

# Social class, subjective status and the perception of meritocracy.

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## Introduction

During the last decades, the rise of economic inequality (Piketty & Goldhammer, 2014) and the stagnation of social mobility (OECD, 2018) has increased the attention of social scientists on how societies perceive the functioning of meritocratic rules - that efforts and talents are rewarded - and its role in economic inequality justification (Mijs & Savage, 2020; Roex et al., 2018). Meritocracy has been related to the justification of social inequalities, as individual achievements and location in the class structure are mostly attributed to individual agency rather than structural constraints (Frei et al., 2018). In this regard, the literature has suggested that individuals' views about the labour market create an image of labour relations and how economic resources are distributed (Svallfors, 2006). Furthermore, empirical evidence has shown that belonging to non-manual and professional social classes is negatively associated with perceived meritocracy, which is more salient in societies with higher levels of economic inequality and low social class mobility (Canales, 2015).

Social stratification can be studied from different approaches. On the one hand, studies on *objective* social stratification have analysed how objective social inequality is expressed in economic and cultural resources (Kerbo, 1998), usually associated with the concept of social class. On the other hand, Kluegel & Smith (1986) point out that studying social inequality from a *subjective* standpoint takes into account elements of individual experience in the class structure. The concepts of *class* and *status* have been crucial for studying social inequality from the social sciences (Ridgeway, 2014). Whereas *class* analysis mainly focuses on occupations, structural position in the labour market and levels of authority and control over work (Erikson & Goldthorpe, 1992), *status* is understood as a structure of relationships perceived as superior, equitable, or inferior among individuals (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2007).

In sociology, the concept of class is proximate to occupational class schemes, but also it has been linked to variables such as income and education. Regarding subjective aspects, although there are scales of subjective social class (Elbert & Pérez, 2018), research on subjective social status has been developed more (Zhou, 2021). In this respect, it has been shown that the perception of an individual or group's standing in the social hierarchy compared to a reference group, such as society (Evans & Kelley, 2004) or their local communities (Condon & Wichowsky, 2020) can also explain perceptions about meritocracy (Castillo et al., 2019). It has been stated that individuals are likely to compare themselves

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with people or groups perceived as similar, contributing to diminishing cognitive dissonance and seeking to assemble better estimations about their societal position (Festinger, 1954; Merton & Rossi, 1968). Whereas empirical evidence has shown a persistent *middle-class* bias toward the center of the social hierarchy, where high-status individuals underestimate their position while low-status individuals overestimate it (Cruces et al., 2013). At this point, the literature has suggested that the characteristics of the closest reference groups shape subjective estimations, in which images of society are influenced by the homophily of their close networks (Evans & Kelley, 2017). Thus, higher subjective social status is expected to be associated with higher perceived meritocracy and also positively moderate the influence of class and status (Hvidberg et al., 2020).

This study aims to understand how objective class and status influence meritocracy perception. In addition, it discusses the role of subjective social status and how it interacts with social class, education and income.

## Data

The data correspond to the third wave of the Chilean Longitudinal Social Survey (COES, 2018). It aims to analyse the evolution of conflict and social cohesion in Chilean society. The sampling is probabilistic, stratified, clustered and multistage, with 3748 participants aged between 18 and 75. After a listwise deletion, a sample of 2077 cases is used for the analysis.

## Variables

*Perceived meritocracy* is the average of two Likert scales ( $r = 0.77$ ) previously used in international studies (Duru-Bellat & Tenret, 2012). It measures the extent to which people agree with whether effort and intelligence are rewarded in society.

For status, first, the per capita household income decile was calculated. Then, education follows the guidelines of the International Classification of Education (UNESCO, 2012). The EGP class scheme was used for measuring social class, a commonly used measurement in social stratification (Connelly et al., 2016). Subjective social status is measured using an 11-point scale question, where higher values represent a higher perceived social status (Adler et al., 2000).

## Methods

Ordinary Least Square regression models were used to estimate the influence of social status on perceived meritocracy. Then, interaction effects between objective class and status, with subjective status, are estimated.

## Results

First, results do not support the rational self-interest hypothesis due to the absence of a statistically significant association of household income with perceived meritocracy. Second, we found that higher education is associated with a decrease in perceived meritocracy, contributing evidence in favour of the instruction hypothesis, where people with higher educational attainment tend to have a more critical view of meritocracy. Regarding social

class, the results do not provide evidence that supports the hypothesis that occupation and position in the labour market are associated with perceived meritocracy.

Subjective social status has a robust positive and statistically significant influence on perceived meritocracy. In addition, the interaction shows that subjective social status positively modifies individuals from the bottom and top income, those with tertiary education, and those who belong to non-manual and professional classes. This evidence contributes to a better understanding of the role of objective and subjective status on perceived meritocracy and also discusses how reference groups shape inequality perception and its consequences on policy preferences.

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