

The End of a Traditional Class Distinction in Neoliberal Society: 'White-collar' and 'Blue-collar' Work and its Impact on Chilean Workers' Class Consciousness

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Abstract

For several decades, the distinction between 'white-collar' (non-manual) and 'blue-collar' (manual) work occupied a central place in the analysis of working-class consciousness. According to many scholars, the expansion of non-manual employment was key to dismantling traditional working-class identities. Although several analysts noted the irrelevance of the white-collar/blue-collar distinction as a determinant of class consciousness, the most recent research on class in Chile continues on the traditional argument. However, the empirical research supporting such a contention has been scarce. In this paper I test that hypothesis. Based on quantitative and qualitative data, I show that the distinction between manual and non-manual labor does not lead to significant variations in workers' class consciousness. Therefore, its use in recent research on class (e.g. the contention that non-manual employment reinforces a 'middle-class' consciousness among workers) is deemed questionable.

Keywords

blue-collar/white-collar work, Chile, class analysis, neoliberalism, sociology, working-class consciousness

Introduction

The rapid development observed since the second half of the 20th century brought about important changes in the class structure of advanced capitalist nations. One of the most significant transformations had to do with the consolidation of white-collar employees. In this context, the distinction between 'blue-collar' or 'manual' labor and 'white-collar' or 'non-manual' labor became one of the most discussed concepts in the sociological analysis of class (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Braverman, 1998 [1974]; DeFronzo, 1973; Gagliani, 1981; Poulantzas, 1975; Wright, 1985).

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Despite the fact that recent analysts have shown that the distinction between manual labor and non-manual labor has become irrelevant to account for significant class divisions (Wright, 1985), the traditional split between white-collar and blue-collar work continues to be used in Latin America and Chile as one of the standard tools to describe the 'objective barriers' between the middle and the working class (Franco et al., 2011; León and Martínez, 2007; León et al., 2010). Such distinction has also been used to account for both the 'mesocratization' of the class structure – i.e. the growth of non-manual middle-class positions – and the dismantling of traditional working-class identities and worldviews (León and Martínez, 2007; Ruiz and Boccardo, 2015). Although compelling, this thesis has not been systematically analyzed. In fact, the question of how and why the performance of white-collar work would (or would not) imply the consolidation of a 'middle-class consciousness' among workers has been barely examined in empirical research.

In this paper I carry out such an examination by assessing whether the type of class consciousness white-collar workers uphold differs significantly from that which is upheld by blue-collar workers. To do so, I focus on the case of Chile. Drawing upon the literature on class consciousness and class formation (Giddens, 1973; Mann, 1973; Thompson, 1966; Wright, 1997), I use quantitative and qualitative methods to show that the class consciousness of white-collar and blue-collar workers is essentially the same. In other words, working on a white-collar occupation in Chile does not produce a 'middle-class' consciousness that differs from the traditional 'working-class' class consciousness of manual workers. Based on this, I suggest that the distinction between white-collar and blue-collar work should not be used to identify a 'real' class boundary between the working class and the middle class in current Chilean society.

White-collar and Blue-collar Work and Its Impact on Class Consciousness

Since the 1950s, research on social inequality has focused largely on the way that economic development has transformed the class structure of capitalist societies. In this context, much effort was devoted to the study of white-collar workers. Several scholars (Marxist and non-Marxist alike) argued that non-manual workers represented a 'new middle class' that was the expression par excellence of capitalist development (Blau and Duncan, 1967; Gagliani, 1981; Goldthorpe, 1982; Lockwood, 1989 [1958]; Marshall et al., 1988; Poulantzas, 1975). However, since the late 1970s many scholars have argued that the white-collar/blue-collar divide was, at best, too simplistic to account for 'real' class distinctions – for example, to account for the 'boundaries' between 'middle-class' and 'working-class' employees (cf. Braverman, 1998 [1974]; Crompton, 1993; Oesch, 2006; Wright, 1985).

Surprisingly, the use of the white-collar/blue-collar divide has been pervasive in the most recent research on inequality in Chile and Latin America, in which such a categorical split is still used as *the* standard tool to explain both the 'mesocratization' of the class structure – understood as the growth of the (white-collar) 'middle class' (Franco et al., 2011; León and Martínez, 2007; León et al., 2010) – and the significant levels of 'upward' mobility, defined as the transition from blue-collar origins to white-collar destinations, observed in the last decades (Solís, 2005; Espinoza, 2006; Wormald and Torche, 2004; Jorrat, 2005; Palomino and Dalle, 2012; for a review see Torche, 2014).

One of the most important consequences of the use of the white-collar/blue-collar divide has been related to the way that scholars understand the political consequences of non-manual employment. Since the 1950s several analysts have pointed out that the performance of non-manual labor implied the emergence of a 'bourgeois' or 'middle-class' class consciousness among white-collar

employees (cf. Lockwood, 1989 [1958]; Poulantzas, 1975). This consciousness was thought to be less radical and more permeated by capitalist values than the anti-capitalist consciousness typically attributed to the traditional working class (DeFronzo, 1973; Gagliani, 1981; Goldthorpe, 1982; Kelley and McAllister, 1985; Marshall et al., 1988).

