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# Reproducing privilege through whiteness and beauty: an intersectional analysis of elite Chilean university students' practices

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## ABSTRACT

This paper undertakes an intersectional analysis of the ways in which socio-economically elite higher education students in Chile reproduce privilege through everyday practices of whiteness and beauty. Drawing on qualitative data from interviews and observations with 20 privileged students at an elite Chilean university, the paper identifies and discusses the students' ambiguous racial identifications and the racialized, classed and gendered ways in which privilege was enacted through practices of 'beauty' as a 'natural' embodied distinction. We discuss how ideals and practices of beauty were a 'double edged sword' for elite female students, conferring advantage while also denying academic authenticity. We argue that Chilean elite performances of whiteness offer an added layer of complexity to existing literature, problematising and decentring performances of whiteness from white bodies. We conclude by suggesting that an intersectional lens offers a useful way to understand and address the re/production of inequalities in Chilean elite universities.

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Whiteness; beauty; elite universities; intersectionality; social class

## Elite education and the re/production of privilege

There is a long tradition of sociology of education scholarship that seeks to understand the reproduction of relations of privilege and subordination in and through education, particularly giving voice to those who experience the sharp end of injustices. In the context of elite universities, most academic writing has focused on the experiences of minoritized and traditionally under-represented students, for instance, examining the experiences of working-class students (e.g. Jin and Ball 2020 in China; Lehmann 2009 in Canada; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009 in the UK), indigenous students (e.g. Jones Brayboy 2004) and Black students (e.g. Bhopal 2018 in the UK; K. Torres 2009 in the USA). These studies have particularly foregrounded the ongoing inequalities that working-class and minoritised students experience within elite universities.

However, as Khan (2012) argues, inequalities cannot only be understood through the conditions of disadvantage – we also need to understand how social reproduction is created,

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sustained and driven by the practices of elites. There is a growing body of work focused on elites and education that has drawn attention to how elite schooling enables the reproduction of social and cultural privilege (e.g. Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Khan 2011 in the USA; Van Zanten and Maxwell 2015 in France; Reeves et al. 2017 in the UK). In Latin America, researchers have examined the links between expensive private schooling and admission to prestigious public universities in Brazil (Almedia 2001), the role of private Catholic schools in fostering ties among 'traditional families' in Argentina (Gessaghi 2017) and how the social isolation of elite schools operates as a class strategy to preserve privilege in Chile (Howard et al. 2020; Madrid 2016). Sociological research has also explored the role of elite universities in reproducing relations of advantage and power for those from privileged backgrounds (e.g. Bourdieu 1996; Wakeling and Savage 2015). In Chile, Villalobos, Quaresma, and Franetovic (2020) and Zimmerman (2019) have shown how specific subjects, notably business-focused degree programmes in elite universities, have enabled entry to 'top' position for those with previous high levels of capital.

While existing research usefully unpicks how elite institutional systems and the educational strategies deployed by elite families help to create and sustain social reproduction, comparatively less attention has been given to the everyday social practices of elite students themselves, although there is a growing body of school-based research on this issue (for instance, Khan 2011; Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Maxwell and Aggleton 2010; Pedersen, Jarness, and Flemmen 2019). Against a backdrop of widening participation – with many elite universities globally aiming to recruit more students from traditionally under-represented communities – it is important to understand how social and symbolic boundaries are re-drawn by elites in these spaces as part of the defence of elite privilege.

Elite Chilean universities constitute an interesting case for analysing elite practices of distinction. Issues of inequality are clearly foregrounded in Chile, as brought to global attention by the 2019 social uprising. Indeed, in 2021 Chile was identified as the second most unequal OECD country (OCDE 2021), in terms of income distribution. It has also been noted that Chilean economic elites are particularly distant and different to the rest of the society with regard to their views on social issues and tensions (Atria and Rovira 2021). There are few spaces in which Chilean elite individuals come into close proximity with those from other social classes, due to the highly stratified educational system (Valenzuela, Bellei, and Ríos 2014), social insulation perpetrated through elite private schooling (Madrid 2016; Howard et al. 2020), housing and geographic spatial segregation (Méndez and Gayo 2019) and the impermeability of elite professions (Zimmerman 2019). In this respect, the presence of 'non-traditional' students within elite Chilean universities presents an interesting social mixing experiment.

While most research on elite education, in Chile and internationally, has foregrounded social class as an analytic lens, a few studies have focused on the role of women and gender within elite reproduction (e.g. Fahey 2014; Kenway, Langmead, and Epstein 2015; Maxwell and Aggleton 2010). For instance, Allan and Charles (2014) discuss how young women at elite schools embody and appropriate particular upper class modes of femininity, such as being a perfect 'can-do' girls and global caring citizens, while maintaining hierarchical distinction with Others, as also pointed out by Maxwell and Aggleton (2010) in the UK. Only a handful of studies have considered the role of whiteness within elite educational reproduction. For instance, in Nigeria, Ayling (2019) discusses how whiteness is aligned with 'quality' and 'excellence' and is used by elite parents to symbolise distinction in school

choice. Yet, on the whole elite scholarship rarely employs an intersectional lens to understand practices of distinction. Khan (2012) explains the comparative absence of intersectional analyses of elites as partially due to the predominant focus on white, male elites—the ‘elite of the elite’ by dint of their income, status, careers and social positioning.

