

## ARTICLE

## Resignifying the Unexpected: Career Shocks and its Impacts on the Trajectories of Executive Women

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### ABSTRACT

Career shocks are extraordinary, unforeseen events that lead to individual reflections on personal and professional directions. The article aims to identify career shocks as drawn from narratives of 20 women, in corporate careers, who carried out transitions in their trajectories, and to understand how these shocks impact on the sustainability of careers in time. Focusing on female careers beyond motherhood, the interviewees had no children when they made the transition. The analysis revealed four shocks: Awareness on the finitude of life and resignification of trajectories, Focus on the balance between Work-Life after Harm to Physical and Mental Health, Transformative Experiences and Search for Sense, and the Covid-19 Pandemic's impact on the working modes. These shocks boosted movements toward more sustainable trajectories, demonstrating that the subjective character of careers allows the positive valuation of experiences commonly considered negative. Career shocks, in addition to revealing opportunities, signaled restrictions in women's career contexts.

### KEYWORDS

Career Shocks, Career Ecosystem, Career Transitions, Sustainable Career, Female Careers

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The concept of career shocks emerged in the search for analyzing the unpredictability of contexts and discussing how extraordinary, unplanned external events influence career paths (Akkermans et al., 2018). Career shocks occur due to the perception of a particular experience, starting from one or more unforeseen events, which result in changes in the trajectory of an individual throughout his or her career. They relate to a certain perceived context, to the time lived, and to the senses that are given to what is experienced, reflecting on transitions that reveal continuities or discontinuities in the careers.

Career can be understood as a pattern of experiences, related to work or not, within or outside organizations, which is established through the life of an individual, from physical movements and psychological transitions (Baruch & Sullivan, 2022). Career studies focus on understanding the succession of these experiences, the structure of opportunities and the relationships between careers and work and other aspects of life (Akkermans et al., 2021), which can be expanded in understanding the constraints.

Analyzing career shocks is relevant to thinking about the sustainability of careers and promising by enabling reflections on dimensions of life, about the meanings attributed to work in their own contexts, as well as for conditions and constraints involving one's career. Studies that have sought to link shocks and sustainability in careers are recent, with space for the development of theory and the deepening of studies, expanding the examinations to the contexts and, especially, the identification of shared aspects in different individual trajectories. In this view, a gap is observed for studies that articulate career, sustainability, and gender shocks (with reference to women). Considering the importance of this discussion, it is emphasized that, in academic journals published in Brazil, there were no studies on career shocks, which justifies the relevance, the novelty, and the innovative character of this study in the national context.

The unpredictability of professional careers becomes even more evident when analyzing the careers of women, which are traditionally more discontinuous than men. Women tend to integrate work and non-work roles in search of personal achievement according to their own satisfaction criteria, moving in their careers for this purpose (Mainiero & Gibson, 2018) and experiencing barriers in general environments, which reveals different conditions for men and women in the construction of their careers. The career paths of these women, although individual, also bring a collective dimension, which can be observed from the analysis of contexts that bring the historicity of gender constructions and constitute possibilities or restrictions for mobilities (Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020), which is also true for career transitions.

It is argued that career shocks trigger a deliberate thought about someone's career, having the ability to reveal conditions that go through a built history and that are reflected in the life and career path as a whole, in its continuity or discontinuity. In women's career trajectories, it is understood that career shocks are crossed and intensified by the context of gendered life and work.

In the search for promoting a discussion beyond the individual reactions to events, it is understood that the way to deal with the changes related to the career reveal living and working conditions that even impact the way in which career shocks are perceived. Thus, understanding how these shocks are experienced by women without children in their option to leave corporate careers brings contributions to the understanding of the phenomenon, for the discussion of

career sustainability and brings subsidies to organizations to the extent that such decisions can be crossed by gender issues and revealing management elements. The choice for childless women was due to studies on career transitions of women usually focusing on motherhood.

There is then an opportunity to look at these issues together. The perspective of career shocks (Akkermans et al., 2018) and sustainability is adopted, approached from the concepts of career ecosystem (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019) and sustainable careers (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017; De Vos et al., 2020). Therefore, this article aims to (1) identify career shocks triggered by external events in women's narratives and gender crossings; and (2) understand how these shocks impact career transitions and sustainability in the course of time. In the next topics, these concepts will be presented and articulated.

## **2. TRANSITIONS IN CONTEXTS OF UNCERTAINTY: UNDERSTANDING THE CAREER ECOSYSTEM AND THE SUSTAINABILITY PERSPECTIVE**

### **2.1. TRANSITIONS FROM THE CAREER ECOSYSTEM PERSPECTIVE**

Careers are developed throughout life through sequences of diverse experiences that go beyond organizational structures (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). The construction of professional trajectories involves experiencing diverse events, capable of affecting the way careers evolve, allowing nonlinear and multidirectional careers, increasingly characterized by the constant transition between physical and psychological barriers, such as changing jobs (whether to accept a promotion or not); geographic (changing cities); occupational (changing companies); employment status (becoming autonomous); home-work (career decisions affected, for example, by the arrival of a child); psychological (yearnings and aspirations); among others, which influence, alter and modify life/career roles (Baruch, 2015).