Recent research on class in Chile has also speculated about the prevalence of a 'middle-class' consciousness among white-collar workers. For example, León and Martínez (2007: 312) have contended that the expansion of the service sector brought about the 'mesocratization' of both the Chilean working class and the class structure as a whole. Such a mesocratization involved not only greater chances of accessing (white-collar) 'middle-class' occupations, but also the weakening of traditional (blue-collar) unionism. This 'mesocratization thesis' has been accepted even in some recent analyses that recognize the existence of precarious and devaluated non-manual jobs which are the core of the 'service proletariat'. Drawing upon León and Martínez's framework, Ruiz and Boccardo (2015: 156) have suggested that white-collar workers are less likely to engage in collective action than blue-collar workers because the performance of non-manual labor makes them more exposed to 'entrepreneurial values'. In line with this, other analysts have argued that non-manual work is the basis of 'middle-class' identities which are determined more by the symbolic content of consumption than by the labor-related frames upon which the traditional working class built its identity (Espinoza et al., 2013: 180). In all these cases, scholars have asserted that middle-class identities might be an important basis of neoliberal regime legitimacy insofar as they tend to produce higher levels of political conformism among workers (cf. Castillo et al., 2013: 171).

During the past decades, this thesis has been questioned from different angles (Wright, 1985; Crompton, 1993; Oesch, 2006). From a neo-Marxist perspective, Wright (1985) showed that the manual–non-manual distinction does not produce significant variations in workers' material interests. By considering relations of exploitation as the root of those interests, Wright argued that both manual and non-manual workers are equally subjected to employers' and managers' exploitation due to their condition as non-proprietors of productive assets, such as means of production, authority, and skills. The possession of these three productive assets is, for Wright, the factor that *really* produces variations in people's class interests. Thus, there is no reason to think of white-collar workers as having lower anti-capitalist interests than blue-collar workers.

Working-class Consciousness in Chile: The Irrelevance of the Traditional White-collar/Blue-collar Distinction

Wright's argument is key to understanding the most recent research on class in Chile, where most of the analyses have rightly identified objective transformations of the class structure (e.g. the expansion of the white-collar sector since the 1980s), without undertaking systematic analyses of how such changes have affected workers' class consciousness. In fact, regardless of some speculations about the effect of the mesocratization of the class structure, the question of how and why the performance of white-collar work would (or would not) imply the consolidation of a middle-class consciousness among workers has been barely examined in empirical research. Nor have scholars carried out systematic comparisons between white-collar and blue-collar workers' class consciousness which would allow us to identify the extent to which the class consciousness of both types of workers actually differs from each other.

In this paper I address this question by examining to what extent white-collar workers' consciousness is significantly different from blue-collar workers' consciousness. In doing so, I seek to assess whether the manual–non-manual divide should be used as a class criterion – in particular as a criterion to distinguish the boundaries between middle-class and working-class employees. To

develop this analysis, I follow Erik Wright's (1997) neo-Marxist class analysis and define class as a concept that refers to people's position in the relations of production and exploitation.

Class position derives, in Wright's framework, from individuals' possession of productive assets such as means of production, authority, and skills (Wright, 1997: 17–26). The dissimilar possession of those assets defines people's location in the relations of exploitation. They define, for example, polar class locations based on property rights in the means of production – e.g. capitalists (exploiters) who own the means of production and hire workers, and workers (exploited) who do not own the means of production and sell their labor power to capitalists. Along with these classes, Wright identifies contradictory class locations – managerial/supervisory or expert/skilled class locations – which are defined by the ownership of some assets (skills or authority) and the non-ownership of others (means of productions).

Following Wright (1985), I analyze class consciousness under the assumption that any 'real' class barrier must bring about substantial differences in people's consciousness. Hence, if the manual–non-manual divide represents a real class barrier between the working and the middle class, then it should produce significantly different types of consciousness among white-collar and blue-collar workers. Drawing upon the literature on class consciousness and class formation (Giddens, 1973; Mann, 1973; Thompson, 1966; Wright, 1997), I define class consciousness as the subjective awareness people have of their class identity and their class interests. Class identity and class interests are two components or 'levels' of class consciousness that are the basis of potential processes of class-based collective action (Mann, 1973: 13). While class identity denotes the way that people identify themselves as members of a 'class' (Jackman and Jackman, 1983), class interests refer to the material interests people have with respect to the process of exploitation – that is, with respect to the way that they secure their economic welfare, appropriate surplus, and enhance their economic power (Wright, 1989: 280–288).

I focus the analysis on Chile because it is a fertile ground for analyzing class consciousness in neoliberal society (cf. Pérez-Ahumada, 2014). Chile has one of the most developed neoliberal regimes of Latin America with a welfare system that closely resembles a 'liberal welfare regime' (Esping-Andersen, 1990) insofar as it is based largely on means-tested assistance and very high levels of commodification of social services such as education, health, and pension funds (Marcel and Rivera, 2008). In addition, Chile's model of development is characterized by a huge imbalance of power between capital and labor stemming from the persistence of the pro-business 1979 labor code imposed during Pinochet's dictatorship (Barrett, 2001; Frank, 2004). Since the return to democracy, unionization rates have never surpassed the peak observed in 1991 (18.2%), and only 8% of the labor force is currently covered by some type of collective agreement (Durán, 2013).

In this paper I hypothesize that the type of class consciousness upheld by manual and non-manual workers in Chile is essentially the same because white-collar and blue-collar workers belong to the same class (the working class), as long as they do not perform highly-skilled jobs or managerial roles within the relations of production (Wright, 1985).¹ Recent data suggest that this hypothesis is plausible. In fact, even the scholars who consider the manual–non-manual divide as a central axis of the class structure have recently showed that there is an increasing 'devaluation' of low-level non-manual occupations such as service or clerical occupations (Franco and Hopenhayn, 2010: 20; León et al., 2010: 46–7). Similarly, other scholars have asserted that the alleged 'mesocratization' of countries like Chile is 'fragile' because of the absence of strong nets of social protection and redistributive policies (Espinoza et al., 2013: 187).