Our paper seeks to help fill these gaps. Focusing on a Chilean elite university, we identify how elite students engage in everyday practices of distinction to maintain their privilege and preserve distance and differentiation from the inclusion of Others into this rarefied space. Employing an intersectional lens, our paper examines interplays of race and gender within elite students’ everyday class practices to offer new insights on the re/production of inequalities in elite universities.

### **Applying an intersectional lens to understanding elite practices of distinction**

In recent decades there has been a growing recognition of the importance of recognising the complexity and multiplicity of social inequalities, paying attention to intersections of class, gender and race (as well as other social differences). As stated by Skeggs (2004, 3) ‘class cannot be made alone, without all other classifications that accompany it’. An intersectional lens, as articulated by Crenshaw (1989) and since explicated by Black feminist scholars such as Hill Collins and (2000), shows how social axes interrelate to co-produce social boundaries, hierarchies and exclusions, producing uneven (mediated and/or exacerbated) forms of domination (e.g. Anthias 2012; Hamilton et al. 2019). Using an intersectional lens thus helps uncover the complex and variable effects of multiple relations of privilege and oppression that inter-relate within any specific time and context (Brah and Phoenix 2004).

Within the extensive body of intersectional scholarship, debates have arisen regarding the scope, meaning and use of intersectionality frameworks both analytically and in practice (see for example, Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013; Hill Collins and Bilge 2016; McCall 2005; Walby, Armstrong, and Strid 2012). In this article, we draw on Anthias’ (e.g. Anthias 1998) treatment of intersectionality as a heuristic device and Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall (2013, 795) understanding of it as an ‘analytical sensibility’. Within this view, analytic attention is attuned to the power dynamics that produce *distinction*, within specific temporal and spatial sites (Anthias 2012). This view of intersectionality implies ‘conceiving of categories not as distinct but as always permeated by other categories, fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power’ (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013, 795).

Thus, while social differences with and between elites are commonly read through a class lenses alone, we utilise an intersectional perspective that understands class inequalities as embedded in and shaped by racialised and gendered divisions. In particular, as discussed next, our intersectional approach integrates critical work on race and racism in Latin America with Bourdieusian understandings of class and gender.

### ***Intersections of whiteness and class in Latin America***

It has been argued that while elites in Western societies tend to be white, relatively little attention has been paid to the intersection of whiteness and elite social class (Cousin, Khan, and Mears 2018). We suggest that this interplay is particularly important in Chile since, as

part of socio-historical legacies, class and race are closely articulated and co-produced in Latin America (Lamont et al. 2016; Wade 2013; Telles 2014). Much of the rich scholarship on race and whiteness emanates from the Global North, emphasising how ‘white people, through the practices of whiteness and by benefitting from white privilege, contribute to the maintenance of systemic racial injustice’ (Applebaum 2010, 3), and highlighting the pervasiveness of white privilege in so-called ‘post-racial’ societies (e.g. Bhopal 2018). In the context of higher education, research has underlined how whiteness is at the heart of institutional cultures (Rollock 2018) and is used to reproduce relations of privilege and subordination (Bhopal 2018).

However, scholars like Nayak (2007, 737) have argued that including different geographical perspectives should help ‘open up researchers to a global interpretation and postcolonial understanding’ of whiteness and how it operates. Chile offers a useful case because (as in other parts of Latin America) there is no comparable public discourse of ‘race’ (such as Blackness and Whiteness), and it remains uncommon for people to be asked their racial self-identification. As Moreno Figueroa (2010, 391) explains, the homogenising process and logic that *mestizaje*<sup>1</sup> has entailed since the colonial period, has produced discourses of racially undifferentiated societies in Latin America in which ‘we are all ‘mixed’.

However, as Wade (2008) discusses, *mestizaje* as an ideology is highly discriminatory. It has been powerfully anchored on ideas of the inferiority and backwardness of indigenous and Black people and the superior value of Whiteness – or ‘lighter skin’ – associated with wealth, beauty and progress. Thus, *mestizaje* implied ‘*mejorar la raza*’ (‘improving the race’), both socially and morally (Wade 2008), through *blanqueamiento* (whitening), an idea that it is still fairly common in many parts of Latin America. In Chile, it has been argued that *mestizaje* was particularly configured as a whitening process, producing a distinctive and ‘better’ (whiter) racial mixing (Walsh 2019). Indeed, Telles and Flores (2013) statistical analysis found that Chile was one of the countries in which people with a ‘light brown’ skin colour were more likely to identify as white, which they linked to prevalent whitening ideologies in the southern cone.

The past legacy of colonialism means that there is also a close relationship between race and class. Telles (2014) talks about ‘pigmentocracies’ in Latin America which translate social hierarchies and racialized inequalities through gradations in skin tone. Whiteness thus operates as a powerful marker of privilege that co-produces social stratifications in Chile, with recent research showing how whiteness is aligned with status and wealth in the educational system (Salgado and Castillo 2018) and higher academic competence at school level (Meeus et al. 2017), while ‘darker’ people are accorded lower status (F. Torres et al. 2019). Indeed, Lamont et al. (2016, 151) studying race in Brazil, refer to the ‘conflation of race and class’ whereby socio-economic status and racial markers are meshed together so that elite spaces are understood as undoubtedly ‘whiter’, and being label poor invokes particular forms of racialisation.

