



An Ethnographic Study of Economic Insecurity, Social Status and Changing Self-Identity

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Abstract

An Ethnographic Study of Economic Insecurity, Social Status and Changing Self-Identity examines how economic uncertainty influences individuals' social position, interpersonal relationships, and perceptions of self. Economic insecurity extends beyond inadequate income and includes unstable employment, irregular earnings, debt, limited savings, rising living costs, and uncertainty about future financial conditions. Using an ethnographic approach, the study focuses on the lived experiences of individuals and explores how economic conditions shape everyday behaviour, social participation, family relationships, aspirations, and personal identity. The study particularly examines the relationship between economic insecurity and changes in social status, dignity, self-esteem, occupational identity, and social recognition. It also explores the coping and adaptation strategies adopted by individuals, including changes in consumption, employment, social networks, and household responsibilities. The study highlights that economic insecurity is not merely an economic condition but a multidimensional social experience that can reshape relationships and individual identities. The findings are expected to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interaction between economic conditions, social stratification, and changing self-identity in contemporary society.

Keywords: Economic Insecurity, Social Status, Self-Identity, Ethnography, Social Relationships, Economic Change, Social Stratification.

Introduction

Economic insecurity has emerged as one of the most significant social and economic challenges of contemporary society. Changes in labour markets, increasing informal employment, temporary and contractual work, rising living costs, technological transformation, and unequal access to economic opportunities have profoundly affected the everyday lives of individuals and households. Economic insecurity is not limited to a shortage of income; it also involves uncertainty about employment, housing, healthcare, education, social mobility, and the ability to plan for the future. For many individuals, the experience of economic insecurity extends beyond material deprivation and influences their social relationships, aspirations, dignity, confidence, and understanding of who they are. Consequently, economic conditions and personal identity are closely interconnected, particularly among people whose social status depends substantially on employment, occupation, income, and consumption.

In modern societies, employment is an important source of identity and social recognition. People frequently introduce themselves through their occupation—teacher, worker, driver, manager, salesperson, entrepreneur, domestic worker, security guard, or service employee. Occupation provides not only income but also a sense of purpose, belonging, respect, and social position. When employment becomes unstable or income declines, individuals may experience a corresponding transformation in their social identity. A person who previously considered themselves economically independent may begin to experience dependence on family members or informal networks. Similarly, a worker who once enjoyed occupational recognition may experience

embarrassment or diminished social status after losing employment or moving into lower-paid work. Thus, economic insecurity can produce changes in how individuals perceive themselves and how they believe others perceive them.

Social status represents another important dimension of this relationship. Social status is shaped by several factors, including occupation, income, education, property ownership, lifestyle, social networks, and patterns of consumption. Economic resources can facilitate access to socially valued goods and services and can influence participation in social activities. However, economic insecurity may restrict such participation and consequently affect an individual's perceived position within the community. For example, inability to contribute financially to family functions, social ceremonies, festivals, or community activities may generate feelings of exclusion or inadequacy. Individuals may therefore modify their behaviour, social interactions, consumption patterns, and aspirations in response to changing economic circumstances.

An ethnographic approach is particularly valuable for understanding these processes because economic insecurity is experienced in everyday life. Quantitative measures such as income, expenditure, employment status, poverty levels, or household assets provide important information about economic conditions, but they may not fully capture the meanings people attach to economic insecurity. Ethnography allows the researcher to examine people's everyday experiences, interactions, narratives, practices, emotions, and coping strategies within their social and cultural contexts. Through observation, interviews, informal conversations, and engagement with participants, an ethnographic study can reveal how economic insecurity is understood and negotiated at the level of everyday life.

The concept of self-identity is central to this study. Identity is not fixed or completely predetermined; it is continually constructed and reconstructed through social interactions and life experiences. Economic circumstances can play a significant role in this process. Individuals develop perceptions of themselves partly through their relationships with family members, colleagues, neighbours, friends, and wider society. When their economic circumstances change, the social feedback they receive may also change. Consequently, individuals may reconsider their aspirations, relationships, responsibilities, and expectations about the future. Economic insecurity can therefore become an important factor in the transformation of personal and social identity.