In line with this, the 2013 Latinobarómetro report places Chile in the list of countries such as Nicaragua, Honduras, and Brazil where the percentages of people who self-identify as middle class are among the lowest of Latin America (Latinobarómetro, 2013: 70–75). These figures do not

entirely match with the figures presented in other reports (cf. CEPAL, 2014: 107). However, the Latinobarómetro report rightly suggests that the inequality in the access to social capacities associated with citizenship and social rights is a central factor accounting for the way that Chileans perceive their position in the class structure. As I will show later, this absence of social rights is indeed key for understanding how white-collar and blue-collar workers frame their class consciousness in Chile.

Data and Methods

Quantitative Data

The quantitative data used in this research comes from a subsample of the Work and Equity Survey, conducted by the Presidential Advisory Council on Work and Equity in 2008 ($n = 1,340$). The subsample is nationally representative of the salaried population (18 years and older), working in all economic sectors except agriculture-related activities. Drawing upon this data I assessed whether the performance of blue-collar and white-collar work leads to significant variations in workers' class consciousness using standard quantitative methods – specifically, OLS and ordinal logistic regressions.

Dependent Variables: Class Identity and Class Interests

Class identity: I measured class identity through the standard question about subjective class identification. In the survey, this question was worded as follows: 'Taking into consideration the socio-economic conditions of the people of this country, how would you classify yourself?' The answers were coded as 1 (Upper class and upper-middle class), 2 (middle class) and 3 (Lower class and lower-middle class).² Given the way this variable was coded, the higher the value, the higher the 'working' or 'lower' class identity.

This variable has an important limitation. It measures class identity understood only as a gradational concept. Although important, gradational schemes are not the only way in which people understand class (Ossowski, 1963; Wright, 1979). As shown in the qualitative section, Chilean workers tend to mix different notions of class – e.g. gradational and relational notions – to define 'who belongs to my social class'. The interviews also show that gradational schemes are not necessarily the *most* important discursive frame workers use to understand inequality and conflict. However, given the lack of appropriate data and the common usage of this class self-identification question in comparative research, the variable used in this analysis seems appropriate to fulfill the objectives of the quantitative section of the paper.

Oppositional class interests: In this research I focus on a particular dimension of class interests; namely, class opposition, understood as respondents' explicit 'recognition of opposition of interest with another class or classes' (Giddens, 1973: 112). I measured oppositional class interests through a 'scale of oppositional class interests' constructed through the summation of five questions:³

- 1) How do you describe your relationship with your supervisor in the company where you work? (0. Very good to 3. Very bad)
- 2) How do you describe your relationship with other bosses of the company where you work? (0. Very good to 3. Very bad)
- 3) How do you describe the relationship between workers and managers in the company where you work? (0. Very good to 3. Very bad)

- 4) How do you describe the relationship between the workers and the owners of the company where you work? (0. Very good to 3. Very bad)
- 5) Broadly speaking, how much do you trust the pledges managers make to the workers in the company where you work? (0. Much trust to 3. No trust)

These items show mainly the interviewee's evaluations about the relations between workers and employers/managers. Therefore, although they do not represent a broad range of oppositional interests, they can be seen as a good proxy for examining broader class interests that transcend the realm of labor relations. In this paper I assume that a negative assessment of the indicators considered here implies, from workers' perspective, upholding oppositional stances that encompass broader oppositional interests – for example, interests in regard to class exploitation and class conflict. In other words, I assume that those who have negative evaluations of the relations between themselves and the employers or managers of the company where they work will be more likely to uphold stronger oppositional interests in regard to more general issues, such as exploitation and class conflict.

However, I do *not* assume that those who have positive evaluations of the relations between themselves and the managers or employers will be more likely to have conciliatory stances on those more general issues. As shown in the qualitative section, most workers had strong oppositional stances on exploitation and class conflict even though many of them did not claim that they had 'bad' relations with the employers or managers of the company where they worked. This suggests that workers' oppositional interests may sometimes transcend the particular type of personal relations they have with their employers or managers. In other words, oppositional interests might be based largely on the long-term relations derived from workers' selling of labor power throughout their life in the labor force, rather than on the specific types of interactions they have with managers or employers.

All the variables included in the scale of oppositional class interest were combined through a simple sum to create a single scale with a range from 0 to 15 points. Given the way that the variables were coded, the higher the score, the higher the oppositional class consciousness – i.e. higher perceptions of conflict between workers and managers/bosses, higher distrust in managers' promises, etc. The mean of the scale is 6.32 and its standard deviation is 2.49. The scale is internally consistent (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.77$) and unidimensional – the Principal Component Analysis (varimax rotation) showed that all the items belong to the same factor.

Independent Variables

Blue-collar/white-collar work: The main independent variable of this research is a dichotomous variable constructed on the basis of the type of economic activity performed by the respondents. Based on the International Standard Industrial Classification of all Economic Activities (ISIC), respondent's type of work was defined as 'blue-collar' (activities in mining, manufacture, construction, etc.) and 'white-collar' (activities in sales, financial services, public administration, etc.) The reference category is 'white-collar'. Because the qualitative fieldwork consisted of interviews with only urban workers (see below), I excluded the cases employed in agriculture, hunting, and fishing activities.

Labor-related variables: In addition to white-collar/blue-collar labor, I included two other independent variables associated to people's work: 1) *Skill level* – unskilled, skilled, and highly skilled (expert) work, measured on the basis of the occupations included in the two-digit aggregation level of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO), and 2) *Authority*, measured as a dichotomous variable where 1 = supervises the work of others, and 0 = no authority over the work

Table 1. Main characteristics of bank, supermarket, construction, and metalworkers in Chile.^a

		Percentage of working-class wage earners	Yearly average income	Unionization rates	Percentage of permanent contracts	Percentage of women
White-collar workers	Bank (financial activities)	1%	\$8716	29%	89.7%	60.31%
	Supermarket (Commerce and similar activities)	17%	\$5813	14.4%	78.1%	47.8%
Blue-collar workers	Manufacturing ^b	12%	\$6501	14.5%	75.6%	22.5%
	Construction	11%	\$6603	6.6%	46.2%	4.9%

^aSource: CASEN Survey, 2013. All the percentages except unionization rates were calculated on the basis of total salaried population – salaried workers employed in private or public companies – belonging to groups 5 to 10 of the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO). These groups include unskilled and semi-skilled occupations. Data for unionization rates were taken from the *Dirección del Trabajo's Statistical Handbook* (2013).

