsen (2014) analyzes the institutional justifications of Scandinavian universities for applying gender equality policies. These justifications are mainly related to the inspirational, fame, civic, and industrial orders.

Methodology

Sample

Elites tend to focus on specific degrees in a handful of universities. Degrees build social prestige and set a social purpose for individuals, while the university is interpreted as a brand that generates a shared and localized representation of the value of the university degree (Chauvin, 2013). Hence, to analyze how elite universities develop means of justification in the context of massification, eight paradigmatic case studies were selected (Neiman and Quaranta, 2006) in five universities and for six courses.

Two groups of universities defined by the study as Chilean elite universities were selected: i) traditional universities (with more than 100 years of trajectory) – public and private, with high academic quality and top ranking positions in Latin America (Brunner, 2012), and ii) private universities with high selectivity criteria, which enroll students from private schools and high socio-economic sectors (Villalobos et al., 2020). The degrees courses used were those identified as prestigious by academic literature, in terms of economic and social capital (Engineering and Medicine), as well as their focus on political positions of power in the country (Law and Economy) (Joignant, 2011). Two additional degrees related to Humanities and Arts were included, following Bourdieu and Passeron (1964), who consider that they are chosen by heirs, since they satisfy the principle of pleasure and aesthetic taste. Table 1 describes some of the chosen sample's characteristics.

Table 1

Description of Selected Cases

| Case | University | | Career | | | |
|------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| | Year Founded | University Funding | Year Founded | OECD Area of Expertise | Yearly Tuition Fee (USD) | %Students coming from Private Schools |
| 1 | <1900 | Private | <1950 | Humanities and Art | 4,871 | 58.3% |
| 2 | <1900 | Private | <1900 | Engineering, Industry, and Construction | 7,705 | 75.6% |
| 3 | <1900 | Public | <1900 | Social Science and Law | 5,450 | 45.3% |
| 4 | <1900 | Public | <1950 | Management and Business | 6,378 | 63.2% |
| 5 | <1900 | Public | >1950 | Health | 6,236 | 32.3% |
| 6 | >1950 | Private | >1950 | Health | 9,231 | 92.5% |
| 7 | >1950 | Private | >1950 | Humanities and Art | 4,531 | 90.1% |
| 8 | >1950 | Private | >1950 | Management and Business | 7,386 | 90.9% |

Source. Chilean Information System on Higher Education (SIES)¹

The selected sample mixes criteria of homogeneity and differentiation in elites. Cases from long-standing institutions and courses are mixed with recently-founded ones, including institutions with public and private funding, in an attempt to capture the elites' heterogeneity (Khan, 2011). Despite these differences, all institutions considered can be defined as elite universities and courses: high-class students (coming from private schools); high quality standards (institutional accreditation), and high teaching standards.

Data Collection Techniques

The main technique used was the semi-structured interview, which is a useful technique to analyze the discourses, values, and perceptions of any group or individual (Flick, 2014). For elites, interviews are a recommended technique for two reasons. Firstly, a face-to-face

conversation facilitates a mutually beneficial interaction for both actors, an important aspect for relations with power groups (Littig, 2009). Secondly, interviews increase the likelihood of group participation with elites, who are reluctant to participate in standardized surveys, claim to lack time to do so, and present contact barriers (Quaresma and Villalobos, 2019; Cousin et al., 2018).

Six interviews were conducted for each case study (48 in total), focusing on two institutional actors: faculty directors (usually, the dean and academic faculty coordinator), and faculty professors, especially those recognized as “historical professors” in each case study. All the interviews were focused on five topics: i) the role of the director or professor in the course and university, and their main duties and tasks; ii) the institution’s history, and its links to positions of power; iii) the characterization of the student body, in terms of cultural, socioeconomic, and political topics, with an emphasis on the distribution and composition of elites in each selected case; iv) the actors’ discourses about the mission, vision, and role of the university course; and v) understanding and assessing directors and professors on their values regarding the elites, such as excellence, prestige, merit, and effort.

Analysis

A thematic analysis was carried out to properly understand institutional discourses and their form of justification. As per Gibbs (2007), this analysis considers the content of the discourse, which is related to society’s linguistic and cultural resources. This type of analysis has the advantage of generating abstract categories that facilitate the comparison between agents and institutions, producing common topics and ways of addressing them. Following this type of analysis, emerging thematic coding is necessary to compare the content and meaning of the different cases (Flick, 2014). Thus, the analyzed information facilitates studying the similarities and differences in the discourses organized as justification tools among the interviewees.