Each individual movement in the conduct of professional trajectories from one position/role to another, whether voluntary or not, can be considered career transition (Chudzikowski, 2012). When voluntary and stimulated by career barriers, transitions can trigger the creation of strategies to deal with new situations in the labor market (Ruiz Castro et al., 2020).

Women leaving corporate careers has been studied through the opting-out phenomenon, defined as an abandonment of the labor market for family dedication (Stone & Hernandez, 2013). Motherhood was pointed out as the main reason for women leaving their corporate careers, although family geographic changes are also pointed out, disappointment with corporate culture, search for more education, entrepreneurship, and care tasks with other relatives, such as elderly parents (Cabrera, 2007). Recent studies address that the departure of women from corporate careers goes beyond the search for a balance between professional and family life and address the desire for a more significant job (Frkal & Criscione-Naylor, 2021).

Transformations of the world of work, impermanence and uncertainties invariably increase the complexity of careers. To understand the transition processes in their completeness, it is necessary to adopt theoretical perspectives capable of capturing the dynamics of these relationships. One of the alternatives is to assume the career ecosystem perspective for the analysis of these movements. In this proposal, careers can be understood as part of a broad ecosystem, which operates through external and internal labor markets, affected by economic, political, and social configurations

at local, regional, sectoral, and national levels (Baruch, 2015). Similar to natural and social ecosystems, in which value generation occurs in the relationships among actors, in the career ecosystem it is the interactivity of individuals with other contexts and actors, intrinsically relevant to their trajectories, which shape careers and influence their results (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019).

The career ecosystem is a complex system, with many actors, more or less interconnected, responsible for the functioning of the ecosystem as a whole through the relationships they maintain with each other. Individuals, in the position of owners of their careers, are the main actors of the system. Organizations, working groups, private life, networks, associations, national, global institutions, governments, professional associations, legal systems, regulations, and teaching systems are contexts that invariably influence the career development, being significant actors in the ecosystem (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019).

For the ecosystem to be sustainable, a long-term perspective is necessary, avoiding the exhaustion of the resources present in search of immediate results. A sustainable career is one that develops, protects, and renews personal and professional resources to be lasting over time (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). Sustainability as a theoretical lens for career analysis emphasizes the ability to adjust, develop, and adapt in a constantly changing working environment (Baruch, 2015). Being that careers are interconnected and directly influenced by the environment, sustainability allows one to go beyond individual career management, requiring the involvement of all the stakeholders (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017; De Vos et al., 2020) and casts an eye over the contexts.

## 2.2. SUSTAINABLE CAREER AND CAREER SHOCKS

A sustainable career can be defined as “the sequence of an individual’s different career experiences, reflected through a variety of patterns of continuity over time, crossing several social spaces, and characterized by individual agency, herewith providing meaning to the individual.” (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015, p. 7). The notion of career ecosystem provides a systemic perspective for the understanding of the interaction among the various actors and contexts that permeate the trajectories, being an inherent foundation of the concept of sustainable career (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017). The individual has central responsibility for building his or her career, being in constant interaction with the social spaces and actors that participate in the ecosystem. What the theory approaches as “meaning” refers to the particularities of each person, to the aspects intrinsically considered in moments of career transition. It is inherent in the agency issue by guiding the sense of direction toward more sustainable career choices (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015).

Over time, the individuals can reflect on their choices (agency) in the face of existing opportunities and constraints (context) finding meaning. The narratives align the individual with the social spaces that permeate their trajectories, transform, and impels the realization of movements in the career to better adjust expectations or adapt to new needs. The individual agency triggers mobility, which can be greater or lesser given the conditions of the structure that operates in the ecosystem, which alters the perception of meaning and produces new alignment narratives that provide new connections of the individual to his or her contexts. Thus, the development of career sustainability lies in the constant adjustment of individual expectations with the conditions presented by the contexts in which the careers develop. This process was represented in the conceptual model of a sustainable career in which “health”, “productivity” and “happiness” are aspects dynamically sought by individuals, representing their life priorities in a given context experienced (De Vos et al., 2020).

The dynamism of the career ecosystem allows to explore the temporal dimension of the concept of a sustainable career. The constant actors' movements for sustainability are shaped by external and internal factors that permeate the relationships in the ecosystem (Baruch, 2015; Baruch & Rousseau, 2019). While internal factors are related to behavioral aspects and the meaning attributed to careers, external factors have a broader character, referring to events, at the contextual level, and experiences, at the individual level.

In the analysis of Akkermans et al. (2018), the increasing complexity and unpredictability of the current scenario facilitates the incidence of unplanned events that drastically change the course of careers, pointing to the need for analysis of the context and how such events affect the individuals' trajectories. From the rescue of the fundamentals in studies on *career chance events*, *shocks* and *turnover*, the concept of career shock is developed to encompass the unpredictability of contemporary careers:

A career shock is a disruptive and extraordinary event that is, at least to some degree, caused by factors outside the focal individual's control and that triggers a deliberate thought process concerning one's career. The occurrence of a career shock can vary in terms of predictability, and can be either positively or negatively valenced (Akkermans et al., 2018, p. 4).

