

A NEW *PRECARIOUS GRAMMAR*? ONTOLOGICAL PRECARITY AND THE NEOLIBERAL SELF IN POST-CRISIS CATALONIA, SPAIN

HUGO VALENZUELA-GARCÍA

Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology,
Autonomous University of Barcelona

Original scientific paper
Submitted: 10. 11. 2025.
Accepted: 13. 2. 2026.

DOI: 10.15176/vol63no19

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Drawing on ethnographic narratives, case studies, and large-scale survey data, this article analyses the moral, affective, and relational dimensions of precarity in post-crisis Catalonia (Spain). It argues that precarity is not merely an economic condition but also a *grammar* that reshapes how people work, relate to one another, and make sense of themselves. Grounded in a recent report on exclusion and poverty in Catalonia (Spain), this study examines three interrelated logics that structure contemporary forms of insecurity and precarity: the commodification of care, the erosion of relational worlds, and the moralization of failure. The *commodification of care* transforms empathy and care into performative labour, producing a systematic exhaustion that particularly affects women. The *erosion of relational worlds* reveals how economic fragility and economic transactions progressively dissolve the social fabric and the affective dimensions, giving rise to solitude as a generalized condition. Ultimately, the *moralization of failure* reveals how neoliberal subjects internalize structural injustice as personal responsibility, while also fostering fragile (and often commodified) forms of repair through spirituality, art, and solidarity. By integrating ethnographic insights with critical theory, the article attempts to develop an anthropology of *ontological precarity* that is attentive to its moral consequences, situating the Spanish experience within broader post-industrial transformations.

Keywords: precarity, loneliness, ontological precarity, moral harm, neoliberalism, Spain

1. INTRODUCTION. THE NEW GRAMMAR OF PRECARIETY

Labor is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself... To allow the market mechanism to be the sole director of the fate of human beings and their natural environment... would result in the demolition of society. (Polanyi 2001 [1944]: 75–76)

In advanced capitalism, where mechanisms of surplus value extraction have become increasingly diffuse, intensified, and decentralized (Harvey 2023), *precarity* has shifted from denoting unstable labour relations to functioning as a broader framework for understanding life under conditions of growing uncertainty (Alberti et al. 2018; Jørgensen 2016; Lorey 2015). Much like the expansion of biopolitical production and immaterial labour described by Hardt and Negri (2000), this paper argues that precarity is no longer confined to the sphere of employment. It is better understood as an analytical trope: a *social grammar* of material and affective rules that structure how instability, dependence, and vulnerability are produced, experienced, and interpreted in everyday life. Beyond its obvious material consequences (income insecurity and contractual instability), I argue that precarity increasingly infiltrates and shapes intimate and relational dimensions, transforming how individuals make sense of themselves and others in late (post)modern societies.

This type of analysis finds particularly fertile ground in Spain. Following the 2008 financial crisis – and later the COVID-19 pandemic – the Spanish economy has taken a paradoxical path. On the one hand, macroeconomic indicators signal sustained recovery: GDP grew by around 3.5 per cent in 2024 (INE 2025), outperforming much of the eurozone, and by 2025 the unemployment rate had fallen to 10.3 per cent, the lowest level since 2008 (Trading Economics 2025), while the employment rate reached 65.3 per cent (EURES 2024). On the other hand, this recovery has coincided with a steady deterioration in subjective, relational, and moral well-being, as these improvements conceal persistent structural fragility. Around 40% of Spanish employees remain in precarious employment characterized by short-term contracts, involuntary part-time work, and low wages (Eurofound 2021). Despite labour reforms that reduced temporary employment from 26% to 18% (*Irish Times* 2023), two out of three young people continue to enter the labour market in unstable, poorly protected conditions.

Parallel to these economic shifts, indicators of relational and emotional well-being have deteriorated sharply. The 2024 *Barometer of Unwanted Loneliness in Spain* reports that 13.4% of the population – approximately 5.4 million people – experience unwanted loneliness. The figure rises to 25.5% among young people aged 16–29 and approaches 40% in both urban and rural contexts (Fundación ONCE & Fundación AXA 2024; Ayuda en Acción 2024; Martínez et al. 2025).

Unwanted loneliness has been consistently associated with adverse health outcomes. National health data document a sustained increase in common mental health problems

in Spain. The *2023 Annual Report of the National Health System* identifies anxiety, depressive disorders, and sleep disturbances as among the most frequent primary care diagnoses, alongside rising psychotropic medication use (Spanish Ministry of Health 2024). The report further indicates that 14.6% of the population aged 15 and over present depressive symptomatology, with around 8% experiencing severe symptoms. Young people show disproportionately high levels of psychological distress in the post-pandemic context, reflecting heightened vulnerability amid economic and social uncertainty.

Recent evidence from the *2025 FOESSA Report on Social Exclusion and Development in Catalonia*, a widely cited and institutionally endorsed report produced by the FOESSA Foundation and Caritas, provides a robust empirical grounding for this transformation. Drawing on the *2024 Survey on social integration and social needs* (EINSFOESSA), based on a representative sample of 12,289 households across Spain, the report documents not merely persistent material deprivation, but also the consolidation of a model of ‘precarious integration’, a social configuration in which growing segments of the population remain formally employed and institutionally included, yet are structurally exposed to instability across multiple domains of everyday life (cf. Standing 2011). In Catalonia, while nearly half the population is classified as “fully integrated”, 36% now occupy an intermediate zone of incomplete social integration, marked by cumulative vulnerabilities in employment, housing, health, political participation, and social relations. This expansion has occurred despite macroeconomic recovery, indicating that insecurity has become more structural than cyclical. Crucially, vulnerability is no longer confined to the poorest strata in society but increasingly affects households with employment, mixed income sources, and educational credentials, signalling a general erosion of social guarantees.

The FOESSA report further highlights the growing centrality of the citizenship and political axis of exclusion – including access to housing, health care, education, and political participation – which now affects more than 46% of the Catalan population. As in much of Europe and the wider contemporary world, this growing discontent often translates into support for populist and far-right political movements.

