

Extending the Literature on First-generation University Students:

A Phenomenological Study of Chilean Experiences

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EXTENDING THE LITERATURE ON FIRST-GENERATION UNIVERSITY  
STUDENTS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF CHILEAN EXPERIENCES

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The topic of this study is first-generation university students. This research explored Chilean first-generation university students' (FGUS<sup>1</sup>) experiences in and out of school and how those experiences influenced their access to and continued enrollment in universities in Chile. FGUS are defined as those whose parents/guardians did not attend and/or graduate from any post-secondary institution and who come from a low socio-economic status (Vergara & Hightower, 2006).

A phenomenological approach was used to describe the experiences and *testimonios* of the participants. Through semi-structured interviews, eleven students from different genders, ethnicities, universities, and social and cultural backgrounds were interviewed. The interviews were based on the phenomenologically interviewing method proposed by Seidman (2013).

This study was also informed by and grounded in certain critical social theories in education. Specifically, this study's theoretical framework was based on Social Reproduction theory, Bourdieu's principles, and Latino/a Critical Theory (Bourdieu; 2011/1986; Bowles & Gintis, 2011/1976; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Villalpando, 2004). It follows that even in light of dramatic expansion of higher education opportunity (as in

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, 'FGUS' is used to describe only first-generation students who attend universities. This is different from 'FGS', which refers any first-generation students who attend any post-secondary institutions, such as community colleges or universities.

Chile), if these theoretical perspectives are explanatory, then the most disadvantaged in the larger society will be the least likely to access newer education opportunities or, if access is gained, to succeed in university.

Interviewed FGUS in Chilean universities described the main facilitators and obstacles to their access to higher education and to their persistence. They also described university and social networks (family and otherwise) that seemed limited in their disposition or knowledge regarding how to assist. In addition, the participants' experiences illuminate how being a FGUS co-occurs with other life challenges (like being a mother and raising a child or earning an income to afford university expenses). Other accounts shed light on how indigenous identity at overwhelmingly non-indigenous institutions of higher education make the sensing of discrepancies between school and home even more acute.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“There is not change without dream,  
as there is no dream without hope”

(Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*)

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PREVIEW

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	13
Statement of the Problem .....	14
Purpose of the Study & Research Questions .....	17
Definitions of Testimonio and Other Terms .....	18
Significance of the Study .....	19
Overview of Dissertation Chapters .....	20
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	22
Theoretical Framework: Social Reproduction, Bourdieu, and Latino/a Critical Theories .....	22
Social Reproduction Theory and Bourdieu .....	22
Latino/a Critical Theory (LatCrit) .....	26
First-generation College Students Research .....	30
Factors Associated with Access to and Persistence in Higher Education	36
Individual Factors .....	36
Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Socio Economic Class .....	36
Academic Expectations .....	38
Social and On-campus Involvement .....	38
Family and Social Support .....	39
Acculturative Stress and Culture Adaptation .....	41
Institutional Factors .....	43
Academic Preparation and College Outcomes .....	43
Type of Institution and Institutional Size .....	46

First-generation University Students in Chile .....	47
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY .....	49
Methodology: Transcendental Phenomenology .....	49
Participants .....	50
Participant's Profiles .....	55
Cristóbal .....	55
Paola .....	55
Carla .....	56
Viviana .....	57
Osvaldo .....	57
José .....	57
María .....	58
Francisco .....	58
Consuelo .....	59
Juan .....	59
Miguel .....	60
Data Collection Methods .....	60
Data Analysis .....	61
Reflexivity, Ethical Considerations, and IRB .....	62
My Role as a Researcher .....	62
Ethical Issues .....	63
CHAPTER 4: STAGE ONE. INDIVIDUAL <i>TESTIMONIOS</i> FROM CHILEAN FIRST- GENERATION UNIVERSITY STUDENTS .....	65