In Latin America, these multiple intersections – and the fluidity of *mestizaje* expressed by racialised bodies – makes racial positioning relational and contingent, where the classificatory judgement is not entirely dependent on skin colour but includes a constellation of other physical and embodied markers (Telles 2014; Wade 2008). In this respect, Moreno Figueroa (2010) argues that within Latin America, inhabiting whiteness and its privilege is more precarious, and thus a less consistent position than Western theories of white privilege might suggest. Hence, the particular nuances of race and the ambiguous and slippery nature

of whiteness in Latin America complicates notions of 'white identity', and can help to expand contemporary understandings of whiteness, where positions of white privilege are not reducible to the possession of white skin.

### ***Class, bodily distinctions in elite education and beauty***

Our intersectional approach to understanding elite (gendered, racialised and classed) practices of bodily distinction within elite Chilean universities brings the above literature on intersections of race and class in Latin America into dialogue with feminist Bourdieusian understandings of gendered, classed practices of distinction. While Anthias (2012) argues that intersectional perspectives and cultural debates on class remain somewhat separate, both are concerned with the ways in which injustices are produced and sustained through social and cultural domains. Largely influenced by the work of Bourdieu (e.g. 1984), contemporary cultural class analysis (also referred to as 'the cultural turn' in sociology, Devine and Savage (2005)) has drawn attention to the ways in which lifestyles, tastes, consumption practices and social preferences are implicated in the making and re/production of inequalities. Bourdieu (e.g. 1984) wrote extensively about the way in which class structures are echoed in symbolic expressions, emphasising the performative power of symbolic classifications within the constitution of classes and social divisions. A growing body of scholarship in various national contexts has examined how cultural factors are highly classed and bound up with class structures (e.g. Bennett et al. 2009 in the UK; Gayo, Teitelboim, and Méndez, 2013 in Chile; Flemmen, Jarness, and Rosenlund 2018 in Norway). For Bourdieu (1991, 238), 'distinctions, as symbolic transformation of *de facto* differences' (emphasis in the original) between groups, work as both: a marker of class background and as a producer of class division in vertical hierarchical ways and laterally between class fractions.

Thus, social distances are realised through mundane, everyday classed practices of taste. Lamont's influential work (e.g. Lamont 1992, Lamont 2000; Lamont and Molnár 2002) highlights the importance of empirically mapping the symbolic forms of differentiation and hierarchization, by which people separate and divide social groups into 'us' and 'them'. More recent work in this line, show how privileged people draw strong symbolic boundaries based on cultural tastes, consumption and lifestyles, linking cultural practices to process of exclusion and inclusion and class formation (see for example, Jarness and Friedman 2017; Sherman 2018).

In the context of elite educational settings, the subjective ways in which young people demarcate themselves, judge, value and evaluate others remains underexplored. Exceptions in this respect reveal the increasing importance of embodied aspects of privilege enacted and produced in elite schools. Khan's (2011) ground breaking study in a USA elite boarding school draws attention to how elite embodiments of 'ease' are key ways in which elite students' can perform superiority. Building on Bourdieu's (1996) identification of the struggles between different sectors of the elites, recent studies of elite students have drawn attention to the importance of bodily performances of taste and style. For example, Pedersen, Jarness, and Flemmen (2019) study of Norwegian elite business school students who cultivated a 'natural' look, expressing their elite distinction through particular expensive products in 'discreet' ways, and draw symbolic boundaries against the 'hipster' students of another elite school. Pedersen, Jarness and Flemmen (2018) study of students rich in cultural capital, note how performed trend-conscious 'looks,' deploying particular cultural knowledges as

markers of distinction. In the context of higher education, Börjesson et al. (2016) found that whereas students on business-related degrees used fitness and exclusive clothing as markers of eliteness, those on art degrees cultivated more 'original' aesthetic practices.

Although Khan (2011) notes that embodying ease was more difficult for girls and Jarness, Pedersen and Flemmen (2019) discuss the pressures and body control experienced by elite girls, very little research on elites has employed an intersectional lens that recognises the role of gender and race within the production of elite distinction. Feminist extensions of Bourdieu's work has importantly drawn attention to the ways in which class boundaries are highly gendered and racialised (e.g. Bettie 2003; Skeggs 1997). The majority of such work, particularly within the context of educational spaces, has focused on explicating the experiences of white and racially minoritized working-class young women, particularly within the Global North. In this paper, we aim to help address Anthias (2012) call for a more intersectional approach to cultural class analysis, by focussing on elites (and the reproduction of privilege within elite educational spaces), attending to the role of gender and race.