At the same time, the report documents a marked deterioration of the relational fabric: among households experiencing exclusion or precarious integration, up to one in three reports having no one to rely on in moments of need. Social networks, far from being secondary resources, function as the key infrastructures that render employment, housing, and health trajectories sustainable. Their erosion transforms vulnerability into a cumulative and self-reinforcing condition.

Taken together, these dynamics reveal a form of lived insecurity that exceeds material deprivation. As mechanisms of belonging erode, lives remain formally included yet existentially unstable. Loneliness and deteriorating mental health thus reflect not only adverse labour conditions but a deeper socioemotional impact: uncertainty becomes normalized, reshaping expectations, conduct, and the sense of self. Rather than unrelated trends, these developments form an interconnected condition that I conceptualize as *ontological precarity*.

Building on ethnographic evidence from Spain and engaging a broader theoretical lineage, we situate this notion at the intersection of three strands of scholarship. Butler's distinction between precariousness as a shared socio-ontological vulnerability and precarity as its uneven political distribution (2004, 2009) provides the foundational differentiation. Lorey's account of precarization (2015) further clarifies how insecurity becomes normalized as a mode of neoliberal governance. Empirical work such as that by Lain et al. (2021) has extended this discussion by using the term to capture the lived, existential dimension of intersecting vulnerabilities. Thus, we define *ontological precarity* as the historical condition in which structurally distributed insecurity is internalized and experienced as moral and existential strain, reshaping subjectivity across domains of everyday life.

This article further argues that this type of precarity operates through what I call a *grammar of precarity*. The term *grammar* does not describe precarity itself, but the structured linkages between material constraints, moral expectations, and affective dispositions that render insecurity intelligible and actionable in everyday life. Rooted in long-term processes associated with advanced capitalism – individualization, weakened solidarities, and fragmented social worlds (Bauman 2000; Sennett 1998) – it stabilizes insecurity as a durable horizon rather than a temporary disruption. Employment instability, housing vulnerability, loneliness, and ethical tensions between self-preservation and collective commitment cease to appear as isolated problems and instead form mutually reinforcing dimensions of a shared condition.

While *ontological precarity* names the lived condition, the *grammar of precarity* describes the patterned logic through which that condition is structured and reproduced. This article examines Spain as a revealing case of how these dynamics unfold in everyday life, bridging macroeconomic transformation and intimate experience. Drawing on ethnographic and mixed-methods research conducted between 2019 and 2024, the paper explores how economic fragility, moral dilemmas, and relational erosion converge to produce ontological precarity as a lived condition rather than a marginal risk.

The next section theorizes precarity across its relational, moral, and subjective dimensions. Subsequent sections present the empirical findings, structured around three main analytical axes – moral, relational, and symbolic – each illustrating a distinct facet of precarious life in post-crisis Spain. The conclusion reflects how these lived experiences reveal precarity not merely as an economic condition, but as a pervasive *grammar* that reshapes the moral and emotional foundations of contemporary existence.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM LABOUR INSTABILITY TO ONTOLOGICAL PRECARIETY

Ethnographic research on work and economic crises across diverse contexts – from southern Europe (Muehlebach 2013; Lorey 2015; Standing 2011) and Japan (Allison 2013)

to Brazil (Millar 2014), Argentina (Kessler 2014), Canada (Thorkelson 2016), and Australia (Hinkson 2017) – showed that precarity operates simultaneously as a material, relational, and affective condition. These dimensions are mutually constitutive: economic insecurity is inseparable from the broader strain that has been generated by sustained ethical self-demands and relational erosion.

This body of research shows that these dynamics are not incidental effects of neoliberal reform but indicators of a deeper restructuring of social life, in which precarity operates as a generalized condition (Allison 2013; Lorey 2015; Han 2015). Here, the sociological dimensions of risk, uncertainty, liquidity, commodification, and self-management are better understood as interconnected effects of a single underlying transformation.

In this paper, rather than treating precarity solely as a structural constraint or institutional regime, we focus on the patterned expectations through which insecure life becomes intelligible in everyday practice. Drawing on Raymond Williams's (1977) notion of structures of feeling, Garfinkel's (1967) background expectancies, and Wittgenstein's (1953) idea of grammar as the tacit condition of meaningful action, we use *grammar of precarity* to describe the implicit logic linking material conditions to moral evaluations and affective orientations.

By *moral* we refer not to normative doctrine, but to the everyday judgments about worth, responsibility, reciprocity, and dignity that organize social life (Lambek 2008). Framing precarity in this way draws attention to how neoliberal rationalities are reproduced less through overt coercion than through routine interpretations and habitual forms of conduct. Ontological precarity thus operates not only through material dispossession or dominant discourses, but through internalized norms that render endurance, responsibility, and adaptability natural, necessary, and legitimate (i.e., a grammar).

2.1. FROM FORDIST SECURITY TO NEOLIBERAL HYPER-EXPOSURE

But what distinguishes contemporary precarity from earlier forms, beyond the growth of temporary or part-time employment?

Historically, work instability has been the norm rather than the exception. The so-called Fordist “golden age” of stable employment and robust welfare provision was a relatively brief episode within a longer trajectory of capitalist insecurity (Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Millar 2014). Under post-Fordism, the erosion of stable employment, collective bargaining, and social protection shifted precarity from the margins to the core of Western societies (Kalleberg 2018).

Contemporary precarity is not defined simply by labour market flexibility, nor does this argument rely on a nostalgic contrast between a cohesive past and a degraded present. Labour instability, discipline, and social vulnerability were central features of nineteenth-

century industrial capitalism, and the mid-twentieth-century welfare compromise was a historical exception rather than the norm (Millar 2014). What distinguishes the current configuration is not insecurity per se, but its normalization within formally inclusive societies. Precarity now unfolds in contexts where citizenship rights and welfare institutions remain in place, yet protection is increasingly conditional and individualized. Under these conditions, structural vulnerability tends to be internalized as personal responsibility and self-management rather than articulated as a collective condition. In short, what is historically specific is not instability itself, but its generalization under conditions of formal inclusion, its penetration into intimate and relational domains, and its moralization as individualized responsibility rather than collective struggle.