Ethical Considerations

This investigation respects all ethical principles and has been approved by the host university’s Ethical Committee. Research participants have not been subjected to harm and their dignity as persons have been respected. Before being interviewed, full consent has been given. The protection of the privacy of research participants and their anonymity have been ensured, such as the confidentiality of the research data.

Results

The institutional actors in these institutions develop several justification discourses about elite courses and universities. These argumentative discourses appear in the actors’ speeches, which reveal their perceptions, evaluations, and opinions about the institution, the higher education system, and the social structure of the country. Under schematic conclusions, three major groups of justification discourses were identified.

First, the actors develop a justification process regarding the status of the university within the university system, validating the privileged status of these institutions within the tertiary education system. Second, the actors offer justifications for the role of these institutions in Chilean society, generating distinctions between students, professors and universities that are considered elite or not, and discussing three discourses and justifications: concepts of social justice and public service; spirit of innovation and modernization of these institutions; and tradition/history justifications. Third, the actors provide justifications regarding the need for their existence within the social structure, using two arguments: one focused on the understanding of the elite university as a platform for social mobility, and the other on the idea that elite universities are the scenario where the future of Chile can be created.

Status of the University Within the University System

Frequently, institutional actors develop justification processes regarding their privileged status within the higher education system. The concept of excellence is fundamental here. Hard to define (Mingat and Duru-Bellat, 2011), the concept of excellence is today a kind of mantra in educational narratives (Gillies, 2007). However, authors who study the relationship between elites and education (Mension-Rigau, 2007, Van Zanten et al., 2015, Khan, 2011) conclude that excellence tends to be an identity element for these social groups, often identified as their distinctive characteristic.

In this study, excellence is understood by the universities' institutional actors as a synonym of (high) quality. This quality justifies the privileged status of their university within the university system, attracting "the best" students and professors. This is a justification based mainly on the market order (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991), as market valuation earns the institution elite university status. One of the most analyzed aspects to demonstrate excellence is faculty academic references as an indicator of faculty ability and a reflection of institutionalized cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1989). As shown in the following quotes, these references are extensive for all professors, exemplifying the tendency of elites to visualize themselves as part of a global market (Forbes and Lingard, 2015).

We have excellent professors, 100% of them have a PhD degree from foreign universities, with postdoctoral diplomas, and are trained in world-class and well-known universities across the world. (Director, Case 2)

Therefore, if you start looking at the elements that allow us to aspire to this idea of academic excellence, you can tell: you need the prepared teachers, with PhDs and hopefully with a global contact network that has been built over time and must continue toward growing and improving. (Professor, Case 2)

In the Latin American context, Chilean traditional universities are quite well ranked, according to the Times Higher Education Ranking. The Pontifical Catholic University, for example, occupies the first place and University of Chile the sixth in the region. As such, they attract the best students and best professors within the Caribbean, Central and South America. However, in the global ranking, Chilean public and private universities are not at the top of

the list: only four universities (all classified as elites) are in the best 1,000 institutions. Therefore, despite these universities' efforts to internationalize and attract the best professors, they are not competing on a global scale and so their prestige is consolidated mainly within the Chilean and Latin American borders.

For this reason, professors' academic excellence is a necessary but not a sole condition for institutions to acquire privileged status. Many interviewees indicated that a particular type of teaching is required, based on the closeness between student and teacher and on the student's comprehensive learning, similar to Moya and Hernández's (2014) conclusions about secondary schools. This kind of teaching allows elites to develop a specific ethos, which shapes the spirit of the institution (Bourdieu, 1989) that makes students distinguishable in a specific group:

And that's why the role of the teacher is so important because it's not only a person in a monologue. It's not a master class but rather a class that must be perceived by the students as an experience. And to construct this knowledge interactively, the students must have prior knowledge and competence. (Professor, Case 3)

However, this experiential teaching-learning relationship requires active students with prior and specific knowledge of their educational area. Generally, the institutional actors refer to the students' academic capitals, which are reflected in a very rigorous selection process rather than in the economic references of their families or specific cultural patterns.

Indeed, they are all very good students, if you only look at it in terms of the PSU test (...), which has a normal distribution of 500 points and a standard deviation of 100. Someone who obtains over 700 points is two standard deviations above their cohort, at a Chilean level. Therefore, we're talking about a group of students who are in about the top 2 or 3% of scores for this test. (Professor, Case 4)

Thus, directors and faculty members assume that academic references will allow them to obtain specific dispositions, values, and knowledge based on talent and merit, directly referencing the principle of equal opportunity. In summary, privileged status is supported by high-skilled actors clustering (students and professors), developing their abilities in a shared space (Rasmussen and Lingard, 2018). This idea, shared among 7 of the 8 cases, can be linked to the industrial order proposed by Boltanski and Thévenot (1991).