^bIncludes the whole manufacturing industry.

of others. Skills and authority are, according to Wright's (1985) framework, the two main exploitative mechanisms that define *real* class barriers among wage earners of contemporary capitalist societies. Therefore I included both variables to assess whether both factors define, in comparison to white-collar/blue-collar labor, significant variations in workers' class consciousness.

Demographic controls: Finally, the regression models also included three control variables: gender (1. Female, 0. Male), age (respondents' age in years), and place of residence (1. Metropolitan region of Santiago, 0. Other). As can be seen, the regression models include few independent variables stemming from the literature review. Consequently, they are not meant to represent all the determinant of class consciousness in Chile but rather to examine different hypotheses regarding the extent to which the manual–non-manual divide explains significant variations in people's class consciousness.

Qualitative Data

In this research I also used data from 36 semi-structured interviews conducted in Santiago, Chile, between July and September 2013. The interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and covered different areas of workers' lives and their employment conditions as well as their perceptions of more general issues like class inequality and economic concentration in Chile. I focused on two types of non-manual workers (supermarket and bank workers) and two types of manual workers (construction and metalworkers.) In total, I interviewed 10 supermarket workers, 10 bank workers, eight metalworkers, and seven construction workers. Their ages varied between 18 and 65 years. The gender composition of each group of workers followed the national percentages for their corresponding industries (see Table 1).

In Table 1 the main characteristics of the four types of workers are shown. As can be seen, the two white-collar activities are much more feminized than the manual ones. The table also shows that while supermarket workers represent the most numerous group of workers – 17% of the working class is employed in this industry – bank workers represent only 1% of the total working-class population. Bank workers represent an extreme case since their salaries, as well as their levels of unionization and permanent contracts, are higher than the percentages for the other three categories. These data could be the expression of the way in which this type of workers has been a

privileged sector of the working class – a sector characterized for decades by higher levels of labor stability. Higher rates of unionization and permanent employment can be seen, in turn, as factors that strengthen class consciousness among bank workers. However, according to what I show in the findings section, a conclusion like this is questionable because bank workers' class consciousness draws not only on the same type of discourses upheld by the more 'unprivileged' workers, but it is also based on bank workers' constant attempts to demonstrate how they are *no longer* a privileged sector of the working class.

Based on the percentages in Table 1, I selected cases trying to get a sample as heterogeneous as possible in terms of its gender composition, salary levels, contractual regulation, and unionization rates (I interviewed both unionized and non-unionized workers).

The main parameter for selecting cases was that all the interviewees had to belong to the general category of 'working class' (Wright, 1985). Hence, they all were salaried workers that did not perform supervisory/managerial roles and whose labor tasks required no or low skill levels.⁴ I intentionally sought such a restriction because by doing so I could analyze whether the type of labor (manual–non-manual) performed by workers affected their class consciousness, keeping controlled other possible sources of influence (especially skills and authority levels).

Quantitative Results

Tables 2 and 3 show the results of the regression models whose dependent variables are class identity and oppositional class interests, respectively. In both cases I followed the same order while adding the dependent variables. While running the regressions, I assessed multicollinearity through the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF). In all cases the VIF was far below 10, which suggests that the models are free of multicollinearity problems.

The coefficients of Table 2 show that although the respondents' type of work (blue-collar/white-collar) leads to significant changes in class identity – according to model 1 those who work in a blue-collar activity are more likely to uphold lower class identity – such a relationship is no longer significant once skills and authority are included. Both skills and authority determine significant changes in class identity. Thus, those who work as unskilled or skilled workers or who work in non-managerial positions are more likely to have lower class identity than those who possess higher skills ('experts') or supervise the work of others.

A similar pattern can be found in the regressions predicting oppositional interests (Table 3). In this case, model 1 indicates that those who work in blue-collar activities uphold higher oppositional interests than those who work in white-collar activities. However, the data also indicate that such a relationship is no longer significant once skills and authority are included. Again, unskilled/skilled workers and non-managerial workers are more likely to uphold higher oppositional interests than experts or workers who supervise the labor of others. The low R-squared values of the regressions in Table 3 suggest that variables other than the ones analyzed here also explain significant changes in oppositional interests among Chilean workers. Similarly, the fact that authority is significant only at the 10% level might be explained by the rough measurement used to describe it (the data did not allow me to distinguish 'supervisors' from 'managers').

Overall, these results support the main hypothesis of this paper. In current Chilean society, the manual–non-manual dichotomy is not relevant for explaining significant variations in workers' class consciousness. They also support Wright's (1985) definition of skills and authority as two exploitative mechanisms that, unlike the manual–non-manual dichotomy, operate as *real* class boundaries as they determine not only people's position in the relations of exploitation but also their material interests. Why would the traditional blue-collar/white-collar division be irrelevant for producing *real* class differences? The qualitative data I present in the next section will help to

Table 2. Determinants of class identity in Chile (ordinal logistic regression coefficients).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coeff.	S. E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
<i>Type of work (ref. white-collar)</i>						
Blue-collar labor	0.479***	0.120	0.486***	0.122	0.211	0.128
<i>Demographic controls</i>						
Female			0.074	0.113	0.065	0.120
Age			0.003	0.004	0.007	0.005
Metropolitan region inhabitant			-0.106	0.133	-0.072	0.137
<i>Labor-related variables</i>						
Skilled position					0.928***	0.206
Unskilled position					1.494***	0.195
Non-managerial position					0.483**	0.168
Threshold 1	-3.484	0.174	-3.344	0.256	-1.846	0.320
Threshold 2	-0.158	0.067	-0.015	0.200	1.620	0.298
Likelihood ratio χ^2	16.30**		17.92**		103.86***	
Pseudo R ²	0.008		0.009		0.050	
N	1340		1340		1323	

Note: Omitted variables are 'white-collar' (for type of work), 'male' (for gender), 'non-metropolitan region inhabitant' (for place of residence), 'expert' (for skill level), and 'managerial position' (for authority).

