

Working Conditions After an Economic Crisis in Spain: “No Calm After the Storm”¹

Francisco D. Bretones² – Antonio Delgado-Padial³ – José María González-González⁴

Faculty of Labour Sciences, University of Granada, Spain

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Working conditions during the economic crisis of the first decade of the 21st century have been the object of extensive research. This study delves into the main risks facing workers subsequent to the recession and economic crisis of 2008-2014 and prior to the unsettling times provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The choice of Spain as the study area stems from the deep effects of the economic crisis on this country and the fragmentation of its trade unions. Spain is likewise relevant as its authorities adopted two opposite strategies (respectively austerity followed by expansive investment) to cope and counter these problems over time. This qualitative study comprises in-depth interviews with 45 experts from various sectors of business. The findings suggest that factors such as persistent job insecurity and work overload profoundly affect the social environment and relationships of employees both at work and in the family generating individual coping strategies that weaken the role of trade unions.

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Introduction

“Here in the calm after the storm ... after all that we’ve been through...”

“Calm After The Storm” (2014) by The Common Linnets

The financial crisis unleashed in 2008 persisted in Spain until 2015. It has had a visible impact on working conditions and on the duality of the labor market. While the economic situation improved somewhat between 2015 and 2019, the recovery did not attain the conditions prior to the crisis. Moreover, the health dilemma provoked by the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic and the fear and uncertainty stemming from the war in Ukraine have raised levels of labor stress, dissipated the expectations of young people seeking a first job, and led

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² Correspondence: Francisco D. Bretones, Associate Professor, Faculty of Labour Sciences, University of Granada, Spain, E-mail: fdiazb@ugr.es

³ Correspondence: Antonio Delgado-Padial, Associate Professor, Faculty of Labour Sciences, University of Granada, Spain, E-mail: adpadial@ugr.es

⁴ Corresponding author: Prof. José María González-González, Faculty of Labour Sciences, University of Granada. Edificio San Jerónimo. 18071 Granada, Spain, E-mail: jmgonza@ugr.es

to perplexity among employers, human resources managers, trade union officials and labor experts.

Spain was one of the fastest growing European economies in the 1990s and early 2000s. However, its economic surge came to an abrupt halt with the financial crisis of 2008. Since then, employment rates have drastically declined as a result of layoffs and the closure of businesses.

Spain in 2018 had the greatest number of poor workers in the European Union and ranked seventh in the world. This was due not only to high unemployment, but to elevated temporality, loss of purchasing power, and, consequently, a growth in social inequality which obliged workers to accept lower salaries and poorer working conditions to retain their employment (Corujo 2014; Martí López 2017).

The impact of the EU's austerity policies on performance clearly reveals itself in the *Decent Work Index* of the European Trade Union Confederation (2021). This index signals that Greece, Italy and Spain were among the five countries with the worst performance. The other two, Bulgaria and Romania, also suggest that not enough was being done to bridge the economic divide between the countries of Western and Eastern Europe.

The report states the following: "... *the austerity policies and the double-dip recession (2011-2013) negatively affected the capacity of these member states to move forward a more sustainable and fairer economic model. Austerity impacted the performances of these countries, preventing them from catching up with the rest of Europe and condemning them to remain in the lowest end of the EU28,*" ETUC (2021: 6).

Regrettably, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine have only exacerbated unemployment figures and aggravated rates of precarity, instability, insecurity and uncertainty in Spain's labor market. It is for these reasons that it is compelling and crucial to also explore the working conditions and psychosocial risks in Spain during this second timeframe (2015-2019). It must be noted that the Spanish authorities adopted EU austerity directives issued in 2008 intended to control the financial budgets of Mediterranean countries, protect the major companies, and save banks from bankruptcy, actions that led to a worsening of working conditions and higher levels of unemployment (Barroso 2017; Borriello 2017).

Subsequently, the Spanish authorities adopted very different strategies to address the more recent difficulties stemming the COVID-19 pandemic and war in Ukraine (Utzet et al. 2022), measures with different consequences for the socio-labor groups. The authorities in fact began to emphasize assistance to companies so as to maintain employment. Furthermore, the EU began to provide economic funding to programs serving to stimulate and recover the economy (e.g., Next Generations EU Funds).

Working conditions and psychosocial risks: a brief review

The deterioration of working conditions in certain countries along Europe's periphery during the period of extreme recession at the outset of this century has been the object of extensive scientific research (Giorgi et al. 2015; Malard et al. 2015; Tsai – Chan 2011; Vinopal 2012; Wang et al. 2010), focusing in particular of the nations most affected by the crisis (Herrero et al. 2020; Houdmont et al. 2012; Ruiz-Pérez et al. 2017; Utzet et al. 2015). The 2008-2014 financial crisis resulted in an intense dwindling of national economies and, consequently, a constriction of labor markets, a deterioration of working conditions and social pressure, and a decline of the influence of trade unions (Burgard – Kalousova 2015; Fornell et al. 2018; Lindström 2009; Pérez de Guzmán et al. 2016; Psychogios et al. 2020). Workload, harassment, bullying and discrimination as well as work–family imbalance and job insecurity are only a few examples of the new working conditions (Alvarado – Bretones 2018).