Cristóbal .....	65
The Struggle with his Father's Expectations .....	65
Instructor's Inflexibility .....	68
Paola .....	70
Academic Preparation at High School .....	70
Being a Mother and a Student .....	72
Juan .....	76
Resources for Traditional Students .....	76
Consuelo .....	80
Isolated in the Family .....	80
María and José .....	82
Stressing with Economic Issues: Survival or Study .....	82
Summary of Findings .....	88
CHAPTER 5: STAGE TWO. OVERARCHING THEMES .....	90
Thinking of Enrolling .....	91
Individual Process .....	91
Own Expectations .....	93
Family and Friend Expectations .....	94
Valorization of Higher Education .....	95
Family and Friends Support .....	97
Enrollment .....	98
Family Process .....	99
University like Another World .....	100

High School and University .....	102
Differences with High School .....	102
Issues and Challenges .....	104
Familial Cultural Capital .....	104
Work .....	106
Distance from Home .....	107
Instructor's Characteristics .....	109
Institution Inflexibility .....	111
Economic Capital .....	112
Academic Preparation: Education Inequality from High School .....	115
Factors that Contribute to Persistence .....	117
Family Support .....	117
Clear Academic Goals .....	119
Classmates and Friends in the University .....	120
Motivation .....	121
Future Projections .....	123
Work in the Major .....	123
Socio-economic Mobility .....	124
Changes as Result of Studying in University .....	125
Closeness/Distance from Family .....	125
Family Pride .....	127
Critical Thinking .....	128
Summary of Finding .....	131

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION .....	134
Summary of the Study .....	134
Findings and Assertions .....	135
Socio-economic Class .....	135
Academic Expectations .....	135
Family and Social Support .....	136
Acculturative Stress and Culture Adaptation .....	136
Academic Preparation .....	137
Social and On-campus Involvement .....	137
Multiple Roles .....	137
Institutional Inflexibility .....	138
Family Capital .....	138
Conclusions .....	138
Limitations .....	147
Implications .....	148
Future Research .....	149
REFERENCES .....	151
APPENDICES .....	156
Appendix A: Interview Protocol .....	157
Appendix B: Certificate .....	160
Appendix C: Consent Forms .....	162
Appendix D: <i>Testimonios</i> in Spanish .....	167
Appendix E: Quotes in Spanish .....	179

## TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Factors Associated with First-generation University Students Access to and Persistence in Higher Education: Empirical Evidence from the United States .....	35
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PREVIEW

## TABLE OF TABLES

Table 1. Participants' Universities .....	52
Table 2. Demographic Information .....	54
Table 3. Thinking of Enrolling: Emerging Subthemes across Participants .....	91
Table 4. Enrollment: Emerging Subthemes across Participants .....	99
Table 5. High School and University: Emerging Subthemes across Participants .....	102
Table 6. Issues and Challenges: Emerging Subthemes across Participants .....	104
Table 7. Factors that Contribute to Persistence: Emerging Subthemes across Participants .....	117
Table 8. Future Projections: Emerging Subthemes across Participants .....	123
Table 9. Changes as Result of Studying in University: Emerging Subthemes across Participants .....	125

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*'.. I wanted to attend a university since I was in the middle school, in seventh or eighth grade. I already had the idea of studying pedagogy because I always had the idea of teaching and, more than teaching, helping others. So, pedagogy attracted me. When I was in eighth grade, I had some problems with my dad because, being honest, he made decisions for me. At that time, I had the plan of attending a humanistic-scientific High School to prepare for the PSU [the Chilean national test] and to go a university, but he decided I would go to a technical-professional<sup>2</sup> high school instead, because he had a mentality that a man has to work ... And he enrolled me in a technical high school... And when I graduated from high school I took the PSU and I was accepted to study Political Sciences at the Catholic University in Temuco. But there was another obstacle with my dad, an economic issue, and he decided not to support me and, as I did not have money, I had to decline the option of going to the university. I said, 'Dad, I was accepted into Political Science at Universidad Católica, I need some money to pay the registration fees'. Then my dad said, 'I don't have that money! I don't have it now.' There were about three days left for the opening of the registration process and he clearly told me, 'I don't have either the money or the intention to support you if you start university now! For me the best option you can take is that you work, that you get to know the working life, and that you get familiar with the idea of what is going to happen to you in the future, how to*

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<sup>2</sup> In Chile there are two different types of high schools: Scientific-humanist (or liberal arts) and technical-professional. The first one prepares students to enter the university. On the other hand, technical-professional schools are designed to prepare students to quickly enter the workforce. In those schools, students are taught practical lessons in technical areas, such as preparation to be a secretary, electrician, or mechanic.