In particular, our paper brings an intersectional lens to bear on elite (classed, gendered, racialised) practices of beauty. Attention has been given to how bodily forms of distinction such as diet, clothing and sporting activities that produce particular ideals of body mass, size and style, bears the mark of social origins (Bennett et al. 2009; Bourdieu 1984; Vandebroek 2017). In this way, beauty can operate as form of class distinction. Indeed, it has been argued that with the rise of media culture and the post-industrial shift to service occupations, beauty, 'looks' and physical appearance have become social resources that are convertible into other resources, and as such play a role in social reproduction (Anderson et al. 2010; Holla and Kuipers 2015; Mears 2014). Beauty standards, as a Bourdeusian perspective stresses, serve to reproduce the dominance of powerful social groups (Bourdieu 1984).

Using our intersectional lens, bodily practices of beauty are produced through not just classed but also racialised and gendered ideologies, as ideas of beauty, whiteness and social status are linked. Indeed, in Latin America women's bodies have constituted a particular site through which the articulation of class and whiteness has played out, notably through attempts to idealise 'Europeanness' and whiteness within nation building projects. As Sutton (2010) in Argentina, and Nichols (2013) in Venezuela discuss, whiteness and elite femininity are portrayed as markers of civilisation and constitute key sites for assertions and negotiations of notions of 'decency'. Whitening is enacted not only through biological reproduction, but also through everyday performances of beauty such as hair straightening (Gordon 2013; Rahier 1999) or cosmetic surgery (Edmonds 2007) as part of practices of 'passing', because idealised (privileged) notions of beauty are strongly associated with whiteness and upper-classness (Moreno Figueroa 2013; Rahier 1999).

As Craig (2006) discusses, class and racial social positionings complicate the value that can be derived from beauty, and that this complexities should be brought to bear in beauty research. Thus, Moreno Figueroa (2013) highlight that research on beauty in Latin America should be attentive to the specific racial logics of the region and suggest that such work can benefit from employing an intersectional lens to help illuminate the reinforcing and potentially ambivalent effects of beauty. Hence, in this paper we attempt to explore racialised, classed and gendered practices of beauty and the implications of these for the re/production of elite advantage within Chilean elite universities.

## The study

This article draws on data from a wider study of classed, gendered and racialised relations at a Chilean elite university that involved observations and qualitative interviews conducted over four months with members of university staff, working-class female students and male and female elite students. The university is a traditional, conservative and highly selective institution. While the university has implemented widening participation initiatives, it remains highly exclusive. In 2021, 61% of the student body were privately educated at school level (SIES 2021).

This article draws on interview data from 20 socio-economically elite students and a small amount of observation data. In Chile, evidence shows that degrees from elite universities in the fields of Engineering, Business (Commercial Engineering in Chile) and Law are widely recognised as key routes into highly paid, high status careers (UNDP 2017; Villalobos, Luisa Quaresma, and Franetovic 2020; UNDP 2017). Thus, the elite students recruited for this study were drawn from these three degree courses. The students had also all attended schools typically associated with the Chilean elite (Madrid 2016; Thumala 2007), as previous research suggests elite schooling is also a key factor in elite reproduction in Chile (UNDP 2017; Zimmerman 2019). At the time of the interviews, two participants were studying engineering, four law and 12 business. Thirteen of the elite student participants identified as female and seven as male. All the interviewees lived in one of the fourth wealthiest boroughs in Chile (Méndez and Gayo 2019), popularly known as the *barrio alto* [high or upper neighbourhood]. 15 of the students had parents (mostly fathers) who had studied either Engineering, Business or Law. All the names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Twelve students took part in individual in-depth interviews and eight participated in small friendship group 'paired' in-depth interviews (comprising 2 to 3 students). The interviews took place in 2019 in students' houses, the university or cafes in the *barrio alto*, and lasted between 50 and 90 minutes. Interviews were conducted and transcribed in Spanish by the lead author. Interview topics included: degree choices, academic and social experiences at university and future career aspirations. They were also asked about styles of clothing at the university, extracurricular activities, perceptions of their social milieu and experiences relating to gender and skin colour. Students were not specifically asked about beauty (as discussed below), rather participants raised the topic within their discussions about student daily experiences. The students also filled out a short sociodemographic form which asked about their social background and racial self-identification. In the 'raceless' context of Chile, this was probably one of the first times in which they thought themselves in racial terms.

As dynamics of race are highly relational and contingent in the Chilean context, student's articulations of race might have been influenced by the interviewer's racial identification as a *morena* woman with *mestizos* origins. As part of this relational racial positioning, how students self-classify themselves does not necessarily coincide with how they might be classified by others, and this stands a limitation for the study. Regional research in Latin America shows a correlation of social status specifically with skin colour (as opposed to self-assigned racial identities) (Telles 2014). And yet, as we argue below, this complexity of racial identification and hierarchy is what dislocates whiteness in Latin America and deserves our attention.



Differences and similarities of class, gender and race can interplay in interview settings to provoke uncomfortable situations and dynamics especially when researching ‘up’ (Sohl 2018). This might have prompted students to talk about themselves in particular (positive) ways, illustrating what Jerolmack and Khan (2014) call the ‘attitudinal fallacy’. This line of critique posits the tendency of social interview research to conflate peoples’ actions with their reports about their actions. It follows that the use of ethnographic data is preferred under this line, to better grasp real life and context-dependent production of social categories. While we agree with this point, and ethnographic observation had been planned as part of the study, in the end extensive ethnographic fieldwork was not possible due to the 2019 social uprising, which coincided with the fieldwork period. However, we found that interviews were productive at teasing out students’ gendered, racialised and symbolic boundaries and yielded rich data. As other researchers have pointed out, constructions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are not always immediately apparent in behavioural observations, whereas interviews can provide a useful space for eliciting interviewees’ classificatory constructions, boundaries and emotions about social distinctions (Lamont and Swidler 2014; Pugh 2013).