Under neoliberal regimes, responsibilities once borne by institutions – welfare provision, employment security, public health, and economic stabilization – are increasingly transferred to individuals, who are expected to manage risk, uncertainty, and emotional well-being on their own (Beck 1992; Harvey 2005; Lorey 2015). Precarity becomes individualized and moralized: failure appears as personal inadequacy rather than structural constraint.

This transformation is embedded in a broader reorganization of capitalism marked by globalization, financialization, outsourcing, indebtedness, and austerity. As socioeconomic polarization deepens (Piketty 2014), vulnerability is no longer confined to marginalized groups but extends into the educated middle classes, incorporated into what Standing (2011) terms the global precariat. The precariat did not emerge ex nihilo; it crystallized over a long process of proletarianization and precarization, intensified by the neoliberal turn in the 1970s (Harvey 2005).

Studies of downward mobility reinforce this historical continuity. Newman (1998) shows that decline and insecurity are recurrent features of capitalist modernity rather than anomalies. Tan Chen (2015) similarly documents how the erosion of stable employment in post-industrial North America transforms economic insecurity into moral isolation. Together, these analyses suggest an acceleration and generalization of an existing pattern: under advanced capitalism, precarity becomes systemic and structural, no longer episodic but constitutive of social stratification.

Crucially, this regime of insecurity extends beyond labour into vital spheres like housing, health, education, and care. It produces a diffuse sense of existential uncertainty that has been advanced and variously described as *ontological insecurity* (Giddens 1991) – a weakening of basic trust in the continuity and reliability of the social world – and as a defining feature of the contemporary *risk society* (Beck 1992). These concepts help illuminate an important shift: insecurity is no longer confined to the *distribution of resources* but increasingly concerns the *distribution of exposure* to instability.

Yet the argument advanced here goes further. Following Butler (2004, 2009), we distinguish precariousness as a shared socio-ontological condition of embodied interdependence from precarity as the politically induced and uneven distribution of vulnerability.

Building on Lorey's (2015) theorization of precarization as a governmental process that normalizes insecurity under neoliberalism, we extend this framework by introducing the notion of ontological precarity. By this we refer to the historical configuration in which structurally distributed precarity becomes internalized and lived as a moral and existential condition. Ontological precarity thus names not vulnerability per se, but the sedimentation of precarization within subjectivity.

Ontological precarity exceeds labour conditions. It permeates social and affective life, reshaping expectations of responsibility, reciprocity, and dependence. It is linked not only to material insecurity but also to social malaise, mental distress, political radicalization, resentment, and anomie. As the following section shows, its effects are deeply embedded in everyday labour and relational life.

What distinguishes the present configuration is not hardship or instability per se – both having been central to nineteenth-century industrial capitalism and earlier neoliberal phases – but the normalization of insecurity within formally inclusive societies. This shift rests on four interrelated processes: the generalization of insecurity across social strata; its internalization as personal responsibility; the erosion of relational infrastructures that once mediated vulnerability; and the psychologization of distress as individual failure or resilience.

Early post-crisis ethnographies of southern Europe depicted precarity as rupture – the shock of austerity and downward mobility. Today, precarity operates less as an event than as a structure: sedimented, expected, and institutionally normalized. Vulnerability is no longer publicly visible as a social condition but lived as an individualized moral and affective burden. It is this shift – from crisis to normalized insecurity – that grounds the concept of ontological precarity developed here.

2.2. PRECARIETY INFILTRATION INTO RELATIONAL AND AFFECTIVE DIMENSIONS

As Zelizer (2005) has shown, the neoliberal logic of calculation does not stop at the market, the factory, or the office; it permeates personal relationships, redefining how affection, care, and reciprocity are valued. Personal and intimate relations that once embodied an ethic of care and mutual obligation are increasingly reframed as calculative and monetized exchanges, generating new forms of moral tension and interpersonal conflict.

Thus, expressions of affection and love – long regarded as inalienable aspects of human life – are increasingly drawn into circuits of commodification, extending what Marx (1976 [1867]) described as the expansive logic of the commodity form, and echoing Polanyi's (2001 [1944]) insight that ever more spheres of social existence risk being treated as fictitious commodities. In this sense, capitalism has historically expanded by incorporating into the sphere of exchange domains that were once considered outside the market, progressively extending the commodity form into ever wider areas of social and personal life.

In my own fieldwork, these dynamics became visible in everyday relationships. Two Peruvian migrant sisters, once closely bonded, saw their relationship fracture when economic strain turned care into a transaction. One, working long hours, asked the other to look after her child; the latter, facing financial hardship, requested payment in return. The monetization of kinship obligations strained the relationship, generating mistrust, resentment, and open conflict.

In another case, a young couple described how they divided all household expenses strictly according to individual income. If one could not afford a holiday, the other simply went alone. What had once been understood as a shared responsibility was redefined as individualized cost management.

The arrangement had been adopted deliberately and presented as a rational, adult decision – consensual, transparent, even (sic) “cool and modern”. Yet over time, it began to introduce subtle forms of calculation and vigilance into the relationship. What initially appeared as autonomy gradually fostered mistrust and quiet accounting between partners. The relationship did not erode because of conflict alone, but because reciprocity and intimacy were replaced by accountancy and negotiation.

Likewise, as a Red Cross social worker explained during fieldwork (2022), some young women from low-income backgrounds occasionally engage in what we could term “petty prostitution” – sporadic sexual encounters arranged through social media in exchange for money or gifts. These practices are not usually understood by those involved as formal sex work, but as temporary strategies to obtain desired consumer goods in contexts of unstable employment and limited institutional support.

According to the social worker, the women framed their decisions as pragmatic and occasional responses to economic constraint. Yet this normalization did not erase their ambivalence. They reported recurring feelings of discomfort, diminished self-worth, and emotional strain. What appears to be individual choice thus carries a moral cost: economic pressure enters the intimate life, redefining the body as a resource to be mobilized when other options are unavailable.