†p<.10; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001 (two-tailed).

Table 3. Determinants of oppositional class interests in Chile (unstandardized OLS regression coefficients).

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coeff.	S. E.	Coeff.	S.E.	Coeff.	S.E.
<i>Type of labor (ref. white-collar)</i>						
Blue-collar labor	0.284†	0.144	0.272†	0.147	0.112	0.151
<i>Demographic controls</i>						
Female			0.091	0.139	0.059	0.142
Age			-0.013*	0.005	-0.012*	0.005
Metropolitan region inhabitant			-0.186	0.163	-0.150	0.164
<i>Labor-related variables</i>						
Skilled position					0.825**	0.242
Unskilled position					0.870***	0.226
Non-managerial position					0.401†	0.205
Constant	6.224***	0.083***	6.748	0.247	5.668***	0.347
Adjusted R ²	0.002		0.010		0.021	
N	1340		1340		1323	

Note: Omitted variables are 'white-collar' (for type of work), 'male' (for gender), 'non-metropolitan region inhabitant' (for place of residence), 'expert' (for skill level), and 'managerial position' (for authority).

†p<.10; *p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001 (two-tailed).

answer this question and clarify the role the manual–non-manual dichotomy plays in current neo-liberal society.

Qualitative Results

Class Identity among Manual and Non-manual Workers in Chile

In line with the quantitative results, the analysis of the interviews showed that the white-collar/blue-collar divide was largely absent in workers' discourses on class identity and class membership. In fact, both manual and non-manual workers tended to frame their class identity on the basis of discourses that emphasize 'materialist' aspects of class inequality – e.g. low salaries, precarious labor conditions, and the problems they have to 'make it through the month'. In some cases (construction and supermarket workers) those perceptions coexisted with some feelings of 'inferiority' defined by working 'as a *simple* supermarket worker' (Sandra, supermarket worker). In other cases (bank workers), those feelings of 'inferiority' did not exist. Rather, what existed was a constant struggle of showing why bank workers are *not* what people think they are, i.e. well-paid workers with high levels of labor stability. This was pointed out by Marco (bank worker): 'People still think that bank employees are the employees of 30 years ago, that they have good benefits, excellent salaries, amazing job conditions. But that's not true nowadays ... There is not even a banking career now.'

This emphasis on material aspects of inequality made blue-collar and white-collar workers uphold the same type of class identity. Most of the interviewees tended to identify themselves as members of a social class that 'is lower than the middle class, but that is not poor either'. In all these cases, the workers framed the ideas of 'lower' and 'middle' class as a way to explain that though they were not 'extremely poor' – they were employed, had a *relatively* stable salary, and were not welfare recipients – they were not part of the real 'middle class', understood as 'the class that doesn't have to struggle to make it through the month' (Miguel, bank worker).

Interestingly, while some interviewees answered the question about class self-placement by arguing that 'I'm *supposed* to be middle class' (Aida, supermarket worker), others started their responses by indicating that they were middle class and then, as the interview developed, changed their minds and asserted that 'in reality, we all are lower class' (Mario, bank worker). Such types of 'contradictions' were even more notorious in some respondents who used the idea of 'lower-middle class' as a synonym for being 'working class'. María (bank worker), for example, started her description of the class structure by supporting a 'middle class discourse' – a discourse that emphasized that unlike the rich and the poor, the middle class is the most disadvantaged class. However, after I asked 'so, which class do you belong to?' she replied:

Maria: At this moment ... mmm ... let's say I'm poor

Interviewer: Really?

Maria: Yes, of course, because ... after working a lot you realize that your situation doesn't improve.

Interviewer: And how do you name the class you belong to?

Maria: The working class.

María's response is illustrative not only of mixing different notions of class inequality (middle class, poor, working class) but also because it represents very well the way Chilean workers define 'who belongs to our social class'. According to the interviews, both blue-collar and white-collar workers upheld rather inclusive criteria to define class membership. Thus, white-collar and blue-collar workers alike denied the existence of barriers between 'them' and the 'others' as long as those others live through the same type of economic difficulties. As put by María: 'It doesn't matter what your work looks like ... in the end we're all workers'.

In line with Maria's response, most blue-collar workers tended to frame their definitions of class membership without using the manual–non-manual divide at all. Thus, for example, Felipe (metal worker) argued that the situation of bank workers is 'exactly the same' as his own situation 'because they are not well paid, just like me' and because in the banking sector, like in the company where he worked, 'those who get all the money are the managers and the owners, not the bank workers who do not get paid well'.

Overall, the interviews showed that the manual–non-manual divide is pretty much irrelevant, from workers' perspectives, to creating identity boundaries. In Chile both manual and non-manual workers frame their class identity through arguments that emphasize *material aspects* of inequality: differences in income, labor security, and access to material welfare. Based on such *materialistic arguments*, both white-collar and blue-collar workers argue that they belong to the class of 'the majority', understood as a majority that shares the same type of economic difficulties as them. The interviews also showed that workers' lower middle-class identification does not contradict the fact of having strong 'working class' consciousness. Identities and interests are structured, as will be shown in the next section, largely on the distinction between the ones who 'really work' and those who 'don't work'.