Insecurity soars during periods of economic recession characterized by weak labor markets and limited job opportunities (Matilla-Santander et al. 2019; Modrek – Cullen 2013) ushering in a state of precariousness that is receiving considerable academic attention (Karamessini et al. 2019; Murray et al. 2020; Shoss 2017). One of the recurring contextual variables among working condition research is job insecurity and, more specifically, the concept of a group designated as “the precariat” (Standing 2011). The term alludes to a certain social class from a modern historical framework suffering from the deregulation of labor relations together with the fragmentation of labor markets and weakening of trade unions provoking insecurity, vulnerability and unpredictability. Immigrant workers (Seiffarth 2021) and a number of other vulnerable social groups (Buchholz et al. 2009; Bretones – Santos 2020; Crespo – Serrano 2001) fall into this category.

Labor insecurity synthesizes, condenses and amplifies certain occupational problems (instability, precarity and fear) and has an impact on both those who lost and retained their jobs (Gallie et al. 2017). Thus, employment insecurity can be examined not only from the perspective of direct economic damage generated by job loss, but by other negative repercussions (e.g., status, recognition, self-esteem) and the perceived threat of loss (De Witte 2005). The negative consequences of all these situations have been the subject of different research both in terms of worker health (Benach et al. 2014; Caroli – Godard 2016; Dragano et al. 2011; Youngmin Cho 2020) and interpersonal relationships and trust between colleagues (Hellgren et al. 1999; Karkoulian et al. 2013).

Another relevant notion is that many companies during the 2008-14 financial crisis reduced their workforce in order to meet the demands of more

restricted markets (Fabiani et al. 2015). The ensuing multiplication of tasks led workers to suffer workload and/or hour increases stemming from excessive organizational demands (Korunka et al. 2015; Paškvan – Kubicek 2017). It is obvious that the consequences of inordinate workloads are pernicious (Bannai – Tamakoshi 2014). Evaluating this factor must take into account objective parameters (amount or volume of work and available time) and subjective perceptions such as if the burden is viable, sustainable, acceptable and affordable (Habel 2021; Schor 1991).

Interpersonal relationships in the workplace are also affected by employment insecurity and workload increase. Harassment with its negative psychological, physical and social consequences thus becomes a tangible workplace risk (Spagnoli – Balducci 2017; Vignoli et al. 2015). However, the influence of work conditions on relationships is not strictly limited to the area of harassment and can extend to both social and family environments. Suffering from work overload or job uncertainty can also lead to neglecting of other vital personal aspects provoking work-family imbalances that can likewise affect individual health and well-being (Richter et al. 2010). Work-private life imbalance can in fact diminish physical and psychological well-being paving the way to stress, anxiety and depression (Minnotte – Yucel 2018).

However, although research has identified the effects of the economic crises on workplace risks and conditions subsequent to the European recession, it remains unclear if these issues persisted, and to what extent they were transformed or provoked the advent of new calamities. These aspects remain essential to countries such as Spain that were hit hard by the last economic woes (Muñoz de Bustillo – De Pedraza 2010). Therefore, research on more recent occupational psychosocial risks gains relevance today when facing the health quandary incited by COVID-19 and, above all, by a global economic and social crisis that all experts are predicting for the near future due to the uncertainty provoked by the war in Ukraine. The research problem of this study is therefore to shed light on the link between the working conditions and main risks suffered by workers subsequent to the recession and economic debacle of the first decades of this century in the framework of a very specific socio-cultural-geographical-temporal context, that is, Spain throughout 2008-2014, a nation hit particularly hard by the financial crisis and by a decline of trade union influence just before the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The research questions are thus the following:

- Have working conditions had negative effects on the occupational health of Spanish workers?
- Do Spanish workers and trade unions share a perception of socio-labor helplessness due to the imposition of these working conditions?

- Which elements of the discourse of the different participants serve to justify these working conditions?
- What are the effects of these conditions on the occupational health of Spanish workers and trade unions?

This study attempts to offer a response to the research problem and questions through semi-structured interviews of socio-labor agents and experts so as to collect their attitudes, opinions and experiences with the intent to contribute new data to the field of working conditions and occupational health.

So as to outline the structure, meaning and overview of the paper, the next section delves deeper into the methodology. This is followed by offering the results, which aim to identify the different working conditions and occupational risks persisting among workers (job insecurity, workload, work nature, interpersonal relationships and family-work balance) subsequent to the acute economic crisis. The final section of the paper, after the summary of the findings, addresses the initial research questions and objectives and states how they relate to the research expectations as well as how they line up with the results of prior research.

Method

To attain this objective, this study resorted to a qualitative method considered more adequate in capturing the complexity, dynamism and subjectivity inherent to the subject matter (Denzin – Lincoln 2005). This specifically consisted of 45 semi-structured interviews with agents and experts (17 females and 28 males) related to the field of business in Spain, notably active employees of companies holding positions of responsibility and management in the areas of human resources or occupational risk prevention as well as medical inspectors, occupational health technicians and union representatives from the sectors of health, education, tourism and transport.