In this proposal, some central but not exclusive, attributes are presented for identification and analysis of what characterizes career shocks. The first refers to **the frequency** with which the event occurs. Unlike routine situations, in which there are naturalized reactions by individuals, extraordinary events are able to trigger deliberate reflections on careers. Cumulative events are considered that trigger disruptions at a given moment of trajectories. Patterns of dissatisfactions with diverse questions about life and work and reflections of trauma experienced in some period of life that do not only bring immediate consequences (Akkermans et al., 2018), are examples of situations that potentially result in significant changes in careers.

Another aspect is the **foreseeability**, on the controllability of events. This attribute assumes that there is a lack of total control, real or perceived, of the individual about the effects of the event. Some shocks can be predictable, but uncontrollable; while others can be unpredictable, but controllable (Akkermans et al., 2018). There may be an expectation that the event will occur, such as, for example, a pregnancy; however, there is no control over its effects, such as a dismissal after the return of maternity leave. Predictability and controllability differ in the individual's ability to deliberately analyze the situation experienced and take the initiative in the face of the consequences of the shock in the career. There are also relationships among the behavior changes that occur after the episode and the change of course (Akkermans et al., 2018).

The event valuation is another assumption. Individuals attribute value, positive or negative, to shocks as they perceive the impact of this event on their life and career decisions triggered. In the analysis of Akkermans et al. (2018), the degree of value attributed should not be limited to career impact or organizational results, since it is inherent in how individuals give meaning to the shock impacts. The example presented by the authors deals with the birth of twins in a family. The consequences for career development may be negative, but still the feeling of achievement is considered more relevant to the individual at that time (Akkermans et al., 2020). The valuation process is related to the "meaning" dimension of the sustainable career concept, guiding the perception of sustainable career paths. In the case presented, "productivity" was not a career priority when the twins were born, justifying the shock positive valuation.

Another convergence with the concept of sustainable career is the process dynamism of assigning meaning to the shocks experienced, which, over time, can change and transform the degree of valuation (Akkermans et al., 2018). This is related to the systemic perspective of the concept of a sustainable career, evidencing the influence of social spaces on the disruptiveness of the event. Akkermans et al. (2018) highlight the importance of analyzing *the locus* or **source** of the event, which can be interpersonal, related to the family, organizational, environmental, or of geopolitical scope. Depending on which, the shock is capable of impacting a particular individual or entire populations; and also whether it is generic (anyone is subject to shock) or specific to a particular context.

Finally, Akkermans et al. (2018) stress the need to consider **the duration of the shock event itself** (e.g., a disease, as shock, may postpone a promotion), or **the duration of the consequences near or far from the event** (e.g.: the delay in professional replacement is a long result of a shock). Shocks caused by long-term events tend to cause greater impacts on those who experience them. The perceived intensity also relates to duration, since different people can experience the same events in different ways, and thus perceive the duration of the consequences distinctly.

With a look at the influence of emotions, the quantitative study by Mansur and Felix (2020) with Brazilian professionals, adopts the theory of affective events (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) and career construction theory (Savickas & Porfeli, 2012) to understand the influence of positive affectivity on people's reaction to unexpected events. The study confirms the influence of career shocks on the ability to develop individual resources, energy, and motivation to grow at work. Mansur and Felix (2020) understand that it is not the nature of shock that implies negative or positive consequences for careers, but the ways in which the individuals react.

### 3. METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

Qualitative exploratory research was conducted through narrative interviews with 20 women, mostly from the Southern region of Brazil. To participate in the research, women who underwent career transitions were selected, leaving a corporate career on their own initiative - that is, they were not fired. Women who had no children were sought when they performed the movement, prioritizing participants who occupied management positions, and in the final composition of the 20 women, 16 had leadership positions. These women were initially contacted from the researchers' knowledge of their transition stories and at the end of each interview indications were requested from other possible participants, through the snowball technique. From the narratives about life and career trajectory, pre and post transition, the career shocks experienced by the participants were identified.

All the research was carried out by videoconference by Zoom platform, concomitantly with the Covid-19 pandemic, between June and July 2020. With the permanence of the scenario of restrictions imposed by the pandemic, between the months of December 2020 and February 2021, a new contact was made with the interviewees, requesting the sharing of the work experience they were living during the pandemic.

