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Women in extraordinary times: The impact of external jolts on professional women's careers

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Introduction

We began writing this article in March 2020. Our universities were closed and we were 'locked down', only allowed out to exercise our pets and ourselves, and for essential shopping. We didn't know how long this would last, whether we would contract Covid 19, if we did, how sick we would be, and we were afraid for vulnerable family and friends. There were day-to-day preoccupations: the latest mortality statistics, what provisions we would need to get through the day, which shops were open and how long the queues would be. Looking ahead, we wondered when we would be allowed to see our families and when the children would go back to school. And we knew that across the world people were in the midst of this pandemic.

We were also beginning to realise that this might not be a temporary suspension of normality, but rather the start of a more profound change in how we live. Looking around, we had neighbours who worked in essential services and whose days had become unimaginably stressful and scary, others who were working from home for the first time, or were furloughed, and there were those whose organisations had ceased trading when the economy closed down. As the weeks and months pass, we are beginning to see how working lives and careers might look as we emerge from this situation. We suspect that the pandemic will have deep and far-reaching consequences.

In an article for *Journal of Vocational Behavior* we examined the impact of context on career (Duberley & Cohen, 2015). Based on a study that we had undertaken with senior public sector managers, we proposed three 'faces of context' (Johns, 2006): ideology, structures and proximal events, and considered their implications for career. The third face, proximal events, referred to happenings that respondents had no control over and which fundamentally changed what happened next. At the individual level these typically included illness and bereavement, and on a more macro level, events like the 2008 economic crash. We found that such events impacted on structures of career opportunity and constraint, and also on people's ideas about the meaning and purpose of their work, and identity. We had not previously considered the presence of such events in career-making, and it sparked our curiosity.

More recently, we both enjoyed reading Jane Robinson's new book, *Ladies Can't Climb Ladders* (2020). Having studied professional women's careers for nearly 20 years, her insights into women's careers in medicine, law, academia, architecture, engineering and the Church, spanning over a hundred and fifty years, added new dimensions to our understanding. One of Robinson's permeating themes is the impact of war on the structures of opportunity and constraint facing women who sought entry into these traditional professions. These impacts were far-reaching, including education and accreditation, access, promotion and influence. At a more abstract but possibly more profound level, they extended to women's roles in society, and associated notions of appropriateness, respectability and femininity.

Whilst there is a small but interesting literature on the role of luck and happenstance in career (Mitchell, Levin & Krumboltz, 1999), this does not include the impact of the kind of externalities we tried to capture with the term 'proximal events'. And yet, the ramifications of such events are undeniable. Furthermore, there appears to be little if any research into the effects of such fundamental external change on women professionals in particular. It is important to address this lacuna. First, because issues like accreditation, access, mobility and respectability/credibility are central to the professions and professional work and, in light of Robinson's insights, it could be expected that their susceptibility to external shocks will differ from men's. Second, given women's historical exclusion from the traditional professions, it could be that such shocks shake things up in a way that changes the landscape of professional work and women's possibilities within it. This is our focus.

To address these issues, we were keen to include a historical dimension. Back in 2013 we wrote a paper on using data from popular culture in careers research (Cohen & Duberley, 2013). We focused on UK radio programme, *Desert Island Discs*, which at the time was celebrating its 70th anniversary. During each episode of *DID*, a public figure is 'cast away' to a desert island. They are allowed to bring eight records of their choice, along with the bible, the complete works of Shakespeare, and a luxury item. In the course of the programme castaways are interviewed about their careers, using the music as a vehicle for remembering and narrating. The programme has aired weekly since 1942, and over 2000 people have been cast away to the fictitious island, including 48 women working in Robinson's six traditional professions. These interviews form our dataset for this paper.

In what follows, we briefly review the literature on environmental jolts and professional women's careers. Next, we expand on our research design and analytical approach. Our findings are presented in two sections: the first examines jolts that are experienced individually, and the second focuses on those that are collectively experienced or potentially have a more profound impact on the shape of a career field. In our discussion, we identify two key contributions. Our initial contribution arises from an examination of the complex interplay of structure and agency in individual's career making. In doing so we bring existing work in sociology to inform and develop career theorising. The second argues that both individual and collective jolts trigger changes in the career imagination, with significant implications for how women make sense of themselves, their working lives, and how they envisage their future possibilities.