Furthermore, a balanced combination of the three methodological criteria typical of qualitative research conditioned both the number and characteristics of the participants and the processes of gathering information. The study therefore applied a more typological than numerical statistical representation to capture all the socio-demographic heterogeneity, discursive variability and diversity of the profiles or occupations of the social group of interest. Secondly, saturation or redundancy criteria served to determine when to conclude the interviews. Thirdly, accessibility and availability likewise had an influence on the number of individuals (Denzin – Lincoln 2005).

A series of means of control were implemented to ensure the thoroughness of the analyses and conclusions. These included coding, categorizing and independently interpreting the results by the different researchers of the team who

subsequently shared and agreed on each criterion and decision. Each step taken in this study is thus described and justified as specifically and clearly as possible.

The participants were contacted through the professional social network “LinkedIn” and recruited through a “snowball sampling.” The different agents and experts, after being explained the objectives, were interviewed individually and in-person. They responded voluntarily and their individual information remains confidential.

The interviews consisted of scripted queries based on the objectives of the study. The following are examples:

- Please describe the current working conditions of your sector?
- What do you think about these current working conditions?
- What are the consequences of these working conditions on the mental health and life of the workers?
- What are the origins of these working conditions?

The interviews were conducted over a period of 18 months from November 2015 to May 2017. Each individual interview lasted an average of 34.21 minutes (between 26.13 and 59.29 minutes). All the information collected was digitally audio-recorded with the participant’s prior knowledge and informed consent.

Transcripts were then drafted of each interview to facilitate the analysis through a focus on semantic content (Van Dijk 1985) following the lines of the Grounded Theory (GT) method (Strauss – Corbin 1994). All the transcripts were then segmented into labels or smaller semantic units (open coding) and grouped by themes. The data were linked and categorized by means of axial coding in order to identify the different underlying occupational risks. These then served to depict the varying interpretations and conclusions in graphic form. Lastly, the data of the last stage were classified by a process of different axial codings in order to garner the latent risks serving to illustrate the interpretations and conclusions.

The next step was to undertake a similarity analysis applying the J coefficient (Niwattanakul et al. 2013) to identify the relationships between the different codes. This was founded on the co-occurrence of certain words without taking into account their frequency. The coefficient was calculated as $J(a,b)=a/(a+b+c)$ with a representing the number of cases where the two terms a and b co-occur ($a \cup b$), with b representing the number of cases where a appears but not b , and c the number of cases where b appears but not a ($a \cup b$). This coefficient equally took into account co-occurrences and non-co-occurrences identifying the terms to group. Two terms were considered analogous if

they appeared together in the same case, thus building a network of conglomerates. The coefficient ranged from 0 to 1, with 1 representing the maximum co-occurrence or similarity between the two nodes. Only J values greater than 0.55 were taken into account (Niwattanakul et al. 2013). The qualitative analysis software NVivo v. 11© served to examine and code the interviews. Finally, the study was conducted following the ethical standards and principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Results

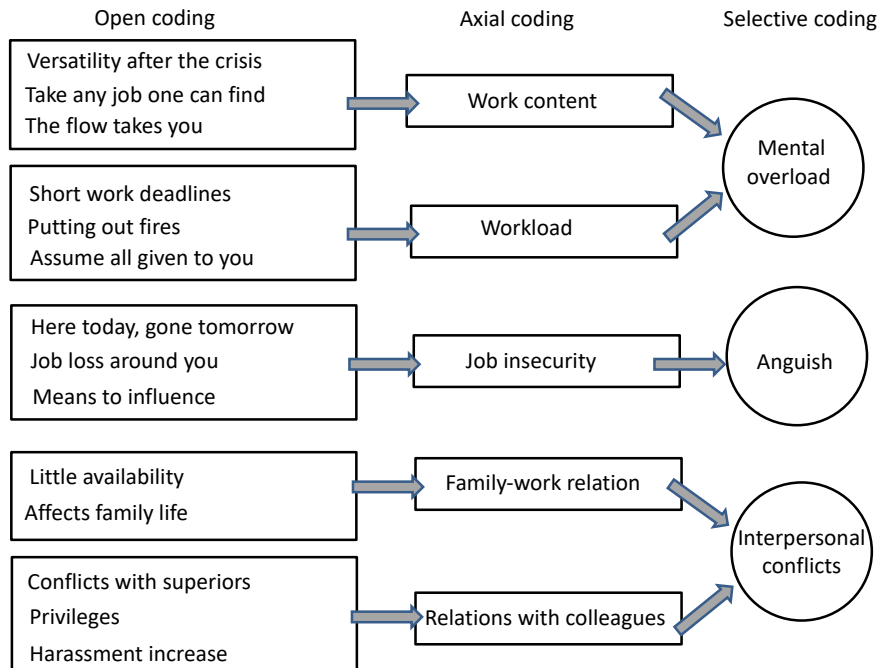
The analyses of the transcripts of the interviews described above led to identifying different working conditions and occupational risks persisting among workers subsequent to the acute economic crisis of the first decade of this century. The study identified five broad axial codes (Fig. 1) that served to group most of the risks as follows: job insecurity, workload, work nature, interpersonal relationships and family-work balance. These topics then served to facilitate structuring and interpreting the results.