For Jovchelovitch and Bauer (2015, p. 91) "through narratives, people remember what happened, put the experience in a sequence, find possible explanations for this, and play with the chain of events that build individual and social life." The interviews and audio messages were transcribed in full, organized, and analyzed with the help of Atlas.ti *software*. The narratives were analyzed

with the thematic construction of categories, allowing to identify collective trajectories from individual experiences (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2015). For analysis, the speeches were manually categorized identifying the career shocks and gender issues experienced by the interviewees, and in a second moment there was the construction of the themes that will be addressed in the next section. The profile of the interviewees is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1***Presentation of the interviewees*

<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Position in Transition</b>	<b>Work until the transition</b>	<b>In professional terms, how is it currently presented?</b>
I1	39	Psychology Post-Graduate	HR Manager <sup>a</sup>	15 years	Psychologist, Human Development Consultant
I2	38	Social Sciences Post-Graduate	Administrative Assistant	15 years	Botanical Perfumer, Craftswoman, Natural Cosmetics Maker
I3	35	Psychology Post-Graduate	HR Manager <sup>a</sup>	11 years	Human Resources Consultant
I4	42	Computer Science Graduate	Senior Projects Manager	17 years	Entrepreneur, Project Facilitator, Multiple Person
I5	42	Managerial Processes Post-Graduate	HR Manager <sup>a</sup>	23 years	Someone who is reinventing himself or herself
I6	35	Accounting Post-Graduate	Senior Specialist	13 years	Yoga Teacher, Accountant
I7	35	International Relations Post-graduate	HR Specialist	10 years	Consultant, entrepreneur in the area of Human and Organizational Development
I8	33	Psychology Post-Graduate	DHO Supervisor	13 years	Psychologist
I9	42	Administration Post-Graduate	HR Consultant <sup>a</sup> Course Coordinator	22 years	Teacher, Entrepreneur, Mentor
I10	31	Journalism	Marketing Coordinator	15 years	Marketing Consultant
I11	41	Administration Post-Graduate	Projects Manager	15 years	Teacher
I12	36	Advertising and Propaganda Post-Graduate	Course Coordinator	15 years	Consultant in Management and Marketing
I13	44	Law Post-Graduate	Legal Manager	12 years	Specialist in Human Development
I14	40	Pedagogy Post-Graduate	Pedagogical Supervisor	10 years	School Director

**Table 1**  
*Cont.*

Interviewee	Age	Education	Position in Transition	Work until the transition	In professional terms, how is it currently presented?
I15	40	Administration Post-Graduate	Senior HR Analyst <sup>a</sup>	22 years	Creative Entrepreneur
I16	39	Administration	Administrative Assistant	20 years	Yoga Instructor
I17	31	Advertising and Propaganda Post-Graduate	Marketing Analyst	10 years	Organizational Culture Management Facilitator
I18	31	Psychology Post-Graduate	HR coordinator and Administrative Area	10 years	Consulting Partner
I19	42	Law	Lawyer	12 years	Photographer
I20	32	Advertising and Propaganda	Director of Service	11 years	Writer

**Note.** Source: elaborated by the authors (2022). <sup>a</sup>Human Resources; <sup>b</sup>Human and Organizational Development.

## 4. ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

The results analysis takes place from two moments: the identification of the types of career shocks and analysis of their impacts on the transition and sustainability of careers, and the crossing of shocks in the face of gender constructions. In addition to the excerpts of the interviews inserted during the analysis, Chart 1 brings other statements that illustrate the evidence of the study.

### 4.1. TYPES OF CAREER SHOCKS AND IMPACTS ON CAREER TRANSITION AND SUSTAINABILITY

The analysis of the narratives considered the elements “frequency”, “forecasting capacity”, “source” of the event, “valuation” and “duration” according to Akkermans et al. (2018), in which four main career shocks were identified in the interviewees’ trajectory: (1) Awareness on the Finitude of Life and Resignification of Trajectories, (2) Focus on the Balance between Work-Life after Harm to Physical and Mental Health, (3) Transformative Experiences and Search for Sense, and (4) Covid-19 Pandemic and the Impact on the Working Modes.

#### 4.1.1. Awareness of the Finitude of Life and Resignification of Trajectories

It just came to my mind: I will die bitter the way I’m, doing nothing of my life, in this sadness, what am I doing of my life? [I19].

Significant, unforeseen and extraordinary events related to death have led to diverse career reflections. The awareness of the finitude of life proved to be a driving career shock so that transitions effectively occur. Because they have a strong career orientation as a common characteristic, the interviewees dedicate much of their lives to their professional development, focusing on activities related to productivity at work. Over time, however, they report a gradual dissatisfaction as a reflection of this emphasis.