For example, Sølvyberg and Jarness (2019) have discussed how interviews can provide a productive space within which to explore symbolic boundaries in relation to classed bodily practices, arguing that different forms of questioning can yield different forms of data. While general questions tend to prompt participants to self-present in a positive light, probing and teasing of specific situations can lead to more ‘visceral’ accounts (Pugh 2013). In this study, we found that questions pertaining to race were difficult for the researcher to articulate and for participants to respond to. We found that some questions (which have worked in other international contexts) such as ‘Do you think that students are treated differently because of their skin colour or race?’ generated vaguer and more generalised accounts than when participants were asked ‘Some students think/feel that physical appearance is very important at university/when searching for a job, particularly that being *moreno* could be a disadvantage, what do you think?’. This type of question produced richer responses as students argued for or against the idea and found it easier to relate to their personal experiences.

The data analysis explored students’ constructions of symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002), i.e. how they categorised and judged other students at university and within their own social group. After a thorough immersion reading of the transcripts, the first wave of coding sought to identify *how* students established differences and similarities. In the second phase of analysis, we brought in a more theoretical, intersectional lens to bear, foregrounding where and how intersections of gender, race and social class were operationalised in the accounts – both in terms of how students constructed boundaries themselves and in the implications of these constructions for Others. We were particularly guided in this by Bettie’s (2003) work with Mexican-American and White school girls, in which race, gender and class are treated as axes of difference, rather than individual properties, which are produced through routine contingent temporal and contextual practices. That is, Bettie argues that class performances (or practices) do not exist outside axes of race/ethnicity and gender that shape these practices. We also draw on Khan’s (2011, 204) views on the performative aspects of privilege, understanding ‘culture as a practice, not a possession’. Khan argues that the embodiment of privilege is a performative act rather than ‘a thing’ within the social actor. That is, social categories of distinction are enacted and produced, and it is the performative character and repetition that makes, for example, the display of *ease* by

elites appear naturalised. Hence in our analyses we sought to identify particular intersectional practices (or performances) in relation to beauty and their implications for relations of power, privilege and subordination.

### **'White, *moreno/a*, 'white, mestizo/a': the ambiguity of whiteness and class boundaries**

When asked about their racial self-identification, the elite students gave a variety of responses. Eight students self-identified as white, five as *mestizo/a* (racially mixed) and/or *moreno/a* ('brown' or darker skin colour) and seven students identified as 'white, *moreno/a*' or 'white, *mestizo/a*'. Ten of the students additionally identified themselves through bodily characteristics such as eye colour, hair colour or height (e.g. 'white, blonde', 'white, *morena*, short height'). We suggest that these identifications illustrate the complexity and fluidity of racial dynamics in the region, as has been argued before (e.g. Moreno Figueroa 2010; Telles 2014), where race is understood as a continuous, rather than binary classification – as illustrated by Facundo's description of himself as 'neither too *moreno*, nor too white'. This non-binary positioning allowed the possibility of multiple, co-existing personal racial identifications, as exemplified by students who identified as 'white, *moreno/a*'.

However, as Wade (2008) points out, 'shifting and contextual terminologies lead to shifting and contextual discriminations, rather than the simple absence of them' (182). Skin colour was evoked in the students' self-positioning and their positioning of others, with whiteness being associated with higher status. For instance, Olivia keenly explained local 'pigmentocracies' (Telles 2014) as being 'too marked' and visible through a variety of signs that encompass clothing, behaviours and skin colour: I think people are too prejudiced, in general when they see a person who dresses like this or that or has that skin colour, especially in Chile where the difference is too marked. When going up to the *barrio alto* it's like immediately people start to have lighter skin or are blonder, and the truth is that there are countries where of course there are different races, but it's not criticised, like 'aw...he's *morenito*' whereas here it's a country that is very discriminatory in that sense, I think that in the end it is a legacy of many years and it's still kind of embedded in society, I don't know why.

As Olivia notes, lighter skin is prominent in the *barrio alto*, highlighting the spatial geographies of racialized and classed relations of privilege. She evokes other (unnamed) countries where she believes that race is not judged negatively which she compares to Chile, where darker skinned people are looked down upon, denoted in the use of diminutive and even pitiful term '*morenito*'. Olivia connects these ideas with a 'legacy' that is 'embedded in society', signalling the continuous effects of racialised hierarchies in contemporary post-colonial societies. In friendship group formation at the university, Olivia further suggested that differences in skin colour and appearance play out in students' social networks, with upper-class students using *moreno/a* as a sign of 'otherness', from which social distance is drawn: In business degrees, like they are so many from schools around here [upper-class area], like if they see someone who is a little more different, like generally they do not have as much relationship with them, is not part of the groups of friends.