These episodes are not isolated responses to poverty but indicators of a broader configuration in which vulnerability is individualized and commodified. Precarity no longer affects only employment; it also reshapes relationships, expectations, and self-understandings. As Millar (2014) and Neilson and Rossiter (2008) note, precarious labour destabilizes everyday life, blurring the boundaries between work, identity, and belonging. Remarkably, ethnographic research carried out in contexts as different as Italy (Molé 2010) and Japan (Allison 2013) converges on the same finding: job insecurity does not remain confined to the workplace but permeates everyday life, reshaping subjectivity and altering the sense of self.

Another defining feature of such *ontological precarity*, as shown in my own work (Lubbers et al. 2020), is the progressive erosion of community structures and, ultimately, the normalization of loneliness, particularly among the most vulnerable (Valenzuela et al.

2020, 2021a, 2021b). As ethnographic research in post-crisis Spain shows, economic precariousness often coincides with a profound relational impoverishment: individuals lose not only income or housing but also “the ability to participate in mainstream social activities,” as daily sociability itself becomes commodified (Valenzuela-García, Lubbers, and Molina 2023: 127). In a city like Barcelona, even modest leisure activities imply a financial outlay – around €40–€60 for a basic evening of socializing – representing 3–5% of the monthly gross income of a minimum-wage worker. Those with limited resources often lack the means and time to sustain social bonds in a society where genuine community spaces have become scarce.

The weakening of social ties reduces not only access to material and emotional support, but also the sense of belonging that sustains psychological stability. Empirical research shows that precarious employment operates as a structural determinant of mental health, contributing to chronic stress, anxiety, and the erosion of professional identity (Belvis et al. 2022). Moreover, the impact of precarious work on subjective well-being is shaped by the quality of social relations: individuals in unstable jobs often rely on smaller and less supportive networks, where interactions may reproduce shared distress rather than mitigate it (Ortiz-Ospina and Roser 2020).

The result is the rise of emotional depletion in which loneliness and fatigue are not personal failures but structural outcomes of market-driven isolation (Vázquez Canales 2023). The marked rise in psychotropic medication consumption – particularly anxiolytics and antidepressants – does not simply reflect a proportional medical response to distress. Rather, it signals an individualization of suffering, whereby structurally produced conditions of uncertainty are reframed as problems of personal resilience, emotional regulation, and pharmacological adjustment (Cartwright 2016; Beeker et al. 2021).

This relational erosion also entails a moral reconfiguration. As Morales and Abal Medina (2020) note, the neoliberal ethos displaces systemic responsibility onto the individual: workers internalize their vulnerability as a personal shortcoming, thereby depoliticizing collective consciousness and action, a new form of political and moral governance.

In a nutshell, contemporary precarity radicalizes earlier forms of capitalist insecurity by combining them with the relational isolation and moral individualization that are characteristic of late neoliberal life.

3. METHODOLOGY

This article draws on a mixed-methods research design conducted between 2019 and 2024 as part of a national R&D project examining the moral and emotional dimensions of precarity. The study followed an integrated methodological strategy combining ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth semi-structured interviews, statistical data analysis, and personal network analysis.

Ethnographic fieldwork was carried out in several urban and peri-urban areas of Barcelona, particularly in neighbourhoods characterized by high levels of labour precarity and social fragmentation. This multi-layered design enabled the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data, allowing us to capture both the lived experience of insecurity and its structural and relational configurations.

The study is based on 30 participants (17 women and 13 men), aged between 21 and 62, with a concentration in mid-adulthood. Identifying details have been modified to preserve confidentiality. Participants represent diverse occupational and social positions, including platform workers, manual labourers, care-workers, academics, migrants with professional credentials, temporary employees, and unemployed individuals. Several occupy hybrid or downwardly mobile trajectories, reflecting fragmented and unstable career paths.

The sample captures multiple forms of precarity: labour and economic instability, migrant and institutional vulnerability, gendered and care-related overload, psychological distress, and symbolic or vocational insecurity. Across cases, precarity emerges not only as material deprivation but as a multidimensional condition affecting relational ties, moral self-understanding, and subjective continuity.

Table 1. *Overview of Participants (n = 30)*

Code	Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation / Background	Thematic relevance
AL01	Javier	M	29	Delivery rider (Glovo)	Algorithmic insecurity, illusion of autonomy
AL02	Ramón	M	53	Retired (mental illness)	Isolation, social withdrawal
AL03	Rubén	M	53	Marble worker	Fatigue, paternal stress
AL04	Noé	M	44	Community facilitator	Queer identity, creative precarity
AL05	Yolanda	F	43	Social worker	Affective overload, moral fatigue
AL06	Sara	F	36	Postdoc researcher	Vocational insecurity, self-exploitation
AL07	Magnolia	F	51	Esoteric therapist	Spiritual refuge, trauma
AL08	Valery	F	52	Unemployed	Control, dependency, violence
AL09	Sonia	F	40	Sick leave (stress)	Anxiety, guilt, isolation
AN01	Hudson	M	39	Postal worker (migrant)	Solitude, endurance, moral distance
AN02	Susana	F	59	Unemployed academic	Middle-class fall, illness
AN03	Josep	M	32	Unemployed	Depression, loss of purpose
AN04	Santiago	M	39	Postal worker	Chronic exhaustion, instability
AN05	Jordi	M	48	Self-employed (maintenance)	Debt, vulnerability
AN06	Alepo	M	44	Migrant driver	Fear, dignity, exploitation
AN07	Roxana	F	53	Hotel cleaner	Injury, survival, resignation
JR01	Vanessa	F	37	Unemployed single mother	Care crisis, class descent
JR02	Soleiman	M	21	Migrant (Guinea)	Fear, injustice
JR03	Ana	F	28	Nurse & PhD student	Meritocratic stress, burnout
JR04	Gabriela	F	46	Architect (Venezuela)	Bureaucratic limbo, frustration