## Chart 1

*Illustrative evidences of the findings of the research*

Shocks	Illustrative Statements	Gender Constructions and their Crossings
Awareness of the Finitude of Life	<p>With the death of my father-in-law, the way it was, every moment he was, of great happiness and of much fulfillment[sic], made us question who we were in our life and whether our choices really made sense. [I15]</p> <p>My father died and I remember it was a very significant moment, because it was one thing that took me off the ground, it was one thing that was not expected, and I fulfilled those three little days by law [...] and then my mentor picked up and told me “look at the message you are passing, what you are saying is: even if you are not able to work, keep working, you have to continue, you can’t stop working.” And then I understood [...] My relationship with work, it got to that level, I didn’t have the slightest condition to work and I was forcing and I continued [I8]</p>	<p>I13 could not be so extroverted in the field of law [...] I tried to get stuck at work, so I couldn’t be too cheerful, too outgoing, bubbly, because people found me crazy. [I13]</p> <p>I’ve already taken my first management into a big and challenging team, because I was super young, and had older people and I often heard “oh, what you think you’re talking about, and you’re a girl”, and “and do not deny it, because I know about that issue very well.” [I3]</p> <p>Thinking I was not able. That thing... the damn impostor syndrome, you never think you are able to do things. [I2]</p> <p>He [director] asked to take out the Facebook photo of the company, to no one else see, that I was in a corporate photo embraced with several people because the company won an award, and his wife was jealous. [I10]</p> <p>I always wrote a lot what I was going to say so as not to lose myself, because talking to man, in the organization, and sexist, has to... oh, you have to go well-prepared [I1]</p>
Physical and Mental Health Impairment	<p>I was not taking care of myself, I was not taking care of my life, I had a <i>burnout</i> [...] I went into a crisis of falling hair, of becoming depressed, looking for psychiatrist, I started taking medicine... [I9]</p> <p>The last straw was my hair falling [...] from 29 to 43 I wore wig. My problem was the cause, and the cause was my job, my job was that cause of stress [I13]</p> <p>I had a collapse, I thought I was going to die [...] I had no more health to continue that way [...] I felt like this: “that way it won’t work, I won’t last, I won’t get in the 30 like that” [I20]</p>	
Transformative Experiences	<p>I took a sabbatical year and it was very revealing. I started reading, started studying, started seeing other things [...] I already had other wishes, I was thinking what I could do more for society, using what I already had as experience... I had a huge desire to do a master’s degree and had never had time [I11]</p> <p>With yoga it began to awaken me the desire to believe in something greater than me. And then it went on. “I want to study more about it.” So I took a graduate degree ... during the course, I freaked out [...] Then I said: “I will need to make decisions in my life, need to change my life” [I16]</p>	
Covid-19 Pandemic	<p>It is quite laborious to go digital, it was one thing that the pandemic pushed me, because I really had to have done this, but I was very used to doing the physical tools and I think now, with them digitalized, I will be able to climb much more in my career. [I7]</p> <p>My new learning is that I need to have other options within my [I4] umbrella as an entrepreneur, I can’t have only one source of... an idea, a project, a source of income, because if there are any troubles in this I do not have where to run to. [I4]</p>	

*Note.* Source: elaborated by the authors (2022).

In the I1 narratives, a situation of imminent death was identified as a career shock, and as the event occurred in the past continues to have effects, “at first I wanted to enjoy my whole life [...] so it was kind enjoy everything, I continued very active at work... but I’ve already started not wanting to be all the weekends stuck there.” I19 brings the fear of death when returning from a holiday trip in which the plane went through strong turbulence. The interviewee, who underwent treatment for depression, reports that she promised herself a change of life. I19 resigned from the office where she acted as a lawyer, even without a clear notion of what professional activities she would perform in the future. Currently, she is a photographer, *social media* of a school, organizes archives in law firms, works in reviewing documents as an autonomous lawyer, and, at the time of the research, was starting in an architecture office in the elaboration of budget research.

The death of family members or loved ones to the interviewees were commonly experienced career shocks. According to I15, the sudden death of her father-in-law, just 20 days prior to her wedding, led her and her partner to question their life goals, culminating in their moving abroad. During her time abroad, I15 was underemployed, but had access to technology companies and to business literature that is still incipient in Brazil, and both things influenced the directions of her career. Back in Brazil, I15 adopted a more mobile career stance, one that was not limited to companies, as a way of personal and professional satisfaction. In the cases exemplified, shock is the main mobilizer of the interviewees for a change of perspective in life and career.

According to the literature, it was observed that shocks lead to distinct impacts in the short and long term (Akkermans et al., 2020). In the case of I1, although the experience of near death aroused the imminent desire for change, the effective transition occurred later because she took over management shortly before the event. In the narrative, it is observed that the shock initially leads to a change of posture in relation to the work valorization, involving a gradual planning to “breathe a little” [I1] and see what other options she could perform, reflecting the long-term extension. Consolidating the search for resignification in her work, I1 currently works as a consultant.

In parallel with the discussion of sustainability, the resignifications of trajectories are understood here as movements in search of more sustainable careers. At certain moments of the interviewees’ lives, the emphasis on productivity is not enough to satisfy intrinsic needs, reflected in desires for new challenges abroad, search for jobs that provide meaning and greater balance between work and life demands (need to “breathe”). In this perspective, the development of career sustainability involves the alignment among career demands, aspirations and individual expectations regarding life (De Vos et al., 2020).

The “time” dimension is also an influencer of the process, since the transitions occur according to the moment of career experienced, and are thus impacted by contextual events in the career ecosystem. Death of relatives or loved ones, the main triggers of reflections on the finitude of life, show the contextual interaction among the various social spaces in the development of sustainability and in the valuation of shock itself (meaning attributed to the career).

