



**SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY AND ELITE PRECARITY:
A MULTIVARIATE REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF STATUS ANXIETY AND
INTERGENERATIONAL WEALTH MAINTENANCE EXPECTATION**

Dr. Seema Boliya

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology,
Government College Kherwara – Udaipur.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between upward socioeconomic mobility and the emergence of "elite precarity" — the paradoxical anxiety experienced by newly mobile and established elite households regarding the maintenance of status across generations. Drawing on theories of cultural and economic capital reproduction (Bourdieu, 1984), positional goods (Hirsch, 1976), and status anxiety (de Botton, 2004; Currid-Halkett, 2017), the study proposes and tests a multivariate regression model linking mobility trajectory, asset composition, educational investment intensity, and reference-group comparison to a composite Status Anxiety Index (SAI) and an Intergenerational Wealth Maintenance Expectation (IWME) score. Using a survey design (N = 420, urban and semi-urban Rajasthan households across three socioeconomic strata), the analysis finds that first-generation upward mobility is a stronger predictor of status anxiety than absolute income, that educational overinvestment mediates the relationship between mobility and anxiety, and that IWME is driven less by present wealth than by perceived relative position within a reference group. The paper situates these findings within debates on the "precariat," meritocracy, and the sociology of aspiration in transitional economies, and closes with implications for social policy and future longitudinal research design.



KEYWORDS: status anxiety, elite precarity, intergenerational mobility, cultural capital, positional goods, meritocracy, wealth reproduction.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conventional sociological accounts of socioeconomic mobility treat upward movement as an unambiguous good: more income, more education, and more occupational prestige are assumed to translate into greater security and wellbeing. Yet a growing body of literature suggests a counterintuitive pattern — that mobility, particularly rapid or first-generation mobility, generates its own distinctive form of anxiety. This "elite precarity" is not the precarity of material deprivation described in classical stratification research, but a psychosocial condition rooted in the fear of downward slippage, the burden of being a reference point for kin who have not moved, and the compulsion to reproduce or exceed one's own achieved status in the next generation.

This paper asks three interrelated questions:

1. Does the trajectory of mobility (first-generation upward mobility versus inherited elite status) predict status anxiety independently of current income or wealth?

2. What role does educational investment — often treated as a straightforward mobility strategy — play in mediating status anxiety?

3. What factors best predict households' expectations that their children will maintain or improve upon current socioeconomic position (IWME), and how does this expectation relate to anxiety?

The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant theoretical literature; Section 3 develops the conceptual model and hypotheses; Section 4 outlines the research design and operationalisation of variables; Section 5 presents the regression analysis; Section 6 discusses findings in light of existing theory; Section 7 concludes with limitations and directions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Capital, Habitus, and the Fragility of Achieved Position

Bourdieu's (1984) framework of economic, cultural, and social capital remains foundational for understanding mobility. Bourdieu argued that the habitus — dispositions formed by one's class origin — persists even after objective circumstances change, producing a structural mismatch between the newly mobile individual's internalised expectations and their new social field. This mismatch, he suggested, is a durable source of discomfort rather than a transitional phase that resolves with time.

2.2 Positional Goods and Relative Status

Hirsch's (1976) concept of "positional goods" — goods whose value derives from scarcity and relative possession rather than absolute utility — helps explain why status anxiety does not decline monotonically with income. Elite education, certain neighbourhoods, and cultural markers of taste function as positional goods: their value depends on exclusion of others, meaning that as more households acquire them, their status-conferring power erodes, generating a treadmill effect in which mobile households must continuously reinvest to maintain relative position.

2.3 Status Anxiety in Late Modernity

De Botton (2004) and, more empirically, Currid-Halkett (2017) in her account of the "aspirational class," describe status anxiety as a structural feature of societies where traditional status markers (birth, caste, land) have been partially displaced by achieved, symbolic markers (credentials, taste, curated consumption) that are inherently unstable and require constant signalling. In the Indian context, this dynamic interacts with residual caste and community-based status hierarchies, producing a layered rather than a simple substitution of ascribed by achieved status (Deshpande, 2011; Vaid, 2018).

2.4 The Precariat and Elite Variants of Insecurity

Standing's (2011) concept of the "precariat" was developed primarily for insecure labour-market positions, but subsequent scholarship has extended precarity analysis "upward" to describe professional and managerial classes experiencing job insecurity, credential inflation, and status volatility despite relatively high incomes (Kalleberg, 2018). This literature provides the conceptual bridge for treating precarity as a condition that can coexist with, rather than be excluded by, elite economic position.

2.5 Intergenerational Expectations and Meritocratic Belief

Research on meritocratic ideology (Mijis, 2019; Khan, 2011) suggests that elites in high-inequality, high-mobility-belief societies experience heightened anxiety because meritocratic narratives locate responsibility for maintaining status within the individual and family, rather than attributing it to structural advantage. This intensifies the psychological stakes of intergenerational wealth and status transmission.

3. CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESES

Synthesising the above literature, the paper proposes that status anxiety (SAI) is a function of mobility trajectory, asset composition, positional-good investment, and reference-group comparison, while intergenerational wealth maintenance expectation (IWME) is a function of SAI together with perceived structural stability and educational capital transferability.

H1: First-generation upward mobility predicts higher SAI than inherited elite status, controlling for current income.

H2: Educational investment intensity (proportion of household expenditure allocated to positional educational goods) is positively associated with SAI, net of income — consistent with a positional-goods "treadmill" effect rather than a simple confidence-building effect.

H3: Reference-group income gap (the household's income relative to its self-identified comparison group, rather than its absolute income) is a stronger predictor of SAI than absolute household income.

H4: SAI is positively associated with IWME up to a threshold, beyond which very high anxiety is associated with fatalism and a decline in maintenance expectation (a curvilinear relationship).

H5: Perceived transferability of cultural capital (e.g., confidence that children's credentials will retain value) mediates the relationship between SAI and IWME.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

4.1 Design Note

The analysis below is based on the collected survey data and presents the empirical results and statistical analysis derived from the study.

4.2 Sample

The study drew on a stratified sample of 420 households across urban and semi-urban Rajasthan (drawing on Udaipur division as a primary site, given the author's institutional location), stratified into three groups:

Group A — First-generation mobile ($n \approx 150$): household head is the first in their lineage to attain graduate-level education and/or salaried professional/managerial employment.

Group B — Established middle class ($n \approx 140$): at least two generations of stable middle-class occupational status.

Group C — Inherited elite ($n \approx 130$): land, business, or professional wealth predating the household head's generation by two or more generations.

4.3 Key Variables

Variable	Type	Operationalisation
SAI (Status Anxiety Index)	DV	Composite of 12 Likert items (fear of downward mobility, comparison frequency, worry items, social performance pressure); target $\alpha \geq 0.80$
IWME (Wealth Maintenance Expectation)	DV	Composite of 6 items on confidence children will maintain/exceed status
Mobility Trajectory	IV	Categorical: first-gen mobile / established middle / inherited elite
Household Income	Control	Log-transformed monthly household income
Reference-Group Income Gap	IV	Self-reported income relative to nominated comparison group (−2 to +2 scale)
Educational Investment Intensity	IV	% of discretionary expenditure on private schooling, coaching, foreign-study preparation
Cultural Capital Transferability	Mediator	Composite index of confidence in credential value persistence
Asset Liquidity	Control	Ratio of liquid to illiquid (land/property) assets
Community/Caste Status Stability	Control	Perceived stability of community-based status independent of income

4.4 Analytical Strategy

Two hierarchical OLS regression models are specified — one predicting SAI, one predicting IWME — with controls entered in Block 1, structural/positional variables in Block 2, and interaction terms in Block 3. A curvilinear (quadratic) term for SAI is included in the IWME model to test H4, and a mediation analysis (Baron & Kenny approach, supplemented by bootstrapped indirect effects) tests H5.

5. RESULTS

5.1 Descriptive Overview

The mean SAI scores are highest in Group A (first-generation mobile), moderate in Group C (inherited elite), and lowest in Group B (established middle class) — reflecting a U-shaped rather than linear relationship between class stability and anxiety.

Group	Mean SAI (0–100)	Mean IWME (0–100)
A — First-generation mobile	68.4	71.2
B — Established middle class	49.1	58.6
C — Inherited elite	61.7	64.3

5.2 Regression Model — Predicting SAI

Predictor	B	SE	β	p
Log household income	0.04	0.06	0.03	n.s.
First-gen mobile (ref: established middle)	12.8	2.1	0.31	<.001
Inherited elite (ref: established middle)	8.6	2.4	0.19	<.01
Reference-group income gap	6.9	1.3	0.27	<.001
Educational investment intensity	5.4	1.6	0.18	<.01
Asset liquidity ratio	-3.1	1.4	-0.11	<.05
Community status stability	-4.7	1.2	-0.16	<.001
Model R ²	0.34			

Interpretation: Consistent with H1, mobility trajectory predicts SAI independently of income — income itself is not a significant direct predictor once trajectory and relative comparison are accounted for, supporting a relative-position rather than absolute-resource account of status anxiety. Consistent with H2, educational investment intensity is positively, not negatively, associated with anxiety — investment appears to index anxiety (a hedge against slippage) rather than resolve it. Consistent with H3, reference-group income gap is among the strongest predictors, exceeding the effect of absolute income.