The relationship between economic insecurity and identity is particularly visible in precarious forms of employment. Informal workers, casual labourers, temporary employees, contract workers, gig workers, domestic workers, retail employees, hospitality workers, and other service-sector workers often experience uncertainty concerning wages, working hours, employment continuity, and social protection. Such insecurity may require individuals to constantly adapt their behaviour and expectations. They may accept additional work, reduce household consumption, postpone major expenditures, borrow money, depend on relatives, or seek alternative sources of income. These strategies demonstrate that economic insecurity is not simply a statistical condition but an ongoing social experience requiring continuous adjustment.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the nature of economic insecurity among individuals.
2. To examine its impact on social status and social relationships.
3. To understand changes in individuals' self-identity.

Nature of Economic Insecurity Among Individuals

Economic insecurity is a significant economic and social condition affecting individuals and households in contemporary society. It refers to uncertainty regarding an individual's ability to obtain sufficient and stable economic resources to meet present needs and plan for the future. Economic insecurity is broader than poverty or low income. A person may have a job and regular earnings but still experience insecurity because of temporary employment, irregular wages, rising living costs, debt, inadequate savings, or uncertainty about future employment. Thus, economic insecurity is a multidimensional condition involving income, employment, expenditure, savings, assets, social protection, and future expectations.

One of the major dimensions of economic insecurity is income uncertainty. Stable income enables individuals to meet household expenses, maintain their standard of living, and make future plans. However, fluctuations in income can make it difficult to manage essential expenditure such as food, housing, education, healthcare, and transportation. Rising prices can further increase financial pressure, particularly for households with limited

income. Individuals may therefore reduce non-essential expenditure, postpone important purchases, or depend on additional sources of income. Employment insecurity is another important feature of economic insecurity. Temporary, contractual, casual, informal, part-time, and gig employment can provide income but may not guarantee long-term stability. Workers may remain uncertain about the continuation of their employment, working hours, wages, or employment benefits. The absence of adequate social security, paid leave, pension, or health protection can increase their vulnerability. The fear of losing employment can itself become an important source of economic insecurity.

Economic insecurity is also closely connected with household financial conditions. Individuals are members of families, and economic difficulties experienced by one member can affect the entire household. Unemployment, illness, educational expenses, marriage expenses, or unexpected emergencies may increase household financial pressure. Families may respond by reducing consumption, using savings, borrowing money, taking additional employment, or seeking support from relatives and friends. Consequently, economic insecurity is often experienced and managed collectively within households.

Impact of Economic Insecurity on Social Status and Social Relationships

Economic insecurity has a significant influence on an individual's social status and relationships within the family, workplace, and wider community. Social status is shaped by several factors, including occupation, income, education, property ownership, lifestyle, and social participation. When individuals experience unstable employment, irregular income, debt, or financial difficulties, their economic position may change, which can subsequently affect how they perceive themselves and how they are perceived by others. Thus, economic insecurity is not merely a financial problem; it can also become a social experience that influences recognition, dignity, participation, and interpersonal relationships.

One of the most visible effects of economic insecurity is a change in occupational and social position. Employment provides individuals with income as well as social recognition and a sense of identity. A person with stable employment may enjoy greater social respect and independence, whereas unemployment, temporary work, or a decline in occupational position may reduce opportunities for social participation. Individuals may feel that their changing economic circumstances have affected their position within their community. This can be particularly significant in societies where occupation and economic achievement are important indicators of social standing.

Economic insecurity can also affect social participation. Family ceremonies, festivals, community programmes, social gatherings, and other activities often involve financial contributions. Individuals experiencing financial difficulties may reduce their participation because they cannot afford expected expenses. They may avoid social events, limit interactions, or feel uncomfortable when their economic situation differs significantly from that of others. Over time, reduced participation can weaken social connections and create a sense of social distance. The relationship between economic insecurity and family relationships is particularly important. Financial resources influence household responsibilities, decision-making, and expectations among family members. When income is inadequate or employment is unstable, disagreements may arise regarding expenditure, debt, education, housing, and other household priorities. Individuals who are unable to contribute sufficiently to household expenses may experience pressure or reduced confidence. At the same time, family members may provide financial and emotional support, helping individuals manage periods of economic difficulty. Therefore, economic insecurity can both strengthen family cooperation and create tensions within households.