#### *4.1.2. Focus on Life-Work Balance after Injury to Physical and Mental Health*

In fact, the last straw, when I said “I can’t stand it anymore”, was when I had an arrhythmia. I felt bad, still, at rest. I thought I was having a stroke [I12].

The interviewees approached in the narratives cited damage to physical and mental health. The events of this typology have a certain degree of predictability; however, the duration and

consequences are unpredictable (Akkermans et al., 2018). Reflections on careers are triggered by diseases that suddenly affect the interviewees, or diseases that subtly appear over the years, culminating in shock at some point. I4, who suffers from chest pain and needs to resort to the doctor: “It is not normal to come to a cardiologist because of work [...] it was the click that gave me clues for me to stop, bring awareness for the first time [...] there’s something wrong with the way you’re dealing with life” [I4]. As a cumulative process, I5 reports the process of illness that affected her during the corporate career, leading to intensive use of medicines, constant visits to the hospital, and culminating in a license for health treatment. The interviewee analyzes, in retrospect, that her health was deteriorating gradually until it culminates in the desire deliberate for career changes.

Mental health impairment is present in the various narratives. The interviewees’ mental illness is experienced gradually, being naturalized because their trajectories were guided by constant professional development and search for high performance in the corporate world. These characteristic fits what Akkermans et al. (2018) describe as events that are formed with low intensity elements, but with constant impact, which end up having cumulative effect until resulting in shock.

The silent and continuous character of mental illness impacts other actors in the career ecosystem, as exemplified in the I5 narrative. The shock is perceived when reflected in the physical, in a distance from work on leave health: “I started to get scared, because I didn’t live anymore, I just had pain, I was always in the doctor [...] My family began to press too.” [I5] The shock ends up involving not only the individual, but also the organization and the family, and even, at the macro level, the health and pension system (De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017). The situation triggered deliberate reflections on the need for a greater balance between work-life, culminating in the decision to leave the organization. In this process, I5 spent almost a year without ties with companies, carrying out craft activities. In 2020 she returned to the HR area of a small company, with reduced workload.

The balance between well-being and productivity is at the heart of developing career sustainability. Mental and physical illness over time proved to be a driver for changes toward higher quality of life and happiness at work. As pointed out by I3 “there were many signs, many things that I did not recognize and that today I recognized and they were there knocking at the door and warning”, recognizing the consequences in the context of intense dedication to work. Before the shock, the plan of the women interviewed was objective, centered on the immediate professional results - a perspective that was not sustained over time. The look exclusively focused on employability is thus insufficient to analyze the careers continuity in the ecosystem, demonstrating the importance of the systemic perspective in this construction (Baruch, 2015; De Vos & Van der Heijden, 2017).

#### *4.1.3. Transformative Experiences and Search for Sense*

This experience of going to the world, visiting three continents, meeting different cultures, different people, doing volunteer work, it was something very transformative, that brought me things that eventually influenced the decisions I made on my return. When I came back I knew [...] I didn’t want to go back to the company [I4]

In the narratives, it was observed that extraordinary experiences in contexts not related to work led to transformations in the relationships with the career. The disruptive, cathartic, and transformative potential of certain types of travel is addressed in the studies of tourism (Müller et al., 2020) and

allows us to frame these experiences as a career shock. I4 reports that, throughout her career in the field of technology, she obtained the desired position, being recognized professionally within her organization. However, the decision to perform a gap period of one year traveling around the world was the necessary trigger for the rupture with the company, seeking a new trajectory as a social entrepreneur. I6 brings similar perception in her narrative about a vacation trip that “brought another reality of perceiving how happy people were there, and how the lifestyle I was taking, ultimately, didn’t connect with my essence.” Upon returning, during a Buddhist retreat she realized that “she needed to leave the corporate environment.”

The “meaning” dimension as a guide to sustainable careers is evident in the narrative of the interviewees. After the sabbatical period, I4 did not return to the corporate environment, deciding to seek other ways of reconciling her professional activity with her life purpose. She set up expedition groups focused on transformative experiences from voluntary work abroad. With the pandemic, she had to cancel the expeditions and returned to the process of seeking activities aligned with her personal values. At the time of the interview, I4 was working as a mentor to people who wanted to develop social projects, thus reconciling her experience as a project manager, allied to the transformative experience of the sabbatical period.

The same movement is observed in the narrative of I6, that decides to professionalize as a yoga teacher, culminating in the leave of the corporate environment to act autonomously. As I6 recognizes, there was a special change in perception about the meaning of her work after the career transition: “I think the work today, it nourishes me [...] it supplies me, and before I felt that, in my departure, in recent years, it sucked me.”

The career shock points to a rupture of these women with the corporate world and the adaptation of their skills to new professional activities. The search for meaning aligns with contemporary notions of success, referring to what is considered important in each stage of life (Van der Heijden & De Vos, 2015). The systemic character of careers development is also highlighted in this process when it is observed that travel, despite being presented as central to triggering the shock, are motivated by experiences in other important social spaces.