*maintain a family, and what to do so you get that right.* ' (Cristóbal, First-generation Chilean university student).

The person in this vignette, Cristóbal, was a 24 year-old Mapuche (an indigenous identity). He had three siblings, two sisters and one brother, who were 38, 31, and 19 years-old respectively. Neither of Cristobál's parents had graduated from high school. In the vignette, Cristóbal referred to some of the familial and economic challenges that he faced to attend the university in Chile. Although Cristóbal was accepted in to a prestigious university after graduating from high school, he was not able to enroll there due to those issues.

Two years later, he did find a way to finance the registration fees and going to university. However, after finally enrolling, being a first-generation student (and a member of a historically discriminated against ethnic minority) was not easy. Like other first-generation students in Chile, during his time attending a university he has faced diverse challenges, which have jeopardized his persistence in higher education. Better understanding this jeopardy is important for Chilean public policy as it dramatically expands its higher education enrollments as part of its increasing participation in the global economy, but also for the fields of comparative and multicultural higher education.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The topic of my dissertation is first-generation students in Chilean universities. Higher education in Chile has experienced a growth in recent decades, due in large part to educational reform, public policy, the expanding Chilean economy, greater integration with the developed world (Chile is South America's first OECD country), and improving

social mobility.

Since the Chilean educational reform of 1980, the number of post-secondary institutions has increased (Brunner, 2009). In 1982 there were 48 institutions; by 2012, there were 173 higher education institutions, including 60 universities, 45 professional institutes, and 68 technical training centers in Chile (Organization for Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013). This expansion has allowed many more students to enroll in one of the Chilean post-secondary institutions and, as a result, access to higher education is no longer reserved only for the elite. In 1981, the number of students enrolled in higher education was 118, 984 (Levy, 1986); however, “in 2002 there were about 520,000 students in Chilean higher education, while in 2012 the number of enrolled students had more than doubled to over 1,100,000” (OECD, 2013, p. 9). As the Chilean Ministry of Education (Chilean Ministry of Education [MINEDUC], 2011) asserted, the new enrollment numbers mean coverage of about 50% of the population between 18 and 24 years old. In turn, this makes for a significant challenges for quality assurance.

The trend indicates that in the past decade the proportion of young people entering the system who came from households whose heads had lower educational levels has increased. Furthermore, seven out of ten students who enroll in university in Chile are first-generation students (Sistema de Información de la Educación Superior [SIES], 2012). However, the proportional participation of young people with parents with those characteristics is still lower than those with parents with more schooling. According to Espinoza and Gonzalez (2007), 60% of young people ages 18-24 who studied at an institution of higher education were children of a householder who did not attend any higher education institution. Moreover, the same authors highlight that the percentage of



students whose parents only attended elementary school are underrepresented in Chilean universities.

In the universities, the growth and diversification student enrollment has generated a number of changes in terms of structure and process in higher education (Brunner, 2009; Espinoza & Gonzalez, 2007). As a result, Human Development in Chile (HDC, 2011) highlights that a new way of understanding teaching and learning has been created in response—an increased enrollment to the education system with a large number of people from families that cannot afford higher education.

Additionally, the effort for ensuring equality of educational opportunity has been focused mainly on university enrollment, offering Chilean government scholarships and/or loans for students like Cristóbal, for example (MINEDUC, 2011). Nevertheless, few educational policies have been implemented to support students who come from low socioeconomic status and are the first in their family to enroll in higher education (first-generation students). In other words, recruitment strategies are well ahead of welcome and retention strategies, akin to what Herrera and Holmes (2015) documented for Latino first-generation students in the United States. Usually, academic strategies developed in Chilean universities are designed for traditional students without taking into account the special features and needs of first-generation students (FGS), which could greatly affect their retention in the system (Donoso & Schiefelbein, 2007). While a broader review of FGS can wait for the literature review (the next chapter), it is worth emphasizing here that there is international evidence that FGS are likelier than traditional students to drop out of college/university even when their previous academic achievement is higher (Lehmann, 2007).