In general, job insecurity coupled with attitudinal and behavioral consequences stands out as one of the five major types of risks. As noted by one of the interviewees:

"... job insecurity among workers is quite noticeable through their fear, reluctance ..." (A.T.S., male, occupational risk technician, transport sector).

This stems, in part, from the persistence of a model of employment and a framework of labor relations dating to the second half of the 20th century based on secure employment and job-for-life implying the potential of career progression in a stable economic-labor world. Such a context brought together two main psychological attributes, notably environments of a) certainty and predictability and b) security guaranteeing controllability (Cappelli 1999; González-González – Rodríguez 2000) which together promote a predictable and controllable scenario that is relatively comfortable, pleasant and healthy. Job insecurity, on the contrary, derives from precarious employment linked to unfavorable hiring conditions, lack of rights, vulnerability from the subordination of worker rights to business interests and insufficient salaries, all of which lead to a shortfall of labor decency and vital dignity (McKay et al. 2012).

Figure 1: Schema of the open, axial and selective coding carried out for the study



Periods of crisis are followed by stages of economic growth characterized by scant employment options and great job insecurity that affect, to a greater or lesser extent, workers of all sectors, genders, qualifications and ages (Kalleberg – Vallas 2018). These periods of precarity, although suspicious due to their temporality, are of structural nature and represent one of the main factors conditioning the society, economy, trade union dynamics and employment of these firsts decades of the 21st century in Spain. They have, in fact, diminished social integration regarding labor rights as well as the capacity of trade unions to formulate claims and negotiate (Serrano – Jepsen 2019; Sánchez-Mira et al. 2021).

This new neoliberal socio-labor model, although prevalent prior to the crisis, intensified to the point of prompting employment flexibility and change thus triggering a surge of instability and insecurity in a fissured work environment (Arnold – Bongiovi 2013; Kalleberg 2012; Weil 2014). This absence of stability coupled with fear of change and unpredictability can be interpreted from many of the participants of the survey as they express how workers must bow to a new insecurity due to labor market changes:

“I believe that any worker employed by a private company assumes that he/she is here today and gone tomorrow. In other words, it is a situation of insecurity (...) with a great turnover among the personnel (...) today you are in one company in one sector and tomorrow you are in another ...” (M.I.F., female, business association prevention technician).

The following passage by Symeonaki et al. (2019: 19-20) compares job insecurity in a number of European countries:

“...one can notice a clear distinction between countries with low and high early job insecurity: the first category includes countries appearing in the right-hand side of the figures, known for their inclusive labor markets, such as Austria, Switzerland, and Luxembourg; in the second category, one can find mostly southern European countries, notably Greece, Italy, and Spain, but also Bulgaria and Croatia..... , one can easily draw the conclusion that the economic crisis has brought divergence in the degrees of early job insecurity among countries..... Another significant aspect is the asymmetrical impact of the crisis. For certain countries, which are characterized by low early job insecurity, the situation has even improved during the crisis or has slightly deteriorated since 2013, for example, in Austria and Switzerland. On the contrary, for the countries figuring in the lowest ranks, early job insecurity has been steadily increasing, with the case of Spain showing a sharp increase from the beginning of the crisis....”

Taking into account that employment is one of the principal means of insertion into labor-centrist societies, a lack of confidence and security in stable employment has negative ramifications and impacts on the lives of people. This leads not only to difficulties in meeting the basic means of subsistence, but to an alteration of the structural composition of social classes, the dynamics of mobility and the processes of social and personal identity. These factors favor the loss of consciousness of belonging to a group, notably trade unions, that can enhance individual self-perception through social and labor demands (Sennett 1998). Certain workers affected by these types of crises are even forced to assume atypical, quasi-irregular “part-time,” “temporary” and even fake “self-employed” contracts. Moreover, early retirement is at times one of the only options serving to break free from this vicious circle of precarity (Standing 2011).

Furthermore, fear and insecurity not only affect the workplace but, as noted by Gallie et al. (2017), diminish employee well-being which can have repercussions on family members. This type of fear is also brought up during the interviews:

“... fear as we all have families; at least three of us in this office are married, one is currently without children but with one on the way, I have two and the other has four. The salary from our jobs is the only income we have (...) All of this is fear ... you tell me what happens to the family if we lose our job at this point. Wages have also fallen. I think people are very frightened...” (J.L.T., male, head of a tourism company).

Employment insecurity and/or the decline of working conditions carries with it not only fear of not procuring another job, but pernicious effects on an individual's social role:

“I think people are very frightened, mainly because of unemployment” (J.R.M., male, labor inspector).

The growth of the relevance of this fear in society resides in a double dimension. The first is quantitative, characterized by high unemployment rates and a tendency to increase on a global scale. It is also qualitative due to its expansion and spread throughout all levels and socio-labor sectors and organizations. By polluting the system as a whole, it modifies the nature, functions and traditional meanings of “employment” and “unemployment” and blurs their contours, especially in times of economic recession (Frone 2018; Huang et al. 2012).