#### *4.1.4. Covid-19 Pandemic and the Impact on Working Modes*

No one is stable in this life; we never know what will happen. Here is the pandemic to show us that from one day to the other our life changes. It turns inside out [I2].

The Covid-19 pandemic is considered a disruptive event that brings different impacts on various careers and types of work. As the research was conducted during the period of the pandemic, it naturally emerged in the narratives as an impact on the methods of work due to the effects of social distancing. The low frequency of occurrence of such an event, allied with the little control potential, makes the pandemic an event capable of triggering reflections on the careers (Akkermans et al., 2018; 2021). The degree of intensity, valuation, and valence of impacts depend on individual circumstances. It was possible, however, to find some similarities in the interviewees’ narratives, which have a similar socioeconomic profile and career paths guided by the development of skills aimed at adaptability.

The women surveyed showed adaptability to the challenges posed by the pandemic. The development of employability along corporate trajectories remains a legacy that the group has to quickly adapt to the challenges of the context. One of the most observed impacts in the reports was the need to transpose the work into the digital context, as an alternative to uncertainties. The decrease in physical sales of I2 led to the investment and opening of an online business, which in the course of time proved to be more profitable and productive than its initial business.

The digitalization of work is seen positively for some interviewees. According to I18, the online world allowed for greater productivity in the period, reconciliation of work with personal demands, and saving time with displacements and leaner meetings. The same perception brings I17 “I managed to expand [...] get to places that I don't know if I would get that fast”. Whereas the other interviewees report that virtualization initially enabled the continuity of activities; however, losses were felt due to lack of interaction with other people and productivity.

The narratives also demonstrate that the pandemic has triggered reflections on the need to diversify their performances so as not to be dependent on a single source of income that can cease from unexpected events. I1, like others interviewees, moves in search of new job opportunities to anticipate crises that, like the pandemic, led to a reduction in the workload in the current company and consequent reduction in income.

The Covid-19 pandemic is understood as a shock that has transformed the work relationships of the researched group, presenting different intensity and valuation for the interviewees. Thus, while for some the need for isolation resulted in a migration of face-to-face activities to online, with positive and negative consequences, for others it represented the end of their work activities and a new beginning after the transition already carried out. The diversification of income sources was an alternative inserted in their lives.

#### 4.2. CAREER SHOCKS AND THEIR CROSSINGS: A LOOK AT GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS

As mentioned by Fraga and Rocha-de-Oliveira (2020), since the beginning of studies on careers, it is believed that, in addition to the capacity of individual agency, there are social conditions that influence the structures of opportunities. Societies, organizations, and careers are structured in gendered contexts.

In organizations, there is still a stereotyped view of the characteristics associated with masculinity and femininity, and men are seen as more ambitious, self-confident, and agentic, while women are characterized as more empathetic, relational, and communal (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018). Gender construction in organizations can generate the unequal distribution of power, leading some women to realize that they should not be occupying certain spaces.

In search of validation in the organizational environment, the interviewees demonstrated the common characteristic of high dedication to work, culminating in the perception that there was no room for other demands in their lives. It is noted that career shocks relate directly to the fact that the women surveyed felt that “they had to live for work.” As a result, from the experiences identified in career shocks, which led them to a greater awareness of the finitude of life, the need to prioritize health and the desire for change emerged. The experience of a set of transformative experiences brought awareness to the great effort that was necessary in maintaining corporate careers in the context they were living.

Motherhood is still seen as a problem for organizations, being an exclusive barrier for women and that men do not face in the labor market (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018). The abstract worker is a man, and is the model of his body and his emotions that permeates organizational processes, and the ability of women to conceive, breastfeed, and care for children is used to devalue her work and reason for control and exclusion (Acker, 1990). The choice for non-motherhood during the corporate career also reveals the need these women felt to adapt to what is expected to be the ideal worker. From the career shocks experienced, the interviewees begin to rethink their trajectories and re-evaluate the decisions made in the past, as brought by the interviewees I4 and I9 “the choices I made to focus on my professional area, really influenced the path I followed in the relationships” [I4].

I've been alone in my emotional life for a while because of these all work things. [...] I ended the relationship so, I couldn't think, “No, I'm working hard, I won't be able to have a child, I won't be able to get married” [I9]

Thus, one can question how the option for non-maternity is really a choice of the women interviewed or it is the adequacy to a general context for maintaining their careers. In the narratives, it was also observed the permanence of barriers and challenges that the interviewees faced during the corporate career, even when they reach leadership positions (Hryniewicz & Vianna, 2018), being able to highlight the different remuneration they receive in relation to the male pair, “I did not earn equal to my partner... I earned less than him” [I1]; being predated in promotions, “because I had more visibility the people kind found strange of his being promoted and not me” [I15]; disrespect of subordinates in relation to his decisions “he did not accept to receive my order. Woman, younger...” [I18]; and the phenomenon of the glass ceiling, “any man passed in front of me even though I was up there. [...] I was already 30 years old and I started to realize that women in the corporate world, they have a shelf life” [I11].