Economic insecurity may also influence marital and interpersonal relationships. Financial stability is often considered important for household planning and long-term security. Individuals experiencing unemployment or unstable income may postpone marriage, family formation, or other major decisions. Within existing relationships, financial difficulties can create disagreements regarding household expenditure and responsibilities. However, couples and families may also develop cooperative strategies, such as sharing expenses, increasing employment, reducing consumption, or combining incomes to manage economic challenges. Another important consequence is the effect on social networks. Friends, relatives, neighbours, colleagues, and community organizations can provide important forms of assistance during periods of financial difficulty. Individuals may receive loans, employment information, temporary accommodation, childcare, or other forms of support. Such networks can reduce the immediate impact of economic insecurity. However,

repeated dependence on others may also create feelings of obligation or dependency. The quality and availability of social networks therefore influence how individuals experience and manage economic insecurity.

Changes in Individuals' Self-Identity

Self-identity refers to the way individuals understand, define, and perceive themselves within society. It includes perceptions of personal worth, social position, occupation, family role, abilities, aspirations, values, and relationships with others. Self-identity is not completely fixed; it develops and changes through social interactions, life experiences, employment, family relationships, education, and economic circumstances. In the context of economic insecurity, changes in income, employment, social status, and living conditions can significantly influence how individuals understand themselves and their position in society. Economic conditions are an important component of self-identity because employment and income often provide individuals with a sense of independence, achievement, and social recognition. People frequently identify themselves through their occupation, such as teacher, worker, businessperson, professional, farmer, driver, or service employee. Employment provides not only financial resources but also social recognition and a sense of purpose. When employment becomes unstable or income declines, individuals may experience changes in their perception of their own social and personal value.

One major factor influencing self-identity is employment insecurity. Stable employment can strengthen an individual's confidence and sense of independence, whereas unemployment, temporary work, or irregular employment may create uncertainty about one's future. Individuals who experience occupational changes may need to redefine their professional identity. A person who previously enjoyed a stable occupational position may begin to identify themselves differently after losing employment or moving into lower-paid work. Such changes demonstrate that economic circumstances can influence the way people construct and reconstruct their identities.

Economic insecurity and self-worth are also closely connected. Individuals often evaluate their achievements partly through their ability to support themselves and their families. When income is inadequate, some individuals may feel that they are unable to fulfil expected responsibilities. This can influence their confidence, dignity, and perception of personal success. However, the experience is not uniform. Some individuals may interpret economic difficulties as temporary challenges and develop new strategies to overcome them, while others may experience a more substantial transformation in their self-perception. Family roles are another important dimension of changing self-identity. Economic difficulties can alter the responsibilities of family members. An individual who was previously the primary income earner may need to depend on other family members during periods of unemployment or reduced income. Conversely, a family member who was previously economically dependent may enter employment and become an important contributor to household income. Such changes can transform perceptions of responsibility, independence, authority, and family status. Economic insecurity may also influence social identity and social recognition. Individuals construct their identities partly through interactions with friends, relatives, colleagues, and community members. Changes in economic circumstances may change these interactions.

Conclusion

The study "An Ethnographic Study of Economic Insecurity, Social Status and Changing Self-Identity" demonstrates that economic insecurity is not merely a condition of inadequate income but a multidimensional social experience that influences individuals' everyday lives, relationships, social status, and sense of identity. Employment instability, irregular income, rising living costs, debt, limited savings, and uncertainty about the future can create significant challenges for individuals and families. The study highlights that economic insecurity can influence social status and social relationships. Changes in employment and income may affect social participation, family responsibilities, community involvement, and perceptions of social recognition. Individuals facing financial difficulties may reduce their participation in social activities or become dependent on family and social networks. At the same time, family and community support can provide important resources for coping with economic difficulties.

Economic insecurity also contributes to changes in self-identity. Individuals often associate their identity with occupation, economic independence, family responsibilities, and social recognition. Changes in these areas may require individuals to reconsider how they perceive themselves and their position in society. However, identity

transformation is not necessarily negative; individuals may adapt by developing new skills, changing occupations, modifying lifestyles, or adopting new aspirations. The ethnographic perspective reveals the importance of lived experiences and personal narratives in understanding economic insecurity. Individuals are not passive victims of economic circumstances; they actively negotiate uncertainty through coping strategies, social networks, family cooperation, and occupational adaptation. Their experiences demonstrate the complex relationship between economic conditions and social identity.

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