JR05	Bexi	F	41	Cleaner / caregiver	Invisible care, guilt
JR06	Juan	M	34	Roma mediator & pastor	Community ethics, resilience
JR07	Conchi	F	57	Former teacher / cleaner	Nostalgia, vulnerability
JR08	Argenis	M	62	Civil engineer (Venezuela)	Loss of status, endurance
JR09	Daniel	M	38	Actor / temp worker	Insecurity, aesthetic selfhood
JR10	David	M	45	Trainer / model	Ego, solitude, self-performance
JR11	Elena	F	33	Admin temp	Disaffection, romantic solitude
JR12	Sesia	F	48	Cleaner / caregiver	Burnout, invisibility
JR13	Magdalena	F	44	Cook / caregiver	Fatigue, self-sacrifice
NO01	Rosa	F	50	Graphic designer	Creative precarity, self-doubt

Qualitative analysis is grounded in recorded deep interviews. Each interview, lasting between 90 minutes and 3 hours, explored biographical trajectories, work histories, moral dilemmas, and experiences of solitude, fatigue, and uncertainty. The names used are pseudonyms. Transcripts were coded thematically using both inductive and theory-driven categories – such as *dismissal, debt, economic crisis, material deprivation, depression/anxiety/sadness, sense of control/agency, dignity, and network fragmentation* – allowing the emergence of cross-cutting patterns across gender, class, and occupational domains. Rather than seeking representativeness, the goal was to trace the moral meanings of precarious life: how people make sense of exhaustion, responsibility, and relational erosion under neoliberal conditions.

To situate these narratives within a broader social landscape, the ethnographic material was complemented with quantitative data from FOESSA's *Report on Social Exclusion and Development in Catalonia (2025)*, the *Barometer of Unwanted Loneliness in Spain* (Fundación ONCE & Fundación AXA 2024), as well as national labour and health statistics (Eurofound 2021; OECD 2023).

This combination of scales (the intimate and the structural) and methods (qualitative and quantitative) enables an integrated view of precarity as both a lived and systemic phenomenon. The resulting analysis seeks not to generalize, but to illuminate how precarious subjects negotiate meaning, dignity, and belonging in a social order where uncertainty has become the baseline condition of life.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All participants provided informed consent prior to each interview. The study complies with the ethical guidelines of the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation and the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona's Research Ethics Committee. Data were anonymized, stored securely, and processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679. Pseudonyms are used throughout to ensure participants' privacy and confidentiality.

4. RESULTS

Across the sample, precarity emerges in multiple, interrelated dimensions. For some participants, insecurity is primarily expressed through unstable employment and material strain; for others, it takes the form of exhaustion, guilt, or the gradual erosion of vocation. In other cases, instability affects recognition, dignity, and the continuity of the self. These variations do not represent separate types of precarity but are different ways in which structural insecurity becomes lived and interpreted across social positions.

A comparative reading of the cases suggests that three cross-cutting logics organize these heterogeneous experiences through a shared *grammar of precarity*: the *moralization of failure*, in which structural constraints are internalized as personal shortcomings; the *commodification of care and empathy*, whereby ethical commitment is reframed as productivity and performance; and the *dissolution of relational worlds*, as social ties become frayed, and loneliness and affective depletion crystallize into patterned, collective conditions rather than isolated misfortunes.

Taken together, these narratives offer a layered portrait of post-crisis Spain. Economic fragility and emotional exhaustion are not parallel developments but mutually reinforcing processes. Individuals struggle – often without success – to preserve a coherent sense of self while navigating unstable livelihoods, shifting moral demands, and a progressive erosion of social trust.

The empirical analysis that follows is organized around a set of analytical axes tracing how precarity permeates moral judgment, emotional life, and relational infrastructures. These axes delineate a social order in which care, empathy, and selfhood are continuously extracted and monetized, yet also tentatively reassembled through everyday acts of endurance, solidarity, and re-signification.

4.1. THE COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN'S CARE WORK

In the interviews, women from different professions describe emotional labour as extending far beyond their jobs into daily life. What feminist scholarship described as an ethics of care (Held 2006; Tronto 1993) turns into a source of self-depletion when the boundaries between work and personal life collapse (Valenzuela-García and Serrano 2025). In these emotion-saturated occupations, the subject functions simultaneously as the main instrument of labour and the primary site of exhaustion. Precarity corrodes not only material stability but also the ethical foundations of work, reducing empathy to performance and vocation to a form of self-erasure.

Sara, a sociologist and 29-year-old postdoctoral researcher on her second temporary contract, describes the moral pressure of constant evaluation and self-justification. Her

days are structured by deadlines, teaching hours, grant applications, and a fierce (but silent) competition for scarce permanent positions. “You have to prove that you care, that you deserve to stay,” she explains. Care, in her account, does not simply mean doing research well; it means answering emails at midnight, supervising students beyond her contracted hours, attending conferences she pays for herself, and showing enthusiasm even when exhausted.

“If you complain,” she says, “it sounds like you’re not grateful. And if you’re not grateful, you’re replaceable.” The pressure is subtle but persistent. No one explicitly tells her to overwork, yet the expectation circulates: dedication must be visible, measurable, constant.

What began as a vocation – a genuine desire to research and teach – has gradually turned into a mode of moral survival. The question is no longer whether she loves her field, but whether she can sustain the performance of loving it. In this environment, insecurity is not only contractual; it becomes ethical. To stay, she must continuously demonstrate not just competence, but devotion.

Yolanda, a 43-year-old social worker in a municipal welfare office, describes similar fatigue from a very different institutional position. Her days are spent handling urgent cases – evictions, benefit suspensions, family breakdowns – often with insufficient resources and mounting paperwork. “You end up caring for everyone except yourself,” she says. “At night, I feel empty.”

She speaks of a routine in which empathy becomes procedural: listening to stories of crisis back-to-back, making calls that rarely solve structural problems, absorbing anger that is not directed at her personally but that lands on her desk. Official hours end at three, yet the cases follow her home. “You replay conversations in your head,” she explains. “You think about what you didn’t manage to fix.”

The exhaustion she describes is not only physical: it is the wear and tear of being continuously available – morally and emotionally – in a system that offers little room for recovery.