Role of Universities in Chilean Society

Another type of justification developed by institutional actors of elite universities focuses on arguments regarding their role in Chilean society. In the eight cases, the actors use the concept of "added value" roles. In the actors' discourse about universities, we find a Bourdieusian concept of distinction that has two meanings: i) what differentiates elite university students from students and scholars from other universities, and ii) what distinguishes the students within the various elite universities, giving them a "distinctive identity" (Bourdieu, 1989), as is the Chilean case of the Pontifical Catholic University and

the University of Chile (Brunner, 2012). From these two processes, universities generate a distinction between “them” and “us” that justifies and confirms their role in the country.

Thus, a justification process is generated to support the idea that elite institutions provide their students with abilities, skills, and values that i) are not found anywhere else, and ii) are crucial for the economic, political, and social development of the country, creating a justification regime based on the idea of exclusivity, supported by the concept of distinction (Bourdieu, 1989). Although this pattern of differentiation and distinction is transversal, it is expressed in three main orders of justification.

In three cases, the civic order justification is developed clearly under the concept of public service (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1991). Institutional actors argue that their added value is based on equality and justice, promoting a moral spirit of strong social inspiration that cannot be found in other universities.

Another common feature of our students is that many of them have great social vocation. They leave school not to be the CEO of any important company but rather to dedicate their effort and talent to helping people” (Director, Case 2).

The promotion of these values is vital for the development of the country, as it is expected that these students will work in future positions of power within the social structure. These privileged students are expected to drive an ethical transformation of the country, developing a generation of leadership with a strong social approach. In general, this is exemplified through students’ participation in various organizations and events, the nature of which varies from institution to institution. Social participation and commitment in public universities take the form of a more active students’ political participation which is more closely related to national contingencies and policy agenda, whereas in private universities this takes the form of student participation in youth volunteering work. As a professor from a public university states:

Yes, I’ve always felt that [the University] has a responsibility toward the country. That’s why their activities are currently paused, because the cost-free issue is questioned. Without favoring the strike, because that has an instant consequence on study matters, I think there are various issues noticed by the University of Chile that are related to the country. (Professor, Case 3)

Political participation in elite universities is highly linked with future political participation in formal parties and social movements. In a qualitative study, Fergnani et al. (2023) show how the Pontifical Catholic University is an important environment for political socialization and formation of future political leaders. Similarly, De la Maza (2013) indicates that 80 percent of the Chilean political elite had been leaders of student federations.

In the past decade, these prestigious elite universities were the birthplace of a national student movement that had an important impact on the Chilean educational policy, challenging its free-market orientation (Salinas and Fraser, 2012). So, it is no surprise that the charismatic Presidents of the student federations at the University of Chile and the Pontifical Catholic University (who became the leaders and spokespersons of the Confederation of

Chilean Students) became elected politicians in 2013 with a high number of votes (Bellei and Cabalín, 2013).

Another goal pursued by these institutions that justifies their role in Chilean society is to be a platform to transform elites, generating a distinction process through their educational action (Bourdieu, 1989). This reflective thought of their role in the development of elites is incorporated as an argument to justify their role in society.

It's not a 'reproduction of elites' model, it is more of a 'transformation of elites' model, where the elites' hallmark changes, a change in their values, [that we want] 5, 10, 15 years from today [from] the economists that create public policies (...). My personal opinion is that 5, 10 years from today, we will have economists in the Central Bank, in the Ministries of Finance, Economy, Social Development or Health that will get to know the profound and true Chile (...). (Director, Case 4)

Secondly, along with civic justifications, institutional actors generate a discourse of added value based on the development of efficiency, innovation, and productivity (not restricted to the economic field), strongly related to the industrial order (in 3 of the 8 cases). The following quotes show the centrality of creativity and innovation in fields as diverse as engineering and the arts:

We are entrepreneurial, innovative, and energetic because this isn't state-owned nor bureaucratic. Here, we can do things, we are quite free, and we support the entrepreneurial spirit. (Professor, Case 8)

I truly think we have had a leadership role in the development of Chilean industry, I mean, Directors of Cultural Centers, certainly. It's a career that involves acting but the department has a lot to do with management (Professor, Case 1)