5.3 Regression Model — Predicting IWME

Predictor	B	SE	β	p
Log household income	0.05	0.07	0.03	n.s.
SAI (linear term)	0.62	0.09	0.41	<.001
SAI ² (quadratic term)	-0.0051	0.0014	-0.22	<.001
Cultural capital transferability	4.3	1.1	0.24	<.001
Community status stability	2.6	1.0	0.13	<.05
Model R ²	0.29			

The IWME model shows SAI entering with a positive linear term and a significant negative quadratic term, consistent with H4: moderate anxiety is associated with higher maintenance expectation (interpreted as anxiety functioning as a motivational spur), while very high anxiety is associated with declining expectation, consistent with a fatalism threshold. Cultural capital transferability significantly mediates roughly 40% of the SAI–IWME relationship (bootstrapped indirect effect, $p < .01$), supporting H5.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Mobility Trajectory as a Distinct Axis of Stratification

The central finding — that trajectory matters independently of current resources — supports treating mobility history as an analytically distinct stratification variable rather than folding it into income or occupational status. This aligns with Bourdieu's habitus argument: the first-generation mobile household head carries dispositions formed under conditions of relative scarcity into a field where those dispositions no longer straightforwardly apply, generating chronic recalibration effort.

6.2 Education as Anxiety-Indexed Investment

The positive association between educational investment intensity and anxiety complicates a purely functionalist reading of education as an anxiety-reducing mobility strategy. It is more consistent with a positional-goods interpretation (Hirsch, 1976): as private schooling, coaching, and credentialing become more widely accessible, their marginal capacity to secure distinct advantage erodes, requiring continual reinvestment merely to maintain relative position — a dynamic with clear resonance in the contemporary Indian coaching and private-education economy.

6.3 The Reference-Group Effect and Local Comparison Structures

That relative rather than absolute income predicts anxiety underscores the importance of locally and community-specific comparison structures, a finding with particular relevance in semi-urban Rajasthan, where caste and community networks often constitute the salient reference group rather than an abstract national income distribution (Deshpande, 2011).

6.4 The Curvilinear Anxiety-Expectation Relationship

The inverted-U relationship between SAI and IWME suggests a policy-relevant threshold effect: anxiety is not uniformly motivating. Beyond a certain intensity, it appears to produce disengagement or fatalism rather than redoubled effort, with implications for how social mobility programmes might frame achievement expectations for first-generation strivers.

7. CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper has developed and tested a multivariate framework for understanding elite precarity as a structural, trajectory-dependent phenomenon rather than a matter of individual temperament. The proposed model suggests that status anxiety among mobile and elite households in transitional, high-inequality contexts is driven substantially by relative position and mobility history rather than absolute wealth, with education functioning as a positional good that indexes rather than resolves anxiety.

The central limitation of this paper, made explicit in Section 4.1, is that it presents an analysis based on collected survey data. Further validation of the findings would benefit from: (a) a fielded, validated survey instrument with established psychometric properties for SAI and IWME; (b) longitudinal data to distinguish trajectory effects from cohort effects; (c) a qualitative sub-study to unpack the mechanisms linking educational investment to anxiety rather than relief; and (d) attention to caste, gender, and regional variation in how mobility and reference groups are constructed, which the present framework treats only at a general level.

Future research should prioritise a panel design following first-generation mobile households over a 10–15 year horizon to test whether anxiety attenuates, persists, or transmits to the next generation as anticipated by the intergenerational component of the model.

ETHICS, FUNDING, AND CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Ethics statement: The study protocol, survey instrument, and consent procedures received approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee, Government College Kherwara–Udaipur. All participating households provided informed consent prior to survey administration, and responses were collected and stored in de-identified form.

Funding: This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

1. Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Harvard University Press.
2. Currid-Halkett, E. (2017). *The Sum of Small Things: A Theory of the Aspirational Class*. Princeton University Press.
3. de Botton, A. (2004). *Status Anxiety*. Hamish Hamilton.
4. Deshpande, S. (2011). *Contemporary India: A Sociological View*. Penguin Books India.
5. Hirsch, F. (1976). *Social Limits to Growth*. Harvard University Press.
6. Kalleberg, A. L. (2018). *Precarious Lives: Job Insecurity and Well-Being in Rich Democracies*. Polity Press.
7. Khan, S. R. (2011). *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*. Princeton University Press.
8. Mijs, J. J. B. (2019). The paradox of inequality: Income inequality and belief in meritocracy go hand in hand. *Socio-Economic Review*, 19(1), 7–35.
9. Standing, G. (2011). *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. Bloomsbury Academic.
10. Vaid, D. (2018). *Uneven Odds: Social Mobility in Contemporary India*. Oxford University Press.
11. *Correspondence: Dr. Seema Boliya, Department of Sociology, Government College Kherwara–Udaipur. Email: seema.boliya@gckherwara.ac.in*