Both expose the same paradox: that is, the transformation of care from an ethical commitment into an impossible ideal due to overburdened and unlimited responsibility. These accounts illustrate how the underlying labour ethics demands not only productivity but affective availability, turning responsibility and labour ethics into a mode of control. And over time, this condition drains the person from within, hollowing out their sense of self. Semantically, the word “emptiness,” which recurred frequently, is highly revealing and strikingly literal. The constant exposure of one’s emotional and moral self to institutional demands produces exhaustion – the sense that one’s ethical energy is being consumed by the very structures that claim to value it (Berardi 2017). Gender deepens this dynamic. Women appear not only as workers but as the primary managers of emotional continuity within households, workplaces, and institutions (see Hochschild and Machung 1989).

Vanessa, a single mother living on welfare support, captures this displacement with clarity: “You give everything and you do everything for her [her baby daughter], and people think that’s real love, not work – but it is work too; or it is work after all!”. And Magdalena, who cooks both at home and in a school canteen, describes a condition of chronic overwork and quiet exploitation, yet insists that there is no real alternative: “If you stop, everything falls apart.”

In each of these cases, resilience operates less as empowerment than as a sentence. The very virtues historically associated with care – empathy, patience, dedication – are appropriated to stabilize and reproduce precarious regimes of labour and everyday life.

In sum, these narratives reveal how neoliberalism penetrates the ethical and affective fabric of everyday life. It transforms care into duty, sacrifice into respectability, and exhaustion into moral worth. The women portrayed here sustain not only households and institutions but the very moral economy that exploits their capacity to endure.

4.2. THE EROSION OF RELATIONAL WORLDS

If the previous section illuminated how precarity commodifies care, this section examines how it weakens the socio-emotional infrastructures that sustain everyday life.

Loneliness, perhaps the most evident manifestation of this malaise, in precarious societies, rarely manifests itself as a sudden rupture. It seeps in quietly through economic fragility, long working hours, and the disappearance of collective spaces of sociability. This process is not merely psychological or individual; it unfolds alongside the disintegration of social ties and everyday forms of reciprocity. The progressive weakening of neighbourhood life, informal mutual aid, and long-standing community spaces – including religious congregations, local associations, and small shops – has been especially visible in urban areas shaped by superdiversity and gentrification, such as Barcelona. Rapid residential turnover, rising rents, and transient populations have eroded the slow accumulation of trust that once sustained everyday coexistence.

This erosion was, in fact, a recurrent topic in the interviews. Many interviewees described a growing sense of anonymity and disconnection. “I don’t even know who lives next door anymore,” one participant remarked. Susana put it more bluntly: “Neighbourhood life has fallen apart.”

For older residents, the contrast with the past was particularly sharp. They recalled open doors, children playing in shared courtyards, neighbours exchanging food or small favours without calculation. What has replaced those interactions, they suggested, is a more guarded coexistence – polite but distant, marked by parallel lives rather than shared ones. In this context, loneliness is not simply a matter of individual withdrawal, but the outcome of a broader restructuring of urban social life.

Cases of individuals' progressive withdrawal from public life were among the most evident manifestations of this ongoing process of ontological precarization. For instance, Ramón, 53, lives alone in a subsidized flat on the outskirts of Barcelona. A former factory worker diagnosed with schizophrenia, he receives a disability pension that barely covers rent, utilities, and medication. His daily routine follows a fixed pattern: coffee at nine, a short walk, lunch at home, and television in the afternoon. "I talk to the television sometimes," he says, "just to hear a voice back. You get used to being on your own."

Daniel, 38, moves between temporary jobs, including extra work on film sets and market surveys. Divorced and childless, his solitude is that of the flexible worker: nomadic, connected online, yet relationally adrift. "Sometimes," he says,

I don't talk to anyone for three days. At first, during the COVID pandemic, I thought working from home was a real bargain – but now I see that you lose a lot. You lose contact with people, you start getting weird, and the more time I spend alone, the less I feel like seeing anyone. Every day's the same – it's like a copy of the one before, and I know it's not good for me – it doesn't make me any happier.

It is revealing how this labour instability translates into affective instability: no continuity, no solid ground on which to build.

Sonia, 40, a bilingual administrative assistant for a logistics and transportation company, is currently on sick leave due to anxiety. She puts it starkly: "At first people would call me or text me on WhatsApp to ask how I was doing... but after a while they stop asking. Everyone is busy surviving. You stop calling, they stop calling, and suddenly, you've disappeared."

The workplace is often described as a site of immediate presence – frequently superficial and inconsequential. Yet the alternative, namely refusing or failing to participate in that daily performance, effectively erases the individual from the social stage.

These trajectories – so different in age, gender, and class – converge in a shared condition: the thinning of social life.

Beyond workplace relations (often marked by competition or conflict in precarious contexts), strong ties once provided consistent emotional, informational, and economic support. Social capital was often sufficient; it worked. What used to be sustained by kinship, neighbourhood bonds, friends, or stable employment has increasingly been replaced by transactional ties. Analytically, this loneliness is not simply about being alone; it is about living without reciprocity – without the small gestures and mutual recognitions that render one's existence visible and meaningful to others.

In short, loneliness in these precarious lives is not a psychological deviation but a social diagnosis. Precarity and contemporary loneliness form a collective emotional tone that saturates everyday life, expressing the contradictions of the present without needing to name them explicitly. The stories of Ramón, Daniel, and Sonia make this clear: their solitude is not a matter of withdrawal but of exposure – a way of enduring a world that has forgotten how to look back.

4.3. THE MORALIZATION OF FAILURE AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

One of the core features of ontological precarity is its intrusion into the sphere of personal meaning and purpose. In contemporary individualized societies, where communal anchors have thinned out and life is increasingly organized around market logics, the transcendental, the emotional, and the symbolic are gradually absorbed into consumer culture. Economic value becomes the dominant measure of worth. Under these conditions, many precarious individuals describe not simply stress or insecurity, but a more diffuse sense of emptiness – a feeling that something fundamental is missing. As several of the more reflective informants put it, the problem ultimately crystallizes into two disarmingly simple questions: *What is all this for?* And, more bluntly, *have we collectively lost our minds?*

The third axis examines how individuals come to internalize structural injustice as personal failure while simultaneously searching for new – often highly commodified – symbolic forms of repair. Foucauldian biopolitics operates here with clarity: subjects are led to assume responsibility for conditions they did not create and to interpret structural constraints as personal shortcomings. At the same time, market logics provide ready-made avenues of relief, fostering the belief that further consumption – self-care regimes, productivity devices, therapeutic services – can soothe the very emptiness generated by those same structures.