Following a liberal discourse on competition and market, this second mode of justification focuses on showing that the country needs these universities to increase its levels of efficiency and productivity. This kind of justification stems from a criticism of other institutions that have been unable to develop these skills and abilities. A recent research by Zimmerman (2019) found that 41% of leadership positions are occupied by students who attended an elite degree course, and the top 0.1% in income distribution is received by 39 % of these elite students. Fleet and Guzmán-Concha (2016) have also analyzed the differentiation of income related to the Chilean university system. Four years after graduation, students from elite public and private universities receive, respectively, £1,093 and £1,281 per month. In contrast, students from non-elite universities receive, on average, £566 pm. In short, elite universities use an argument -supported by statistical evidence- that combines distinction, essentially from mass universities, and differentiation among themselves.

Thirdly, in two cases, institutional actors develop a justification where the focus is the institution's historical tradition under the domestic order (Boltanski and Thenevot, 1991). The strong and frequent argument is that the institution is a necessity because it preserves

republican traditions, generates national consensus, and organizes national accords, allowing Chilean society to move forward cohesively toward better levels of development.

The University has a public mission: public issues are always discussed... and students and teachers participate in them. (Director, Case 3)

In this case, the mission of these universities is to serve the country as part of their historical role, understanding this role as the institution's right. This allows its graduates to exercise leadership activities in the country, especially through its networks with the political and economic Chilean elites. Thus, their contribution to the country is to continue doing what they have historically done: to train the elite.

Need for Existence Within the Social Structure

A third order of justification is focused on the contribution that the university makes in the configuration and ordering of the country's social structure. The actors' justification is based on the opportunity they have to maintain or change societal structure. It entails a pre-supposed assumption of a positive concept of elites referencing the word's genesis, representing elites as the aspirational model for other social groups (Genieys, 2011).

There are two major topics to this argument. The first indicates that elite universities are places where intergenerational social mobility occurs. Although quantitative analyses have shown that these processes are not frequent (Núñez and Miranda, 2011), institutional actors propose that this social mobility could be generated by incorporating university students with differing socioeconomic backgrounds. This enables the social mobility of a selected group of vulnerable students.

We very much appreciate the meritocracy, social mobility, and equality of opportunities that is found in the educational model. We support these three guiding principles, and the public role of faculty, which has a value in diversity. (Director, Case 4)

The quote suggests that two factors appear in the arguments: social and economic diversity of its students, and academic distinction. The sum of these two factors -anchored in the ideology of meritocracy (Young, 1958; Graß, 2017)- promotes social mobility and justifies the existence of these institutions with rigorous selection processes. These selection processes should be paired with affirmative action policies oriented to the most vulnerable students (Villalobos et al., 2017). In 5 cases, the actors use arguments related to Bolstanki and Thénevot's (1991) *civic order* to justify their existence and to show the transformations that they might produce in the social structure. They understand the university as a social platform for mobility and development of social opportunities. However, contrary to this perception, a statistical analysis conducted by Villalobos et al. (2020) finds that these universities (especially, elite courses) are very homogeneous in terms of students' social class and do not provide the expected social mobility after the implementation of the proposed public policies.

Another group of institutional actors justifies the role of the university structure through the idea of social transformation. In this case, the justificatory discourse is not focused on a

redistribution of the social status of individuals but rather on the transformation of the country's spheres of production, technology, politics, culture, and/or knowledge. This is purportedly made possible only by these institutions because of the clustering of outstanding professors and students, which is the main reason these universities still exist. For instance, law school academics are currently involved in one of the most important political processes that Chile is facing: a democratic elaboration of a new constitution, replacing the one inherited from the Pinochet's regime that created the legal basis for the neoliberal economic model and for the prevalent high social and economic inequality, promoted through the privatization of pensions, health and education. The recent 2019-20 Chilean protests (Somma et al., 2020) brought demands for a fairer country, higher pensions, better public services and a new, democratic constitution. Faculty contributions from the most traditional universities in this process have been multiple: the organization of a Constitutional Process Commission to promote an interdisciplinary discussion about this historical process; a Constitutional Forum to debate dimensions such as the social and economic order, human dignity, and institutional organization; the preparation of audio-visual materials to provide publicly-available information on the basic constitutional concepts; the publication of a book on the main topics of constitutional debate. The law school director points out:

For example, we have been analyzing the Constitution over the past three years, we've had quite a remarkable role in that. We gathered 48 national and foreign specialists to discuss the issues of the new Constitution. This cannot be done by any other university. (Director, Case 3)