## **Purpose of the Study & Research Questions**

As an educational researcher and a professor at a Chilean university, I am curious about the challenges that my students face, particularly those who are part of a minority and oppressed groups. Prior to going on leave to pursue my doctorate, I spent seven years working for a public and regional university in Chile and this experience made me realize that the department and the university where I worked, were not meeting most of those students' needs, making it often difficult for them to persist in the system or to graduate on time. I do not mean this as an indictment of my particular university. There is little evidence that any Chilean university is sufficiently responding to this challenge.

In this framework, this study focuses on first-generation university<sup>3</sup> students in Chile (FGUS), that is, students from low socio-economic status (SES) who are enrolled in universities and do not have a parent or guardian who graduated from any Chilean higher education institutions. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe first-generation university students' experiences in Chilean universities.

This inquiry starts with the assumption that Chilean universities would be reproducing the social structure existing in society, promoting and perpetuating the existing unequal social relations, which negatively affect mainly students from low SES. This situation would be especially disadvantageous for FGUS, those that have less social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 2011/1986) because they have fewer networks and their parents have had fewer years of education.

In this sense, Chilean universities would ignore these needs, fostering drop-outs,

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<sup>3</sup> Chile does not have a second category of institutions of higher education called colleges. Universities in Chile offer only undergraduate programs, give academic degrees, such as doctoral degree, and exclusively provide the professional qualifications (MINEDUC, 2011).

low grades, and academic failure for this group of students. Although HDC (2011) highlights that higher education is now a real social mobility opportunity for young people, especially for those who belong to lower-income sectors, this would not be the case in Chile given the assumption mentioned above.

In order to accomplish the purpose above described, the central question of this study is:

**1. What does it mean to be a first-generation university student in Chilean universities?**

The specific sub-questions are the following:

1.1. What is easy or difficult about being a FGUS in Chilean universities?

1.2. What experiences encourage access to and persistence of FGUS in Chilean universities?

1.3. What experiences challenge access to and persistence of FGUS in Chilean universities?

1.4. What could be done by universities to encourage retention among Chilean first-generation students?

**Definition of Testimonio and Other Terms**

In this study the term **first-generation university students** (FGUS) is defined as those whose parents or guardians did not attend or graduate from any Chilean university and come from low socio-economic status (Vergara & Hightower, 2006).

In addition, and especially for international readers, **Chilean Higher Education** is defined in this inquiry as education received from universities. Even though Chilean post-secondary institutions are classified mainly in Technical Training Centers (CFTs),

Professional Institutes (IP), and universities, only the latter last of these provides four-year academic degrees, post-graduate diplomas, graduate degrees, and medical specializations (OECD, 2013).

**Drop-out** is defined as the process of leaving university without completing a degree.

*Testimonio* (literally ‘testimony’) refers to a tradition, originating in Latin America, of sharing research subjects’ accounts with as little modification as possible about an experience, a phenomenon, a perspective, etc. The idea is that the author tries to ‘get out of the way’ as much as possible to position readers to directly consider the way something is experienced. The term is left untranslated here (a) to avoid misleading legal implications that often accompany the English term testimony, but (b) because there is a growing tradition in North American research otherwise written in English to use the term *testimonio*. This term is further defined in Chapter 2.

### **Significance of the Study**

The present topic is relevant because in Chile, there is little research specifically related to this group of students. An extensive literature review (in English and Spanish) found only one study about Chilean FGUS (Centro de Políticas Comparadas [Center of Compared Policies], 2009). In this sense, getting to know more about Chilean higher education institutions and their FGUS’ experiences are crucial in order to successfully contribute to the understanding of this phenomenon in Chile. Chilean higher education research in general has focused principally on student drop-out descriptions and causes, pedagogical instruction, and skill development in students (Díaz, 2008; Donoso & Schiefelbein, 2007; Villalobos, Melo & Perez, 2010).