Finally, throughout the interviews it was also possible to see that workers' inclusive discourses on class membership are not solely a narrative phenomenon. Rather, they seem to be based largely on workers' concrete lived-experiences (Sewell, 1990; Thompson, 1966). In fact, when explaining why the manual–non-manual divide is not a relevant class barrier, most of the interviewees gave concrete examples of 'friends', 'siblings' and 'parents' to emphasize that the other type of workers they were talking about were, in fact, in the same social position as them. Thus, for example, when bank workers explained why construction workers belonged to the same class as them, most of them did so by saying that 'I know this because I have a lot of friends who work there (in construction)' or by noting that 'my husband (or sibling or father) is a construction worker'. This suggests not only that these workers 'knew well' what they were talking about. More importantly, it suggests that manual and non-manual workers belong to the *same social class* because they share the same types of experiences both inside and *outside* the work place.

Class Interests among Manual and Non-manual Workers

As with class identity, the irrelevance of the manual–non-manual divide was evident throughout blue-collar and white-collar workers' discourses on their class interests. In both cases, the way that they defined their interests depended largely on the way that they constructed their oppositional consciousness against both their employers and the Chilean 'ruling class'. For example, although most workers claimed they had relatively 'good relations' with their employers, most of them emphatically denied they share a 'common' goal with them.

In order to support this idea, several workers claimed statements such as: 'in this company they [the employers] are the only ones who always win [i.e. make profits], while the workers are the only ones who always lose' (Graciela, supermarket worker). Similarly, others emphasized how different the company's profits and manager's salaries are from their own rewards. For instance, in explaining why workers and employers are not on the same 'side', Ricardo (bank worker) said: 'last semester the bank [where I work] was one of the banks with the highest profitability. However, profits stay "up there" [because] the only ones who win are the owners, the Sahie family, who are the owners of the bank.'

Based on this, blue-collar and white-collar workers agreed on defining the Chilean 'upper class' as the class made up of those who 'don't work' and those who do not even 'need to work' as a result of the wealth they have. For workers, the 'upper class' is the class of 'entrepreneurs' or 'the rich'

who control 'the country' as they belong, as Jesús (metal worker) put it, to a 'small group of seven or eight families that are the owners of *everything*, that is, the owners of the natural resources, our jobs, our pension funds, and so on.' From workers' perspective, to belong to this small group of people implies not only having access to much better economic conditions, but also being freed from the need to 'work'. Many interviewees said, for example, that unlike 'the rich', working-class people depend *only* on their own work to survive, because they become poor 'as soon as they stop working' (Patricia, supermarket worker).

The interviews showed that regardless of the specific label used to describe 'the rich', all the criticisms of the ones who do not work are closely linked, in workers' discourses, to a more general class-based criticism: workers' condemnation of the commodification of 'rights' like education and health. Such a condemnation is worth mentioning because it seems to be one of the main components of the Chilean workers' interests. In fact, throughout the interviews most respondents argued that the better economic condition of the rich implies both higher chances of 'living more conformably' and the 'unfair' access of the rich to those commodified social services. In other words, most respondents defined access to those services as a class issue, not only because it is determined by people's economic capacity, but also because both education and health have become a source of 'profit' for the rich. As pointed out by Miguel (bank worker): 'in Chile you have to be rich to get a good education and health. That's because in this country everything is private so you have to pay for everything, because everything is a source of profit for the rich.' On the basis of this type of discourse, many workers argued that the lack of economic affluence implies, for them, the practical absence of those social rights and, consequently, the amplification of the inequalities which emerge 'at the workplace'.

The importance assigned to health and educational issues was evident in most interviews. For example, after bringing up the question: 'Some people say that inequality is an important issue in Chile, what do you think about it?', all the interviewees replied by articulating responses such as 'of course, this country is very unequal'. Then, once I posed the question: 'So, where do you think inequality is more salient?', most of them spontaneously mentioned 'in education and health'. More important than these responses is the fact that most workers gave concrete examples to show how in Chile education and health are class issues. Their criticisms of that problem are based on workers' idea of 'deserved rights'.

A good example of this can be found in Roxana's case. She is in her late 20s and has worked as a bank account executive for the last five years. Like many young workers I interviewed, Roxana was studying in college when she had to drop out for economic reasons. Since she was majoring in mathematics, she said she did not have trouble working at the bank. Nor did she have trouble fulfilling the 'goals' she had to meet as a bank worker (e.g. to sell a certain number of credit cards per month). However, during the interview she constantly complained that she 'would rather be studying mathematics' than 'working at this bank'. In this respect she asserted: 'A person like me cannot have access to college education because according to the social worker my mother made enough money to pay for my college education, but that's not true! So eventually I had to drop out.' Then, she concluded her reflection by arguing:

Roxana: I totally support the student protests [for public education] because education has to be a guaranteed right.

Interviewer: So, you think education is a right. Why?

Roxana: Because ... Why does a person who is smart, who can do something for the country and can develop new ideas, have to be left without education just for not having money? Do you think that's fair? In my own case, I attended college enthusiastically, I loved it, but I couldn't do it anymore, just because I had no

money. I only completed my second year and then I lost it all. So I started working and could never resume my [college] studies again. Do you think that's fair?

Similar to Roxana's case, several interviewees gave concrete examples of how health is a class-based issue. Some workers asserted, for instance, that 'in this country there are two health systems, one private and good-quality for the rich and one public and ill-equipped for the poor' (Manuel, supermarket worker) or 'in Chile health is business, so if you don't have money you are death, because nobody [i.e. physicians] is going to take care of you' (Leonidas, construction worker).