F. Torres et al. (2019) show that upper-class people in particular use skin tone as a cue to social class positioning in Chile. In the student's accounts, darker skin colour was perceived as signifying cultural origins, conflating working-classness and traces of past

indigenous and mestizos heritage: ‘so in general, it tells a lot your skin colour, or it can tell a lot how slanted your eyes are’ (Lucía). Yet the racialized divisions between ‘lighter’ elite and ‘darker’ lower class peer and friendship groups were justified by the elite students as being unproblematic, as articulated through the idea that ‘everyone has its niche’ (Lucía) and that it is natural for people to ‘all look like the same in the group they are in’ (Dominga), entailing simultaneously racialized and classed othering and hence subordination.

Yet, the elite students’ constructions of racialised boundaries of belonging within their social circles were also complex and shifting. Federico, for example, suggested that within his elite friendship group he has ‘black’ friends, explaining that this would be a common way of nicknaming ‘darker’ people. His ‘black’ friend could refer to someone with white skin and dark hair or it could denote someone who is darker skinned. This slipperiness simultaneously obscures and relies on racial othering that is grounded in the classed association of blackness with inferiority and subordination. As Federico continued: I would say that the attitude, the way of speaking and the way of dressing are more [important] than physical appearance by itself. Although there is a tendency that the *cuicos* [popular to naming the upper classes] are whiter, I also have *black* friends, actually we call them *black*, not *black*, *black*, but [they are] more *morenitos*, shorter...

Federico notably identifies his ‘black’ friend as being ‘shorter’, which would be interpreted as hinting a past indigenous or *mestizos* origins, while also height has been discussed elsewhere as a classed marker (Vandebroeck 2017). Indeed, we note that height was mentioned in five of the students’ responses to the racial identification question as a way of explaining their own racial self-identification. We interpret such references to height as embodied racialized and class markers that are used to signal privilege without using the explicit terminology of race or class.

Thus, we suggest that the students’ accounts reveal how whiteness remains a key marker of elite distinction and privilege but in ways that are more ambiguous and complicated than many examples discussed in literature from the Global North. In this way, the operation of racialised injustices does not depend on the recognition of particular racialized identities and may be hidden by the erasure and/or slipperiness of whiteness and race within elite young people’s talk.

### **Racialised, gendered and classed beauty as ‘natural’ embodied distinction**

The interplay of whiteness, gender and class was particularly evident in the interviews with young women students. Frequently when participants were asked about their views about race and skin colour (e.g. in relation to friendship groups or job applications), their replies associated *moreno* with ugliness and equated whiteness with beauty. For example, when Martina was asked about the relevance of skin colour in job searching, she replied: ‘I think it does put you maybe three steps higher, looking good or being pretty’. Martina illustrates how bodies are valued and the racialised understandings of beauty as it has been found in other parts of Latin America (Moreno Figueroa 2013; De Casanova 2004; Sutton 2010).

In Chile, upper-class young women are popularly nicknamed ‘*pelolais*’, or ‘*lais*’, as a word derived from *pelo liso* meaning straight hair. The term refers to young women with natural appearing, long, straight fair hair. Black feminism has stressed how racialised ideas of ‘good hair’ expose Eurocentric beauty standards (e.g. Craig and 2002). Latin American feminist work also highlights how practices of hair straitening and smoothing are important in upper

social mobility journeys (Viveros Vigoya 2015; Gordon 2013), because the virtue and 'decency' associated with whiteness is expressed through hair texture (Nichols 2013). As Moreno Figueroa (2013) asserts, societal constructions of beauty matter because they constitute a pervasive form of racism that is part of everyday life, however, normalised and accepted.

In the interviews, we noted that all the young women performed their identities to at least some extent through reference to dominant ideals of racialized, classed and gendered beauty. For instance, engaging in sports, work-out routines or going to gym were the most common activities that they undertook in their spare time. As other research discusses, maintaining a thin and athletic body requires considerable time and resources to produce, and is one of the ways in which economic elites can display distinction (Bennett et al. 2009; Vandebroek 2017). Performances of style and fashion were mentioned as being important in everyday life at university, particularly by participants studying for Law and Business, as Martina explained: 'here in general they are like very dolled up girls, they come almost as if they were going to a party'. Similarly, Olivia also portrays the importance of aesthetics in these elite degrees: as it is a very... very aesthetic space so to speak and like a lot, women always worry about going with their best clothes, like... It is too much about how one dresses, how one walks, what is the attitude that you have, like that.

Through beauty practices, the cultivation of appearance and the display of embodied cultural capital, upper class women's body can become an asset and a way to generate value and differentiation from working-class Others. As Bourdieu (1984) notes, beauty is particularly valuable for women from the dominant class for whom: 'beauty can thus be simultaneously a gift of nature and a conquest of merit, as much opposed to the abdication of vulgarity as to ugliness' (204). Hence, when conceptions of beauty are premised on colonial and postcolonial ideals of race and material and symbolic class inequalities, beauty becomes an asset that is not available for all women (Mears 2014). Beauty operates as a powerful sign of distinction and reinforces the privilege of those who can match the classed, gendered and racialised expectations, as we found among these elite young women.