The audiences that will benefit from this research are faculty members, administrators in higher education, policy makers, and, hopefully, FGUS themselves. The results from this study are expected to have direct and practical implications for Chilean administrators, especially at universities, and within governments. As this topic has not been studied in depth in Chile, the findings will attempt to serve as input for the development of policies in public and private higher education institutions –policies which will take in consideration these students’ needs and characteristics in order to promote their persistence. Appropriate for a study that is exploratory, the accounts related here are primarily qualitative and exploratory, but I hoped for second use of this study is to enable future quantitative or mixed-methods research that involves many more FGUS and their families.

### **Overview of Dissertation Chapters**

The chapters in this thesis present the most important points of my study.

In addition to this introductory chapter (Chapter 1), in Chapter 2 I point out the study’s overall theoretical framework and I review the existing literature on first-generation student research. This comes mainly from the U.S., because that is where the bulk of inquiry into this phenomenon has occurred and thus the main empirical evidence can be found.

In chapter 3, I offer a detailed explanation of and rationale for the qualitative methodology chosen approach (phenomenology). In addition, this chapter describes each one of the eleven participants in my study, the data collection used, and the analysis done on the audiotaped and transcribed interviews.

Chapters 4 and 5 describe the main findings from the interviews. Chapter 4 presents the *testimonios* of six participants. And chapter 5 describes the overarching themes and subthemes across the all participants.

Finally, chapter 6 discusses my conclusions from the results, as well as the implications of my study for Chilean higher education and recommendations for future research in the field.

PREVIEW

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter has two sections. The first part describes the theories that my study is informed by and grounded in. The second part provides empirical information about first-generation college students (FGS). The literature for this chapter consists mainly of the peer-reviewed articles to which I had access, which were primarily conducted in the United States. These seem to form the bulk of the literature on this topic available (at least the literature in English and Spanish). Based on this empirical knowledge, I will describe and explain the main individual and institutional factors that give explanation about access to and persistence in higher education in the United States of students whose parents or guardians did not attain a bachelor's degree. Then, I will discuss higher education in Chile and I will describe how the existing literature about FGS in Latin America compares with the evidence reported in the United States.

### **Theoretical Framework: Social Reproduction, Bourdieu, and Latino/a Critical Theories**

This study is informed by and grounded in certain critical social theories in education, these focused on understanding and explaining the causes of structural domination and inequality in order to facilitate equity and social justice (Levinson, 2011a). Specifically, my research is based on the Social Reproduction theory and Bourdieu (Bowles & Gintis, 2011/1976; Bourdieu, 2011/1986), and Latino/a Critical Theory (Anguiano, Milstein, De Larkin, Chen & Sandoval, 2012; Kumasi, 2011; Villalpando, 2004).

**Social Reproduction Theory and Bourdieu.** Although diverse countries around the world have implemented policies to ensure quality and equality in higher education,

there is an achievement gap between students who come from high and low socioeconomic status (Berggren, 2006; Oliva, 2008). Education has an important role in socio-economic mobility (Espinoza & Gonzalez, 2007). For a household with limited economic, social, and cultural resources, the fact that one of its members attends a higher education system constitutes a possibility of intergenerational mobility (Ishitani, 2003; McDonough & Fann, 2007).

Nevertheless, social reproduction theory argues that schools reinforce inequality and replicate dominant structures and relations to serve the interest of the dominant classes (Bowles & Gintis, 2011/1976). Under this perspective, the school's role is to reproduce the established social and cultural order by maintaining the structural inequalities based on social class, gender, and race (Nieto & Bode, 2012). In Bowles and Gintis' (2011/1976) words:

Schools legitimate inequality through the ostensibly meritocratic manner by which they reward and promote students, and allocate them to distinct positions in the occupational hierarchy. They create and reinforce patterns of social, racial and sexual identification among students which allow them to relate "properly" to their eventual standing in the hierarchy of authority and status in the production of process. (p. 97)

This theory brings to light the debate on the goal and outcomes of schools and their responsibility on the success or failure of students. Under this theory, academic rewards are not based on capacities, and failure is a logical