Prosser points out the following:

“...On the basis of field research in eight European countries and with reference to theories of liberalization (deregulation of employment protection for all workers) and dualization (precarity suffered by labour market ‘outsiders’ is the result of the manipulation of policy processes by well-organized ‘insiders’), the factors that drive precarious work in discrete European labour markets are thus investigated. It is discovered that, while a structural demographic factor such as non-compliance with labour law is a notable progenitor of precarious work, the deregulatory strategies of public authorities are particularly significant drivers. In conclusion it is asserted that although the theory of dualization helps explain developments in conservative-corporatist countries (Germany, Netherlands); in Anglophone and Mediterranean countries (Ireland, UK, Greece, Spain) liberalization theory is generally more apposite. Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries (Latvia, Poland) emerge as a hybrid case...” (Prosser 2016: 949).

Furthermore, labor legislation is now more flexible as it facilitates and promotes entry into the market through temporary and part-time hiring and training programs. The current laws also promote the hiring of certain population groups suffering from socio-labor disadvantages by reducing the rates employers contribute to Social Security, by offering tax benefits, and by supporting multiple mediator agents such as temporary work and labor intermediation agencies. Legal codes now also facilitate exit from the labor market by reducing severance pay and expanding when it is applicable. Finally, relations between employers and workers are losing their collective dimension and now tend towards individualized interactions and negotiations leading to a decline of the influence and capacity of trade unions (Armano et al. 2017; De Witte et al. 2008; Sánchez-Mira et al. 2021). A new discourse has also emerged promoting that insecurity, precarity and even unemployment are not the upshot of the new global, flexible capitalism, but stem from individual worker shortcomings meaning that their qualifications, competence and psychosocial attitudes are not in line with the requirements of the new marketplace (Boltanski – Chiapello 2005).

Circumstances have likewise evolved from the aspirations typical of the past of institutions, the state, trade unions and political organizations offering employment and promoting employment programs. These have led to a decline in the classic processes of psychological worker/company bonding by substituting the notion of job stability of former times with employability understood as actions developed by organizations to maintain employee competitiveness in a labor market that currently only perceives them as a value. This is the opposite of the job security and stability characteristic of the time of the Keynesian Pact.

All of these factors serve to acknowledge this fear and how it aids businesses in bolstering precarity:

“The company itself resorts to fear to influence the behavior of the worker and force him/her to carry out activities and put in more hours than required ... playing, for example, with existing fear, that of unemployment and the difficulty to find a job” (M.P.S. female, union representative, trade sector).

Therefore, layoffs – or the fear thereof – serve as a major catalyst of job insecurity (Gallie et al. 2017; Verd – López-Andreu 2012) where workers in a given organization compare their situation with that in other organizations where layoffs are common (Vignoli et al. 2015):

“Then of course, you see that around you hundreds of company branches are closing and you are always thinking that it may soon be your turn” (R.G.F., male, union representative, financial sector).

Other occupational risks identified by this study are linked to work overload (at both qualitative and quantitative levels) that employees have to shoulder due to the multiplication of tasks and processes of acceleration in both the workplace and their social life (Korunka et al. 2015; Meyer – Hünefeld 2018).

“We have to be multifunctional. We now have to do everything and assume tasks that we did not do before (...) I am ‘the girl’ for everything ... this versatility is what the crisis has left us” (M.A.G., female, director, tourism sector).

Similar consequences of work overload are reported by Basińska-Zych and Springer (2017) respectively in Poland and Belgium, as well as by Artazcoz et al. (2016) from data garnered from the *European Working Conditions Survey* which resorted to a representative sample of employees from 27 EU Member States (EU27) during the economic crisis. The findings place a special emphasis on gender and welfare state labor differences related to health. In this sense, outsourcing and downsizing have also contributed to the emergence of labor practices generating “anorexic” organizations where the reduction or elimination of employees has deteriorated worker psychological health. In these cases, the organization itself has acted as a diffuser provoking a decline in identification with trade unions (de Jong et al. 2016):

“... anyone in the past with a driving license could arrive and be hired on the spot because there were so few drivers... it was super easy. But now the dynamic is to reduce the personnel year after year” (O.D.C., male, union representative, transport sector).

One of the most obvious aspects of this scenario affecting workers is the sensations of anomie and uprooting, alienating oppression, and loss of freedom and autonomy. This is brought on by imposing a logic of employment decisions based on instrumental rationality, economic utilitarianism and materialistic pragmatism that can affect worker well-being and health, and lead to universal commodification:

“Not everyone who works does so because it is the job of their life. There are people who take a job because it is all they can find, something that they can do; they are not very comfortable with it nor is it a type of job that fulfills them ... but due to the work environment and the changes that

have taken place, they have no choice” (J.M.A., male, human resources consultant).