The most salient characteristic of this type of critical discourses is that all of them were based, in one way or another, on the idea of 'deserved rights'. Thus, for example, while some interviewees criticized their employers 'who exploit us by underpaying us or denying us what *we deserve*' (Francisca, supermarket worker), others contended that, although not 'extremely poor', they 'deserve', such as the poor, to be recipients of welfare because no matter how much they work, they still cannot 'make it through the month' nor 'afford the costs of getting good education and health' (Cesar, metalworker). In all these cases, the idea of 'deserved rights' was closely linked to the identity of 'being a worker', i.e. the idea of being members of a group of people who, unlike the rich, rely only on their work to live and fulfill their material needs.

Finally, another salient characteristic of the interviews was that they showed that both manual and non-manual workers strongly supported the role of unions as legitimate organizations of the working class. This was evident even in those cases in which the respondent was not unionized. Several interviewees argued, for example, that unions are key for 'stopping entrepreneurs' abuse of the workers' (Leonidas, construction worker). Similarly, most non-unionized workers argued that they did not participate in unions not because they preferred to undertake individualized relations with 'the bosses'. Instead, most of them contended that they did not join unions for either legal and practical reasons (e.g. they are subcontracted workers, they have family responsibilities, etc.) or, more importantly, because the existing unions 'do not truly represent the workers' (Patricia, supermarket worker) since they have become 'pro-business unions' which 'are more interested in getting along with the bosses than in supporting workers' demands' (María, bank worker).

Why Has the White-collar/Blue-collar Distinction Become Irrelevant in Chile?

The quantitative and qualitative evidence suggest that the class consciousness upheld by manual and non-manual workers is essentially the same. In other words, the traditional distinction between manual and non-manual labor is largely irrelevant for producing substantial variations in workers' class consciousness. Four factors might explain why this is so. First, Chile's high degree of economic concentration (cf. Fairfield and Jorratt, 2014) may have produced a scenario where workers can *easily* identify the 'ruling class' by emphasizing distinctions framed not 'horizontally' (i.e. between different types of workers) but 'hierarchically' (especially between them and the ones who 'control the country').

Second, the radical neoliberal restructuring carried out in Chile in the 1980s has created a 'liberal welfare regime' (Esping-Andersen, 1990) that might have affected the way that workers frame both their 'lower middle class' identity and their class interests. In fact, the commodification of social services has left a large number of workers – many of whom are not 'technically poor' – without access to high-quality services such as education and health care. As a result, a common discourse of 'deserved rights' has appeared as one of the main components of workers' class interests. Through that type of discourse, workers face inequality by emphasizing how the commodification of social 'rights' is a class-based issue. This can explain why most if not all workers

interviewed strongly supported the renaissance of popular mobilization observed in Chile since 2011, and the social movements' demands for the establishment of a state-guaranteed system of social provision that replaces the current liberal welfare regime.

Third, the interview analysis suggested that class experiences (Thompson, 1966; Sewell, 1990) are a central determinant of the formation of the same class consciousness among white-collar and blue-collar workers. As shown, the workers interviewed tended to share the same type of experiences 'outside' the workplace. In fact, regardless of their manual or non-manual activities, almost all workers in the sample lived in the same type of neighborhoods in the periphery of Santiago, attended the same type of public schools, were users of the same public and ill-equipped health services, and even belonged to the same type social circles. The blue-collar and white-collar workers I interviewed knew each other's situations well because they were friends, parents, spouses, or children of one another. It is likely that these shared experiences have blurred any barrier that may have existed between, for instance, a bank worker and a construction worker.

Fourth, the manual–non-manual divide may have become irrelevant because other factors are acting as 'real' class barriers. As suggested by the quantitative analysis, skills and authority levels are two important determinants of class consciousness. In line with this, the workers interviewed frequently used authority and skill differences to describe day-to-day situations that create tangible class distinctions. For example, authority was commonly used to draw a conflict-based line between themselves, as non-managerial workers, and those in charge of reproducing 'the bosses' commands'.

As for this, two examples are illustrative. In construction, for instance, the authority line was used by workers to describe how the supervisors are the people in charge of reproducing the construction industry's 'perverse logic', as put by an interviewee, according to which companies' profitability depends to a large extent on their capacity to meet the deadlines imposed by the customers. Such a 'perverse logic' makes supervisors reproduce very questionable practices (which include threats and workplace harassment) to make sure that workers meet productivity goals.

In the banking sector, on the other hand, authority was commonly used to describe how the workers have to face constant psychological pressures that stem from the system of performance-based salary under which they work. According to that system, workers' salaries rely largely on their capacity to fulfill the 'goals' established by the managers – i.e. selling a certain amount of 'products', such as credit cards, bank accounts, and insurance services. According to the respondents, the worker is usually fired if he or she does not fulfill those quotas in three consecutive months.

Both construction and bank worker cases are illustrative because they show how authority is a factor that generates conflicts of interest that, according to the interviews, are felt by workers in their day-to-day labor experiences. Also, they illustrate well Wright's (1989: 111) contention regarding the way that some contradictory class locations – in this case, managerial locations – tend to be ideologically closer to capital as their position in the managerial hierarchy separates them from the working class in terms of both their objective position in the relations of exploitation and their class interests.

Regarding skills, most workers used them to explain why they are in a subordinate position in the labor market and in the company where they work. When talking about their social position, many workers argued that they are at the 'bottom' of the hierarchical structure because they are 'just an unskilled worker'. Thus, for example, while some white-collar workers referred to their lack of skills as *the* cause that explains why they are 'stuck' in the low-level work they perform, some blue-collar workers complained about how the skills they have, which are obtained through informal instruction (e.g. apprenticeships), are not legally recognized in the labor market. In all these cases, the lack of actual or legally recognized skills was thought to be one of the main determinants of workers' subordinate position in both production and market relations.