There remains, however, a subtle but significant class distinction that goes beyond the obvious differences in accessing market-based forms of repair. While the middle classes tend to experience precarity as anxiety, uncertainty, or fatigue, the working poor face a more cumulative and corrosive form of harm, rooted in invisibility, chronic overwork, and everyday shame (Valenzuela et al. 2022).

The distinction is not merely emotional but structural. Among middle-class respondents, precarity tends to be experienced as anxiety linked to downward mobility and status fragility – the fear of losing accumulated educational, professional, and symbolic capital, and of failing to sustain previously secured standards of autonomy and recognition. Their distress often takes the form of anticipatory insecurity: exhaustion, self-doubt, and persistent pressure to remain competitive and self-sufficient. By contrast, among the working poor, precarity more frequently manifests itself as shame tied to public dependence, stigmatization, and perceived insufficiency. Here, insecurity is not only instability but moral exposure: the experience of being seen – or imagining oneself seen – as inadequate, replaceable, or burdensome. While anxiety reflects the instability of one's social position, shame signals a threat to one's sense of dignity. This distinction helps explain why ontological precarity takes different embodied forms across class locations, even when material insecurity is comparable.

Roxana, 53, a hotel cleaner from Ecuador, shows me her hands – thickened, marked by chemicals. She is a discreet, diligent person who carries out her work quietly and barely

dares to look others in the eyes, shy and reserved. “You become part of the furniture,” she says, laughing softly. “Guests pass by and never see you.” Her humour covers something deeper: the pain of being rendered invisible in the very spaces she maintains. “They [employers] tell you to smile,” she adds, “but you can’t smile with your back hurting.” Sesia, 48, also a cleaner, described her exhaustion in bodily terms: “The fatigue starts in the hands and ends in the head. You feel like your thoughts get heavy.” Her words reveal the psychosomatic dimension of precarious work: a blurring of body and mind where rest no longer restores. Sesia explains the harshness of her usual work – a physically exhausting job ruled by the stopwatch and a daily schedule packed with tasks that must be completed on time to avoid extending her working hours beyond the formal contract.

Across these accounts, caring, cooking, and cleaning are treated as natural extensions of individuals (often women) rather than as labour requiring recognition or protection. The tension between ethical commitment and economic constraint becomes evident: people continue to do what they consider right even when doing so carries a material cost. Dignity, in this context, does not operate as a reward but as a boundary – a line that some refuse to cross.

Conchi, a cleaner in a public residence for the elderly, changes the sheets of bedridden residents every morning, even when her supervisor instructs her to skip those “who don’t complain.” She knows this means staying beyond her paid hours. “I couldn’t leave them like that, smelling bad – they’re people, not packages,” she explains. The act is modest but deliberate. It shows how dignity can become a form of refusal, not compliance. This is what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls *cruel optimism*: an attachment to values that simultaneously sustain and wound.

In this context, moral injury refers less to a loss of trust in others than to the recognition that fairness and reciprocity have become structurally unattainable. This transition reflects not only a growing sense of pessimism but also a broader political and philosophical withdrawal – a drift toward nihilism that is increasingly harnessed by far-right and populist movements worldwide (see Brown 2019; Fraser 2019; Inglehart and Norris 2019). Yet responses to precarity are not uniform: while some translate into resignation and cynicism, others give rise to new forms of critique, solidarity, or moral re-evaluation.

A significant number of participants engaged in acts of re-enchantment – attempts to restore meaning, coherence, or transcendence to lives stripped bare by uncertainty. Amidst existential exhaustion, they turn to spirituality, healing, or small-scale activism as ways of reassembling themselves. These acts of defiance closely resemble what James C. Scott (1985) described as the *weapons of the weak*. Yet, unlike Scott’s account – which emphasized the collective and often covert nature of everyday resistance – these gestures tend to remain individual and fragmentary, reflecting the profound individualization characteristic of late neoliberalism. They express a soft moral refusal, a quiet dissent, but this rarely translates into open refusal, collective action, or sustained political transformation.

Magnolia, 51, introduces herself as an energy therapist and runs a small wellness studio on the outskirts of Barcelona. Her practice – an old flat refurbished with second-hand furniture and the scent of incense – combines reiki, aromatherapy, and guided meditation. For years, she worked as an administrative assistant in a pharmaceutical company, but after experiencing burnout and a difficult separation, she decided to “change her vibration” and reinvent herself professionally. According to her: “People come to me broken... I remind them that light still exists.” Pointing to something higher or transcendent – which, in fact, constitutes the foundation of all religions, past and present – becomes her fundamental mechanism of relief. Noé, 44, a community facilitator, frames his activism in moral rather than mystical terms: “We’re all broken in some way. The trick is to stay together long enough to do something with that.” Rosa, 50, a freelance graphic designer moving between short-term projects, describes drawing as her “spiritual therapy”: “When I draw, I breathe differently. I’m not productive, I’m alive.”

As noted above, these are individual, subjective, and temporary forms of relief. These gestures, however modest, embody what Lambek (2008) calls *ordinary ethics* – the everyday practices through which people care for their moral selves and attempt to preserve a sense of integrity amid structural uncertainty. Through art, therapy, and solidarity, participants try to craft moral shelters where economic logic no longer dictates value (see Illouz 2007). Magnolia’s light, Noé’s solidarity, and Rosa’s drawings each perform the same quiet gesture – to restitch the moral fabric of everyday life, one act of meaning at a time.