Power relations between socio-labor agents have also altered in the sense of a weakening of trade unions and a strengthening of management. Political power is simultaneously becoming subordinated to economic power, diminishing the role of the State in a new post-crisis socio-labor scenario leading to labor reforms that pursue deregulation and flexibility and promote socioeconomic policies (Kalleberg – Vallas 2018). Uncertainty is thus introduced into the labor and life aspirations of individuals which provokes a surge in economic determinism, a clear expression of the rupture of the pact between State, Capital and Labor (Vosko 2010).

Employees, therefore, have experienced a general loss of control and autonomy over their activities and display certain automation when executing their tasks. The company controls the decisions at all times and employees simply execute:

“The current itself carries you. You cannot participate in an organization be it public or private; you cannot, man, even if the company has means of representation and participation for workers, you have no control. It is the organization itself that provokes all these situations” (N.F.C., female, human resources consultant).

Along these lines, the tasks are becoming less and less physical and evolving, above all, towards mental exercises that involve complex information processing, problem solving and uncertainty management (Kačerauskas 2019). The current employment scenario is thus becoming increasingly demanding and complex. Adapting to these requirements entails great cognitive and formative efforts. Individuals, in a certain sense, currently form part of a society which has evolved from the viewpoint “we have to do it” to “we can do it.” These circumstances generate an attitude among workers of aspiring to “do what we are capable of doing” which leads to work overloads and psychological costs materialized by permanent anxiety and dissatisfaction. They also result in frustration and recurring professional disappointment as workers are not able to perform all they potentially can achieve. It is no longer just a question of efficiently tackling a task, but adopting qualities such as initiative, decision-making, risk-taking, workplace innovation, self-control and self-regulation mechanisms and strategies of self-motivation. All these transformations precipitate a spiraling not only of physical, but above all, psychological demands yielding a state of permanent alertness:

“We are putting out fires all day and, indeed ... we have a much greater workload. It is true that due to the workload and the little time that we have, obviously, all of this means that we end up assuming a tremendous level of stress” (J.M.G., male, director, tourism sector).

Hence many workers today suffer from self-exploitation when pursuing professional self-realization. Under these circumstances work controls, according to Han (2015, 2017), are no longer necessary, to the point that many workers have internalized them. This leads to a complex and subtle, and in many occasions, permanent work ethic where the former sense of capitalist alienation is replaced by self-alienation stemming from professional self-efficacy expectations. This incessant accumulation of tasks and continuous cognitive demands generates workloads difficult to take on in a normal workday contributing to longer working hours and overtime affecting their families:

“...our workload is huge and, man, conciliating family life is difficult due to work schedules and availability, and if any weekend is free, then I must be happy” (C.J.V., female, human resources consultant).

This environment marked by greater workload and fear not only affects family but interpersonal workplace relationships inducing conflicts between superiors or colleagues sharing the same hierarchical level:

“There are many conflicts among the hierarchies and conflicts arise between colleagues themselves when a boss offers more privileges or considerations to one worker than to another...” (M.J.J., female, union representative, business sector).

Furthermore, the findings of this study coincide with those of a number of others (Agervold – Mikkelsen 2004; Baillien – De Witte 2009; Moayed et al. 2006; Tuckey et al. 2009) in that these types of stressful conditions generate conflicts:

“They lead, on the one hand, to a workload increase and, on the other, to an increase of labor unrest, an increase in situations of conflict, situations of harassment, that at the same time, paradoxically, go undetected” (M.L.S. male, prevention technician, professional ergonomics association).

It is common for most companies to not recognize these situations, which reveals they lack detection and action protocols. At times these conflicts are

simply not identified due to a lack of resources or simply by employer negligence or lack of interest. They can also possibly relate to cultural specificities characteristic of Latin European vs. Northern European countries concerning workplace harassment and violence, issues brought up in the studies of Salin et al. (2019), Giorgi et al. (2015) and Escartín et al. (2011).

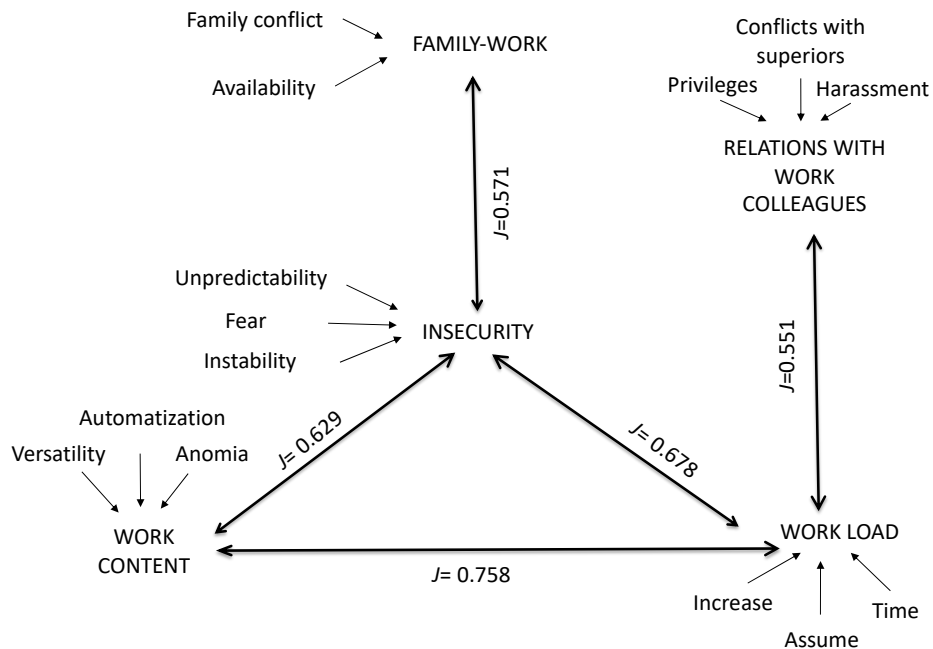
“There are many cases in which the employer sees a conflict and either does not know how, or does not want to recognize it ... or perhaps does not even have a system to evaluate or take knowledge of it; the employer can only see that something is happening, but does nothing about it”
(B.G.M., male, medical inspector).