Overall, these findings would support Wright's (1985) claims regarding the way in which skills and authority are two exploitative mechanisms that, unlike the manual–non-manual divide, give rise to real class barriers among salaried workers. Authority and skills are, in fact, two dimensions that produce not only dissimilar earnings, but also unequal capacities to appropriate surplus. They, in turn, structure dissimilar class interests among the employees who possess them and the workers who do not.

Conclusion

The evidence shown throughout this paper suggests that the traditional distinction between manual and non-manual labor does not produce substantial variations in workers' class consciousness, as pointed out by several analysts of advanced industrial nations (Crompton, 1993; Oesch, 2006; Wright, 1985). In current Chilean society, blue-collar and white-collar workers uphold the same type of class identity and class interests. Assuming that any 'real' class barrier should lead to significantly different subjective outcomes, the results of this paper indicate that scholars should not keep using the manual–non-manual divide as a criterion for delimitating the boundaries between 'working-class' and 'middle-class' employees, nor explaining 'upward social mobility' (commonly understood in the stratification research as the transition from a blue-collar class origin to a white-collar class destination) or the alleged 'mesocratization of the class structure', understood as the growth of the non-manual sector.

As suggested in the last section of the paper, political economy factors of current Chilean society (economic concentration and liberal welfare regime) and class-related mechanisms (workers' class experiences and workers' position in the relations of production/exploitation) explain why the manual–non-manual divide is irrelevant for producing different types of class consciousness among workers.

To conclude, two implications of this paper's findings are worth mentioning. First, scholars should rethink what it means to have a 'middle-class' identification in neoliberal society. As shown throughout the qualitative section of the paper, having a 'lower-middle-class' identification in a neoliberal society like Chile means neither to support 'middle-class' worldviews (i.e. worldviews that accentuate the virtues of neoliberal regimes) nor to reject identities and interests based on the idea of 'being a worker'.

In other words, having a lower-middle-class identification seems to be a component of the *working-class* consciousness of people who, although not 'technically poor', do not think they are part of the middle-class they are supposed to belong to. This suggests that stratification theories that only emphasize gradational concepts might not be helpful for understanding the complexities of class in a society like Chile. Class is, from Chilean workers' perspective, a notion that implies hierarchies but especially relations of conflict that frame their identity and interests – for example, relations at the workplace which shape the distinction between 'those who work' and 'those who don't work'.

Second, scholars should rethink some taken-for-granted explanations for the weakness of unionism in Chile. Most explanations are based on the assumption that the structural transformation of the country observed since the 1980s – e.g. expansion of the service sector and white-collar occupations – has made class identities (or any other 'labor-based' identity) irrelevant for explaining collective action. This 'irrelevance' of class identities has been affirmed even in those analyses which do not couple the growth of the service sector with the 'embourgeoisement' of the class structure (Roberts, 2002). However, according to what I have shown, that might not be the case insofar as white-collar workers seem to be as class-conscious as blue-collar ones. Similarly, both types of workers seem to value the idea of being a worker evenly. Therefore, further research should redirect some of their

questions in order to explain *not* how the white-collar/blue-collar divide has affected unionism, but *rather* why there are not stronger working-class mobilizations in a context where manual and non-manual workers seem to uphold the same working-class consciousness.

This question becomes even more relevant if we consider the re-emergence of social mobilization observed in the country since 2011. As shown in recent investigations (cf. Mayol et al., 2013; Ruiz and Boccardo, 2015), those mobilizations represent a reaction to the social malaise stemming from the feelings of ‘abuse’ and ‘injustice’ that Chileans experience in labor and consumption relations. Unlike these recent analyses, I do not claim that the basis of this social malaise has to be found in a ‘middle-class unrest’ prevalent in Chile. Instead, I have argued that the critical stances Chileans workers uphold are framed through discourses that emphasize strong *working-class* identities.

This difference aside, the findings of this paper are in accordance with those analysts who claim that the most recent waves of protests in Chile embody egalitarian goals that are unlikely to be fulfilled under the current neoliberal institutional framework. Accordingly, it seems that the answer to the question of why there are not stronger working-class mobilizations that can lead those demands for equality might lie not in the ‘mesocratization’ of the class structure, but rather in the huge imbalance of power between capital and labor – e.g. in employers’ capacity to maintain the 1979 pro-business labor code intact – that has characterized class relations for more than 30 years.

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Notes

1. This hypothesis does not mean that I deny the existence of some important distinctions *within* the working class. The divide between contracted and subcontracted workers is one of them. While not being the source of a *real* class distinction (contracted and subcontracted are, from a Marxist perspective, located in the same position in the relations of exploitation), recent research has shown not only that subcontracted workers have worse economic and labor conditions, but also that they are sometimes more likely to engage in collective action than contracted workers (see Cifuentes, 2014).
2. I decided to group ‘lower’ and ‘lower-middle class’ together on the basis of the discourses framed by the respondents in the interviews. As shown in the qualitative findings section, most of the workers defined themselves as ‘lower-middle class’ as a way to indicate that they are closer to the ‘poor’ than to the *real* middle class. I checked the way that this categorization might have affected the results by running analyses with different class identity variables, i.e. variables with three, four, or five class categories, and with broader and narrower middle-class categories. In no case did the results of those analyses differ significantly from the ones presented here.
3. More details on the construction of this scale can be found in Pérez-Ahumada (2014).
4. I defined ‘low-skilled’ jobs as those jobs that require, as a formal requisite to access them, neither the possession of a bachelor degree nor other type of tertiary level degree that implies more than four years of study.

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