Yet it is the hidden labour that is required to produce a 'natural' appearance that carries the highest cultural value (Skeggs 2004). Hence elite young women's efforts to cultivate their appearance needed to be careful to appear as natural and effortless as possible. The field notes below indicate how some of the women preferred to wear demure and plain clothing, eschewing striking accessories, visible brands and make-up, as part of their performances of elite femininity. A student told me that jokes circulate about the clothing of upper-class students, suggesting that they wear 'uniforms'. Observing students in the corridors, one of the noticeable aspects of upper-class girls is how similar their looks are. Their style is fairly alike, a 'chic relaxed' style is dominant, and demure as well, no flashy colours or shiny jewellery and no make-up or 'no make-up style'. In general a style that is opposed to excessiveness or extravagances (October, 2019)

Jarness, Pedersen and Flemmen (2019) study in a Norwegian elite business school also found that adolescents engaged in practices to produce a 'natural' body and style depicted as 'neutral' or 'causal', through the consumption of goods that, though expensive, are not too 'showy'. The authors explain how the transformation of economic resources into forms of symbolic distinction is not automatic, but rather requires a practical mastery which is granted by an upbringing within certain social conditions. As they argue, and also Khan

(2011), drawing on Bourdieu (1996; 1984), ease and naturalness are a sign of ‘proper’ superiority. Effortless, ‘natural’ beauty is thus central to these elite women, in which the resources and efforts required to produce it are misrecognised as a natural property of elite femininity.

However, such performances also highlight the intersectional operation of gendered inequalities, as elite women are required to manage the symbolic capital of their class (Bourdieu 2001), experience more pressure than men to comply with bodily demands (Vandebroek 2017) and because western expectation of femininity are policed through women’s bodies (Sutton 2010). Thus, the elite women students’ performances of beauty can be read as both sites for the production of classed and racialized privilege and the reproduction of gender injustice.

### The double-edged sword of beauty as a practice of distinction

We interpret the production of ‘beauty’ as being contradictory for the elite women students. While a potential source of symbolic capital, it also threatened their authenticity as academic students. For example, Law students remarked that upper-class ‘pretty’ girls were asked easier question during oral exams, as Martin explain in the following quote when responding to a question about whether physical appearance makes a difference to people’s experiences in his courses: I believe that it can actually operate more among women than men, it can focus more at women’s image and you also notice it in the treatment that exists, the exams are oral and there is a subjectivity regarding the lecturer when choosing the question he is going to ask, the way he is doing the exam and everything, and it is known the fact that, in general, there is some... Favouritism for women, for example, prettier compared to another... For men, I think not, from what I have seen lately, maybe not so much the physical appearance but more the aspects of the family that comes from, where he comes from, if he knows his father, I think it happens everywhere, but as for men, at least, I don’t think they pay much attention to whether he’s *moreno*.

Martin’s quote exemplifies the inversion of a commonly accepted injustice (in this case sexism) to claim that the privileged community (men) are ‘actually’ the disadvantaged ones as women receive ‘favouritism’. His talk constructs beauty as a form of symbolic distinction that can be exploited to obtain educational advantage for women. Martin’s quote also positions race as particularly salient for women, explaining that men are judged less on their appearance. We interpret his construction as an example of the ways in which elite women are fixed in their racialised and classed bodies in ways that elite men are not, as according to Martin, men can ‘pass’ by mobilising social and symbolic capital, in the forms of family names.

The dilemmatic nature of beauty for elite women students is further explored by Teresita, who concurs with Martin in that she has experienced being asked ‘less difficult things’ in exams by lecturers. While this offers her an ‘advantage’ in some respects, she also feels infantilised and positioned as less capable than her male counterparts. In this way, the practice can also be understood as a form of harm: So they kind of talk to us like [she lowered her voice as when talking to a child] and ask us less difficult things, which is great, I appreciate it because otherwise, I would be... complicated, but I have seen how... It ‘benefits’ me in inverted commas, but at the same time it harms me because they are not demanding the same for me as my [male] classmates who are supposed to be the same as me.

Thus, while elite femininity can work as a form of bodily capital to confer social privilege in some contexts, it is still subject to forms of gendered and sexualised regulation and domination (Skeggs 2004), through which women students are excluded from the possibility of being recognised as legitimate ‘serious’ academic learners. This interpretation complicates Bourdieu’s assertion that capital has the ‘capacity to produce profits and to reproduce itself’ (Bourdieu 1986, 280), as this potential can be mediated by the intersection of race, gender and sexuality.

Against this context, we noted that four of the upper-class young women appeared to perform femininity in ways that drew symbolic boundaries between themselves and other elite young women students, who they described as ‘popular’, ‘daddy’s girls’ and/or hyper feminine. As Dominga explained in the following quote: I like them very much but I feel that we clash in many things, they are like daddy’s girl, like ‘oh my dad gives me a credit card and I can spend lots of money’ like they talk about those things within each other, and it’s like what for? Like, what for are you going to talk about that? things like that, or like ‘I went on a travel and I bought such a very expensive thing’ No need, like I feel that that keep me apart from them, and also as they are more showbiz girls, I’ve never liked that so much.