These different perceptions are thus not disjointed. The five types of working conditions and occupational risks (job insecurity, workload, work nature, interpersonal relationships and family-work balance) identified in this study do not function independently but as a cluster. Application of Jaccard similarity coefficient algorithm (J coefficient) to the codes to gauge their similarities taking into account only the J values greater than 0.55 on a scale of 0 and 1 (Ni Wattanakul et al. 2013) (Fig. 2) point to a strong interrelation between certain items, in particular among the “job insecurity” node which yields a value very similar to “work content,” “workload,” and “family-work balance” (J coefficients between 0.571 and 0.758). The last two also obtained a good co-occurrence index ($J = 0.551$).

Indices of concordance were likewise obtained for the relationships between the other nodes such as “work content” with “family-work balance” ($J = 0.423$) and “relationships with colleagues” ($J = 0.476$), “workload” with “family-work” ($J = 0.428$), and “job insecurity” with “relationships with colleagues” ($J = 0.520$).

These last results only indicate that the conditions of the labor market of Spain do not influence workers as independent elements or isolated socio-labor factors. They require being contextualized within a global, neoliberal, flexible system that during the great economic crisis generated all the conditions for a “perfect storm.” That is, these factors rendered it very difficult to recover the “calm after the storm,” especially after the newer period of recovery suffered an abrupt halt giving way to an even fiercer socio-labor crisis linked to COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine.

Figure 2: **Relation between axial coding and the Jaccard coefficient index**



Conclusions

The findings of this study reveal the persistence of certain working conditions that developed or were aggravated during the crisis and economic recession of the first decade of this century. For this reason, and unlike the initial verses of the song by the musical band *The Common Linnets* serving as the preamble to this article, there is no economic “calm after the storm,” at least in terms of working conditions. And these factors persist in the current panorama of a degradation of working conditions (social, labor and psychological) and a naturalization or attitude of resignation towards an inevitable state of affairs that has served to justify future crises and inequality in line with the liberal thought summed up in the slogan (“*there is no alternative - TINA*”).

The findings of this study thus bolster the initial expectations addressed in the research questions and objectives. The results are also coherent with those of prior research on these issues. Along these lines, the experts that participated in this study clearly express that job insecurity is the most recurrent of all labor risks. It is also the issue that reveals the greatest concomitance with certain others. It thus stands out as it not only contaminates organizational, union and

labor aspects within the workplace itself, but transcends into the private personal sphere.

Current job insecurity not only affects the present, but conditions and feeds the fear of future loss of employment or the inability to obtain another job if unemployed. This leads workers to assume greater burdens and work rates and, on the whole, tolerate poorer conditions (Aragón – Bretones 2020; Utzet et al. 2014). This ideology sustains itself by penetrating the imagination and fantasies of individuals as to their own lives and relationship with work, which could explain the persistence of this behavior over time (Bal – Dóci 2018).

Hence, the economic law of the post-crisis labor panorama is presented as a scientific, technocratic, effective/efficient regulator of the competitive labor market that is external to workers. It thus becomes a feature supposedly free of political interest and subjectivity intended to pursue common good and material social progress.

The current working conditions in the 2008-14 post-crisis and pre-COVID-19/Ukraine War framework are thus justified as necessary to maintain employment, business and economic growth for the benefit of everyone. Furthermore, the different issues lead to the question of what other types of solutions emerge from this scenario. The answer is not simple. Žižek (2014) points out that the replacement of one ideology is likely to yield another that can become as just as hegemonic resulting in a sort of double blackmail implying that the current alternatives to neoliberal capitalism reside in a return to previous greatly limited systems (i.e., social democracy or Marxism).

Arguments from the perspective of post-crisis socio-labor management assert that the increase of wealth of a social group is not at the expense of others, but rather due to creating more goods and services. The rhetoric of managerialism and vocational counseling contribute to these new conditions of employment that fit in with the normal aspirations of workers for decent employment and dignity (Standing et al. 2003). Likewise, numerous social marketing strategies have been put into place that present all these work experiences, knowledge and trajectories as necessary, enriching and guaranteeing individual occupational options and professional development. Consequently, an attempt is made to equate employability with employment which leads to the design and planning of different types of orientation, training and insertion strategies to assist individuals in finding and maintaining a job for as long as possible (Anner 2015).