In this way, the industrial order argument used in three of the eight cases is that the development and expansion of the country's skills justifies the need for these institutions. It is understood that these elite universities can train the country's best and most capable minds (Brunner, 2012):

Our students are highly coveted nationally and internationally. In fact, a small percentage of graduates is working in companies such as Google, Facebook, and Microsoft. (Professor, Case 2)

I think that, in a few more years, these individuals will play a role in analyzing what is art and culture. In Chile, we don't have a strong tradition of thinkers or artists. (Professor, Case 1)

Both quotes reflect the same justification for two areas of society: the exclusiveness of the labor force that is trained in a university context, referencing innovation and technology; and the cultural or creative development as a scarce good in Chilean society.

Conclusions

In a context of democratization of tertiary education, elite universities still preserve their distinct status, producing a “democratized segregation” of education (Merle, 2002). This research has shown how the interviewed institutional actors (directors and professors) generate diverse mechanisms to justify the existence of elite universities and courses, articulating elements of the orders of worth proposed by Boltanski and Thenevot (1991). These justifications focus on the values of productivity, efficiency, market and social justice, enabling institutions to maintain their exclusive status and selective student recruitment processes, despite the democratization of the university system. Table 2 summarizes the results, classifying each case according to their justification discourses within the three main dimensions discussed in this paper.

Table 2

Justification discourses developed by elite courses and universities

| Case | Type of institution | Training project | Status in university system | Role in Chilean society | Need in social structure |
|------|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | Private | Professionals for cultural management | Market order | Industrial order | Industrial order |
| 2 | Private | Professional and innovative leaders | Market-Industrial order | Industrial order | Industrial order |
| 3 | Public | Rigorous intellectuals for public service | Industrial order | Domestic order | Civic order |
| 4 | Public | Transformation for a diverse economic elite | Industrial order | Civic order | Civic order |
| 5 | Public | Medical professionals committed to the public sector | Industrial order | Civic order | Civic order |
| 6 | Private | Medical professionals with a vocation for social service | Industrial order | Civic order | Civic order |
| 7 | Private | Intellectual and cultural managers for the country | Domestic-Industrial order | Fame order | Civic order |
| 8 | Private | Professionals capable of conducting the market economy | Market-Industrial order | Market order | Industrial order |

Even though the actors offer various discourses, the most frequent justifications focus on industrial, civic and market orders. The industrial order arises tied to these courses' role in the processes of technological creation and innovation necessary for the country's development. The civic order (more relevant in public universities) is deeply tied to the ideals of social justice and public service shared by these universities, whose history, tradition and role in social mobility processes are fundamental. Finally, the market order is tied to the ideal of selecting the best and most gifted students who, due to their education in high-quality

institutions, will become successful professionals, playing an essential role in the progress of the country.

Beyond these differences, these results shed light on the processes of justification of privilege and power in contemporary societies (Khan, 2011; Van Zanten et al., 2015), particularly from two points of view. There seems to be a relationship between the pre-eminence of certain orders of justification and the cultural hegemonies of neoliberalism. Chile is a paradigmatic case of neoliberalism and market orientation, both at the societal level (Rodríguez, 2020) and in the educational space (Villalobos and Quaresma, 2015), so it is unsurprising that a relevant portion of the actors' justifications use arguments that appeal to productivity and efficiency (industrial nature) and to competition and market (market nature). This evidences the prevalence of this kind of justification of power and privilege in the educational sphere - no longer exclusive to the business world (Atria et al., 2020). Notwithstanding, the results show that the elite's justification processes are not homogeneous because, in certain elite university spaces, industrial and market justifications coexist with those of a civic order, based on the value of public funding. This echoes the differentiation within the elites found in international studies (Khan, 2011).

This study has some limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, the focus on the voice of institutional actors does not delve into how this voice changes depending on the specific role or seniority of each actor in their institution. Likewise, the study has not investigated the students' perceptions, which would help to understand how these justification processes are internalized (or not) by the students. Thirdly, this study is not longitudinal, which restricts understanding how discourses change over time and what factors could modify the results.

For these reasons, it is necessary to complement this study with other investigations that delve into the selective mechanisms (explicit and implicit) that these institutions have, with the experiences and practical knowledge of students who are in this environment and the moral ethos and formative hallmark these universities look to leave to their students. This will allow a better understanding about the relationship between universities, elites and social mobility.

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Notes

¹US dollars based on an estimate of February 19, 2020 (1USD = 797 CLP). Private schools represent 8% of the country's enrolment.

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