Environmental jolts and change

Literature in the careers field has tended to over emphasise agency and has been critiqued for being under-contextualised (Mayrhofer et al., 2007). However, in the organisational and strategic management literature it is widely accepted that context is vital to understanding the process of change (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018). Context appears in a wide variety of organisational perspectives, for example open systems approaches (Scott, 2004), contingency (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) and institutional perspectives (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). The dynamics of externally driven change have often been conceptualised in relation to an environmental jolt or impetus (Bartunek, 1984: 356). Meyer (1982: 515) defines these environmental jolts as 'transient perturbations whose occurrences are difficult to foresee and whose impacts on organisations are disruptive and potentially inimical'. Such sudden forces for change may typically be linked to crisis situations and are therefore often presumed to be negative events that place organisations in jeopardy. However, Meyer argues that 'sudden changes are ambiguous events that also benefit organisations' (Meyer, 1982: 535). He stresses the importance of agency and discusses how environmental jolts create opportunities for organizational learning, administrative drama, and introducing unrelated changes. At the same time, he recognises the impact of structural constraints on responses. In other words, an organisation's positioning and current structure can limit the extent to

which it can take advantage of any opportunities that arise. This recognition of the interaction between structure and agency seems relevant to understanding how external jolts may impact on individuals in general and professional women in particular.

Analysis of the role of professions in institutional change and the changing nature of professions themselves has been a popular area for study over more than forty years (Muzio, Brock & Suddaby, 2013). Hasselbach (2016) provides an interesting commentary on the distinction between fast and slow processes of professional change, arguing that much more is known about slow processes of evolution of the professions over long time spans. However, he suggests that comparatively little is known regarding the impact of rapid or sudden changes on the nature of professions and professional work. With respect to women in the professions, this raises the question of whether environmental jolts might shake up established patterns of gender-based exclusion.

Furthermore, according to Hasselbach existing studies tend to treat disruptive events as exogenous and give insufficient attention to the role of agency and sensemaking. This study stands in sharp contrast. We focus on a more micro level, examining how external perturbations or jolts are experienced by women working within professional fields and the impact of this has had upon their careers sensemaking and action.

Patterns of inclusion and exclusion in professional women's working lives

A study of the impact of jolts on professional women's working lives is compelling, in part, because within the literature the dominant narrative is on processes of stasis and reproduction. Part of this is the on-going positioning of professional women in tangential and supporting roles (Davies, 1996). In what follows we discuss these forces for continuity. Our question is whether external jolts might have the potential to shake up these sedimented arrangements.

Feminist researchers have long argued that professional organisations are gendered, reflecting the patterns and structures of men's lives both within and outside of work settings (Kanter, 1977; Acker, 1990; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 1998). Importantly, this not only includes structural arrangements, like working hours and parental leave policies and practices, but also is underpinned by deeply rooted assumptions about expertise, commitment and professionalism. Because women's lives are often out of synch with these arrangements, they find it hard to measure up, and frequently end up in less remunerative positions with fewer opportunities for advancement than men (Tomlinson, 2013). This invidious situation is exacerbated by HR practices which, in the words of Tomlinson and her colleagues, 'create the potential for both conscious and unconscious bias' (2013: 250).

In her article on 'getting ahead', Gorman (2015) examines three dimensions of professional occupations that contribute to what is effectively a form of gender based social closure: technical ability, cultural proficiency and social connections. We will say a few words about each of these.

Although the evidence for gender differences in technical prowess is inconclusive (Clydedale, 2004; Cech et al, 2011, Post, DiTomaso, Farris & Cordero, 2009), quantitative findings reveal that in the main, women are held to a higher standard than men. For example, Gorman (2015) explains that for lawyers, grades and hours worked play a more important role in women's advancement than men's (Noonan & Corcoran, 2004). At the same time, low scores on these measures have greater negative consequences for women than men.

This disadvantage appears to be compounded by degrees of cultural proficiency (Davies, 1996) – the extent to which one can ‘read’ and fit into dominant norms. Kay and Hagan (1998) found that cultural fit was important in the allocation of opportunities and responsibilities, suggesting that those who fit in and who look like those in the dominant groupings (often a matter of gender) are typically offered the higher status, ‘stretch’ jobs. These roles are likely to lead to greater visibility, stronger social networks and ultimately to promotion. Although Kay and Hagan’s, and Davies’s work was published over twenty years ago, these patterns of homophily have persisted (Tomlinson et al, 2013; Cohen, Dalton & Holder-Webb, 2020).