This takes place in a framework that conceals, or in any case, legitimizes the asymmetries of power of domination and exploitation (Boltanski – Chiapello 2005). This is accompanied by robust movements of de-politicization, de-unionization and de-idealization through a Welfare State that, insofar as it offers socio-economic, educational and health coverage, demobilizes

protest and reduces social tension while implementing fear of social control. The fragmentation of social classes in the post-crisis labor market has reached the point where workers focus on their own interests and objectives as well as on the freedom to achieve them. They are thus solely responsible for their present situation and future which supposes a “*de facto*” individualization and psychologization of the social problems generated by the economic-labor crisis (Parker – Shotter 2015). Moreover, the negative consequences of these processes on the influence and awareness of trade unions are clear.

The post-crisis labor market therefore appears as an ideal of autonomy opposing the constraints of those preceding the crisis. Economic and labor freedom are likewise perceived as possessing an emancipatory power in the sense that individuals and society can benefit from social mobility, choice of employment and place of residence, with meritocracy as the main measure of the trajectory of a professional career.

The personal and professional development of workers will thus be based on the demands of the post-crisis labor market that will bolster self-realization and progress towards an individual’s maximum potential. They will evolve by means of an enriching and liberating empowerment and professional development of employability, with the emergence of new personnel management techniques such as “coaching” to accompany the worker on the voyage. Concepts such as internal corporate social responsibility and prevention of occupational risks also generate the perception that companies are concerned with worker welfare (González-González et al. 2019).

Attempts have been carried out in the “after the storm” labor market to promote the notion among workers of the entrepreneurial challenge and the adventure of a company. This has succeeded in steering workers from external control to self-control, from external exploitation to self-exploitation, and from trade union perspectives to those of the employer. This has therefore necessarily promoted a consumerist culture that anesthetizes the conscience of the working class, corrodes and enslaves worker character in pursuit of material desires generated by marketing leading to egoistic individuals devoid of socio-labor solidarity.

An “illusion of the authentic” arises in this context to the extent that the “authentic” is replaced by the “personalized” through consumption. This promotes a sense of liberation of the worker personalizes his/her facet as a unique individuals. This coincides with a propagandistic defense of change as being the only constant with risk as a necessary stimulus for growth and mobility as challenging and liberating professional nomadism (aka “flexicurity”).

This framework nurtures the myth of managers characterized by initiative, motivation and leadership promoting the ideal of resilient workers that when facing adversity can accomplish any type of project. The worker is thus

emotionally intelligent and imbued with a positive attitude that counteracts fear and insecurity.

This study also explores the working conditions in countries such as Spain that not only were greatly afflicted by the economic crisis of the first decade of this century but suffered "... new black storms along the skyline" during the subsequent period of recovery. The analysis of this compelling but uncertain period between the two socio-labor crises is one of the main novelties of this study, especially when taking into account that the Spanish authorities over time confronted the problem through two very different strategies (austerity vs. expansive investment). Moreover, this focus is of interest as Spain possesses one of the most representative socio-labor markets and economies of Mediterranean Europe.

This analysis has not only assessed the effects of the economic crisis on worsening working conditions but has delved into their persistence beyond the period of crisis. This is highly relevant today as it serves as a guideline to identify labor, social and business behaviors in the face of impending global health, economic or social crises (e.g. COVID-19, Ukraine War) while also delving into the means of prevention and control that governments, regulatory bodies and other social partners need to implement (Utzet et al. 2022).

This study also gathers and illustrates a large part of the rhetorical arguments adopted by management to convince workers and public opinion in general to assume and internalize all the new working conditions imposed by the post-crisis labor market, thus weakening trade unions.

It must be noted, however, that this analysis suffers from a series of limitations that narrow its scope and should be taken into consideration in future research. First of all, the data was collected within a restricted period of time (2015-2017) prior to knowledge of the tremendous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine on working conditions, occupational health and global life. In spite of this, working conditions appear to have worsened due to the uncertainty and fear provoked by these new threats. Furthermore, most of the interviewees are employed in private companies, the sector most affected by the economic crisis and, therefore, the slowest to recover. Few interviews were conducted with members of the public sector, workers who, in a way, suffer less from the threat of losing their employment. Moreover, participation was limited to workers with active contracts. Future research of this type should also focus on the unemployed or on those subjected to recent employment regulations. Likewise, future investigations should delve deeper into the psychosocial risks of employees of other sectors or groups that are under the dark shadow of dismissal.

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Francisco D. Bretones is Associate Professor of Social Psychology of the University of Granada (Spain). His areas of interest are entrepreneurship and migration process, and labour activities from a psychosocial perspective.

Antonio Delgado-Padial is Associate Professor of Human Resources of the University of Granada (Spain). His professional activity's topics are related to employment, work and occupational health.

José María González-González is Associate Professor of Work and Organizational Psychology of the University of Granada (Spain). He is researching about psycho-social factors within work context from a sociological perspective.

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