We interpret Dominga as constructing a boundary between herself as performing a mature/adult, independent elite femininity of ‘real’ value and worth and a counter-construction of superficial and materialistic femininity. Like Dominga, Emilia also used consumption practices and ideas about intelligence to differentiate herself from girls who worry only about ‘the Zara jacket and the party’ and that in general ‘have very empty conversations’. For Emilia ‘there comes a time when you have to worry about something else’. Emilia thus differentiated her own femininity from the superficiality and ‘emptiness’ of the *pelolais* girls’ performances of ‘popular’ elite femininity. Maxwell and Aggleton’s (2014) elite schoolgirls also drew on notions of popularity to mark differences and strongly differentiate themselves from one another within their elite peer culture.

Research has explored how constructions of female academic success sit in tension with performances of hyper-femininity, as the ‘girly girl’ figure is portrayed as lacking substance, as vacuous and content-free (Francis et al. 2017). The young women are obliged to negotiate their positioning within a dichotomy between being ‘bright’ and being ‘beautiful’ (Renold and Allan 2006). Hence women students who wish to be ‘taken seriously’ need to manage their femininity, particularly within subject areas that are strongly traditionally aligned with masculinity (Archer, Moote, and MacLeod 2020).

We suggest that such examples also hint at differential power positionings (and contestation of intra-class boundaries) *within* the elite class (Bourdieu 1996). Far from being a homogeneous group, elites draw distinctions within themselves (Méndez and Gayo 2019; Savage 2015). We note that three of the four students had previously attended the same elite school which has lost popularity among the economic elites due its more critical stance toward social change (Madrid 2016) and speculate that the institutional habitus of this school may have helped shape their performances of femininity. Such differences may exemplify the division of labour of domination (Bourdieu 1996), in which what is at stake is the type of power that is valued by different elite fractions. While some elite young women invested in performances of hyperhetero-, ‘white’, elite feminine beauty, other elite young women attempted to accrue value through the performance of more ‘modest’ versions of hetero-femininity to possibilise their identification as academic students.

## Conclusions

In this article we employed an intersectional lens to unpack the ways in which elite university students in Chile re/produce relations of privilege and subordination through practices of whiteness and beauty and the social and educational implications of these practices for themselves and others. Our findings shed light on how elite students' everyday practices can sustain intersecting inequalities in the context of class proximity produced by widening participation agendas in universities.

Our analysis seeks to add complexity to sociological understandings of 'race', whiteness and racialisation and how these are deployed as part of reproduction of privilege in elite universities. As we discussed, the Chilean context entails particular nuances that can help to usefully augment and complicate some dominant Global North understandings of whiteness and the intersectional reproduction of privilege. For example, critical whiteness studies explain whiteness as an ideology that allows white people to maintain privilege and benefit from racism. However, whiteness is more elusive in the Chilean context, where who identifies as white is inconsistent, contested and shifting, complicating who 'white people' are. Our findings decentre whiteness from exclusively white bodies, foregrounding instead the practices of power involved in enacting whiteness (and white privilege) by more racially ambiguous bodies that may not always identify as white or be identified as such by others. This slipperiness allowed these students to enact racialized distinctions from/through ambiguous positionings, using a range of signifying physical (e.g. height) and social and symbolic (e.g. class, gender) markers. Identifying such practices as part of the intersectional reproduction of racism is difficult in a national context such as Chile that lacks a public discourse of race. However, we hope that our findings can empirically contribute to foregrounding race/racisms and addressing this powerful silencing.

We have argued that whiteness, class, embodiment and beauty are all implicated in the reproduction of relations of privilege and subordination, albeit in complex and shifting ways. These complexities stress the importance of intersectional analysis to better understand elites. While elite scholarship has paid relatively little attention to masculinity and whiteness within class domination, our article has tried to contribute to this gap. We argued that young elites in Chile cannot be understood only in class terms and showed how articulations of class are bound up with racialisation that are played out through gendered bodies. For these economic elites, 'whiter' female beauty is key site in which class, race and gender relations are negotiated. We drew attention to the subtleties and complexities of these intersections, discussing how some elite young women were able to capitalise on their (racialized, classed, heterosexual) 'beauty' to produce class distinction, although these performances also had the paradoxical effect of fixing women in their (lower status) bodies and impossibilising their simultaneous production as authentic students, underscoring the differential capacities for profiting from symbolic resources (Mears 2015; Skeggs 2004).

We suggest that an intersectional lens can usefully raise implications for widening participation agendas in elite universities, which often tend to rely on simplified notions of equality. For example, Chilean universities tend to homogenise underrepresented students under single categories of difference, overlooking the subtle and layered ways in which different students are unequally positioned in elite higher education. Bringing together different conceptual bodies of work within our intersectional lens helped illuminate the ambiguous, contested, contingent and situated ways in which injustices and privilege are

re/produced, disrupting essentialised categories of race, class and gender. We thus suggest that efforts to support equity in HE need to recognise this complexity, paying attention both to elite practices and to Others.

## Note

1. As Wade (2020; 2001) explains, the term *mestizaje* indicates the processes of sexual and cultural interaction between Europeans, Africans and Indigenous that began in the 16th century with colonialism. *Mestizo/a* is the generic term used to designate mixed people, who were neither European, African nor indigenous.

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