Yet, while these practices provide symbolic shelter and a sense of moral continuity, their effects remain structurally ambivalent. By framing suffering in therapeutic, spiritual, or creative terms, they may alleviate distress, but they also contribute to the privatization of response, displacing structural critique into individualized coping. Moreover, many of these strategies operate within market logics – through consumption, self-branding, or commodified forms of care – thus transforming repair itself into an economic option. In this sense, acts of resilience can coexist with, and even stabilize, the very conditions they seek to endure. Rather than straightforward resistance, they exemplify the constrained agency that is characteristic of normalized precarity.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, these thirty ethnographic portraits delineate the moral and emotional landscape of precarity in post-crisis Spain. They do not describe precarity in a statistical or economic sense, but rather in a deeper and more pervasive form of *dispossession* (Harvey 2003): the erosion of meaning, connection, and recognition that underpins contemporary insecurity. Participants describe feelings of exhaustion, disaffection, and endurance – symptoms of a collective condition in which economic fragility and emotional strain mutually reinforce one another.

This analysis should not be read as a lament for lost solidarity or as an implicit idealization of past social worlds. Rather, it examines how contemporary forms of distress emerge from the disjuncture between promised inclusion and lived insecurity – between institutional narratives of autonomy, care, and rights, and the everyday experience of moral exhaustion, isolation, and relational fragility.

The testimonies gathered here trace what we have metaphorically referred to as a *new grammar of precarity*. Among middle-class professionals, ontological precarity manifests itself as moral depletion – the sense of giving more than one receives. Among the working poor, it manifests itself as injury and humiliation – the slow violence of being unseen. Loneliness cuts across both groups, signalling not isolation but the weakening of reciprocity and the community fabric.

What emerges is a precarious subjectivity sustained by paradoxes: care becomes labour (as in the cases of Conchi and Roxana), flexibility becomes survival (Vanessa, Yolanda), and hope becomes a moral obligation (Sara). At the same time, whether through faith, activism, creativity, or sheer persistence, people strive to reclaim moral coherence from the fragments of disenchanting life. These narratives challenge the notion that precarity is simply an economic malfunction to be corrected. Instead, they reveal it as an ontological and relational condition, one that reshapes how individuals envision the future, interact with others, and assess their own worth. The normalization of insecurity, once perceived as a crisis, has become a *grammar*: it structures how we engage with time, space, and emotion, producing a chronic anxiety that defines contemporary life.

Yet within this condition lies a discreet form of resilience. Across these lives, we encounter small gestures of defiance: a worker refusing cynicism, a caregiver insisting on tenderness, a community organizer rebuilding solidarity from below. These are not heroic acts but everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1985) that sustain a moral position while simultaneously reinforcing individualized modes of response, often through consumer practices.

Precarity, then, is not merely a failure of the system but the *grammar* of a new moral order – one in which uncertainty becomes normal, endurance becomes virtue, and the struggle to remain a person, despite everything, becomes the most human act of all.

From an anthropological perspective, these transformations necessitate re-embedding economic experience within moral and social contexts. As Griffith (2023) observes in *Anthropology of Economics*, the growing dominance of neoclassical paradigms has abstracted labour from its ethical and relational dimensions, promoting a “cult of the market” that obscures the lived realities of those who work under precarious conditions. Anthropology, by contrast, insists on viewing labour not as a mere factor of production but as a moral practice at the heart of every economy that is the foundation of social life.

Griffith’s notion of ethical labour – work oriented toward care, solidarity, or justice, despite low pay and insecurity – resonates strongly with the affective ambivalence of

precarious employment. In a context of declining worker power and weakened collective institutions (Stansbury and Summers 2020), such forms of ethical labour emerge as a symptom of neoliberal subjectivation.

The anthropology of precarious labour must therefore move beyond the dichotomy between economic determinism and moral voluntarism. It must trace how people negotiate their own vulnerability through work, reciprocity, and care – how they seek meaning and dignity in conditions that continually erode both. Precarity is not merely a social pathology, but a window into the human condition under late capitalism – a *grammar* of existence structured by dependence, exposure, and exploitation.

In this sense, *ontological precarity* does not signal the erosion of a once-harmonious moral order, but the ethical consequences of living within a social order that promises protection, autonomy, and belonging while systematically failing to sustain them.

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NOVA PREKARNA GRAMATIKA? ONTOLOŠKA PREKARNOST I NEOLIBERALNI IDENTITET U POSTKRIZNOJ KATALONIJI (ŠPANJOLSKA)

Oslanjajući se na etnografske narative, studije slučaja i podatke iz velikih anketa, u ovom se članku analiziraju moralne, afektivne i relacijske dimenzije prekarnosti u postkriznoj Kataloniji. Tvrdi se da prekarnost nije samo ekonomsko stanje već i *gramatika* koja mijenja način na koji ljudi rade, odnose se jedni prema drugima i shvaćaju sebe. Studija se temelji na nedavnom izvješću o isključenosti i siromaštvu u toj španjolskoj pokrajini, a ispituje tri međusobno povezane logike koje strukturiraju suvremene oblike nesigurnosti i prekarnosti: komodifikaciju skrbi, eroziju relacijskih svjetova i moralno shvaćanje neuspjeha. *Komodifikacija skrbi* transformira empatiju i skrb u performativni rad, stvarajući tako sustavnu iscrpljenost koja posebno pogađa žene. *Erozija relacijskih svjetova* otkriva kako ekonomska krhkost i ekonomske transakcije progresivno rastvaraju društveno tkivo i afektivne dimenzije, što dovodi do usamljenosti kao općega stanja. Naposljetku, *moralno shvaćanje neuspjeha* otkriva kako neoliberalni subjekti internaliziraju strukturnu nepravdu kao osobnu odgovornost, istodobno njegujući fragilne (i često komodificirane) načine oporavka kroz duhovnost, umjetnost i solidarnost. Spajanjem etnografskih uvida s kritičkom teorijom, u članku se nastoji razviti antropologija *ontološke prekarnosti* koja uzima u obzir njezine moralne posljedice, smještajući to španjolsko iskustvo u šire okvire postindustrijskih transformacija.

Ključne riječi: prekarnost, usamljenost, ontološka prekarnost, moralna šteta, neoliberalizam, Španjolska