It is possible to recognize that there is a notion of empowerment in the interviewees' reports, but the process of coping with power structures in organizations is carried out individually, aligned with the dominant organizational discourse that does not see the need to problematize gender (Fraga & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2020). Faced with the understanding that changes are slow and costly, the leaving the corporate environment is shown as a way to take control of one's own life and career.

While men are more likely to pursue careers associated with a sector in search of linear progression and to keep their professional and personal lives separate, women tend to create their own careers, without taking into account traditional models (Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005). After the transition, it is noted in the narratives the intertwining between life and work, as when I19 reports that she decided to stop making photographic shoots of births due to the discomfort she felt in not having success in her own attempt to become pregnant; the care relationships that go beyond the experience of motherhood, as when I2 reports changes in her way of work and consumption thinking about the examples that she passed to her stepdaughter; and the possibility of reconfiguring her way of being and living, integrating personal, professional demands, and care tasks, as highlighted by I18, “I schedule my meetings, I have my deadlines, everything is according to what I prioritize for me. If I want to take care of my mother during the day and work until midnight, I will do it.”

The interviewed I13, who had a child after the career transition, is the only mother among the interviewees, and addresses the impact of the pandemic during the period in which schools remained closed and without the availability of a support network for care tasks: “my babysitter and my other employee stayed at home [...] I was taking care of my son, my husband working insanely [...] I had an engaged project [...] and I couldn’t do it, because I couldn’t manage it.” Thus, the career shocks reveal particular consequences for the studied group and crossings by the gender construction.

## 5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The impact of career shocks on the interviewees is observed in decisions regarding the transition of careers, as a trigger of transitions toward trajectories with more sustainable characteristics. The search for career sustainability was identified in the processes of adjustments of career expectations with the reality presented in the social spaces in which participants interact in the ecosystem. The interaction among the contexts in the career ecosystem is highlighted in the narratives that portray the impact of disruptive events in people close to those interviewed, commonly related to the social space of the family or private life (De Vos et al., 2020). The agency’s role is facilitated by the career experiences accumulated by women from the transitions already carried out, reflecting on the rapid adaptation to changing work environments. The multiple experiences contribute to the growth and renewal of careers, although such experiences do not have a direct relationship with their work (McDonald & Hite, 2018).

As observed in the analyzed trajectories, sustainability is facilitated or limited by the interaction between the actors of the ecosystem and by the social conditions. In this sense, the emphasis of research on executive women who opt for deliberate transitions emphasizes the importance of organizations as an actor in promoting environments that meet the subjective criteria of the interviewees’ success and in creating conditions for well-being at work, this includes attention to gender equality conditions, fundamental aspects for the careers sustainability.

The privileged condition of the researched allows the financial security necessary for the realization of movements and transitions in their trajectories, justifying the positive valuation, in the medium and long run, of career shocks. The adoption of sustainability perspective in the careers context, based on the adopted theories, is thus shown as a contribution of the study by allowing the analysis of the transitions in the current scenario of uncertainties. It is also understood as a contribution the expansion of the gaze to the context in which careers develop and to the relationships between agency and social space.

In the narratives, it was observed that career shocks initially perceived as negative were gradually re-signified in the trajectories development. Reinforcing the quantitative study of Mansur and Felix (2020) with Brazilian workers, this scenario may indicate cultural influences in the ability to cope with shocks. The constant experience of adverse events in Brazil implies greater adaptability and positive attitude toward unwanted situations (Mansur & Felix, 2020). Thus, the findings of these studies strengthen the basis for the understanding of nationally contextualized career shocks, contributing to advance in field research.

In this article, still as a theoretical contribution, it was proposed that an attentive look at the career shocks that boosted changes in executive women’s careers worked as a way of accessing aspects of a social, gendered, life and work context. Individual decisions were identified in the

face of unforeseen events crossed and revealing a dimension that is also collective. The career shocks and the transitions performed - especially because they involve moments of significant reflections, portraying experimentation and experiences with meanings built along the trajectory - situated in time and context, present this potential for analysis. The shocks in women's careers appear to be intensified by a context of a gendered life and work.

As a practical implication, the study points to the need to promote practices of management of people focused on sustainability, as a greater commitment to the workers' health, possibilities of internal transitions aimed at better reconciling work with the moment of life, the reduction of inequalities, and the deceleration of the pace of work.

For future research, longitudinal studies are suggested to understand long-term career shocks, and to investigate their impacts on individuals from less-favored social classes. Upon casting an eye over the group of executive women, we no longer discuss other groups and contexts, involving, for example, barriers and limitations of access, support conditions, etc. For a better understanding of the connection between shocks and sustainability or career unsustainability, studies are also proposed that include individuals in conditions of prolonged unemployment and workers from areas strongly affected by the pandemic, such as tourism and events.

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**AV:** Conceptualization, theoretical review, methodological planning, conducting interviews, analysis, manuscript writing, and revision. **CM:** Theoretical review, analysis, manuscript writing, and revision. **AS:** Supervision, theoretical review, methodological planning, analysis, manuscript writing, and revision.

#### **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest in relation to the research developed.

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