Turning to social connections, again the picture is mixed. While some researchers (Gorman, 2015) have argued that men more often participate in key informal social networks, Fernando, Duberley & Cohen (2018) found that women are particularly skilled in garnering social and emotional support from colleagues. Perhaps a key difference here is in guidance and mentorship versus actual sponsorship (Ayyala et al., 2019) - with the latter leading more directly to advancement. This is exacerbated by the importance of ‘clubbability’ and the role of after-hours activities in career progression. As Tomlinson and her colleagues point out, ‘homosocial reproduction (Kanter, 1977; Wilkins, 1998) occurs as decision-makers tend to trust, support and promote people with profiles similar to their own’. (p. 250).

As professional service firms have commercialised, the ability to generate new business, ‘rainmaking’, has become an important factor for promotion (Cohen, 2017). Unsurprisingly perhaps, researchers (Bolton & Muzio, 2007) have found that those most able to develop new business are not those with greatest technical expertise, but rather, those who have the most extensive and most lucrative social networks. Thus, as Tomlinson et al argue, this criterion is not neutral, but rather impacts differently on people with greater or less access to particular people and spaces, both within and outside of the organization. Although the formalisation of rainmaking as a stated criterion for advancement might appear meritocratic and gender-blind, the twinned processes of bias and homophily work against women professionals, leading to the reproduction of existing patterns.

In recent years, in many of the established professions there has been a shift from traditional partnerships to more corporate, managed professional businesses (Ackroyd & Muzio, 2007). With this change has come the introduction of formalised career management practices which work alongside and/or have replaced traditional ‘apprenticeship’ models (Cohen, 2017). It is reasonable to expect that these more bureaucratic approaches could go some way to shaking up some of the entrenched, gendered practices associated with earlier arrangements. However, while greater transparency could lead to greater fairness, leaving less room for biased practices, Tomlinson et al (2013) found that it can likewise lead to more and better opportunities for established groups, working yet again to re-inscribe existing patterns, but with even greater legitimacy. They argue that while the emergence of managed professional businesses has led to the undoing of gender discriminatory policies and practices at lower organisational rungs, it has done little to dismantle arrangements at the higher levels. Phillips’s genealogical perspective (2005) offers further insights into this process. Based on his examination of generations of law firms, he maintains that patterns of inequality transfer from ‘parent firms’ to ‘foundings’ (start-ups founded by partners of existing firms), suggesting that where parent firms had women in senior leadership positions, the same is true in foundings. However, where women are subordinated, these inequalities are also reproduced in the fledgling organisations. Because parent firms are traditionally male dominated, in terms of numbers, but also with respect to patterns of meaning-making and behaviour, gender inequalities persist. Given the robustness of the status quo and its deeply embedded inequalities, the question arises of where change might come from and what form it might take.

Conceptually, our starting point is a structuration (Giddens, 1984) framework originally put forward in the careers field by Barley (1989) and adapted by Duberley, Cohen and Mallon (2006) in their study of research scientists. Duberley et al depict their respondents' career worlds as diverse and potentially contradictory, including a range of institutions: organizational, family, scientific, governmental, national/cultural, whose imperatives are neither consistent nor uniform. This point mirrors other studies within the careers literature that present context as multi-layered and multi-dimensional (Gunz & Mayrhofer, 2018; Mayrhofer et al, 2007; Al-Ariss et al, 2012) or as permeating themes (Eaton & Bailyn, 2000; Kaulisch & Enders, 2005; Lee et al, 2011; Mainiero & Sullivan, 2005).

In order to capture the complex notion of careers in context, Gunz and Mayrhofer put forward a model of careers as spatial, ontic and temporal (2018). The spatial element focuses on the social and geographical space within which careers happen 'locating career actors and their careers in a defined space internally structured by boundaries constraining and enabling careers' (p. 48), including factors such as gender, class and ethnicity. The ontic perspective focuses on the nature of career actor in comparison to other actors and, depending upon the aims of any study, this might include consideration of their skills, attitudes, perceptions, ethnicity etc. Finally, the temporal perspective involves consideration of time. This is fundamental to career because career is about a passage through life and both the spatial and ontic perspectives require a consideration of time to record either transitions across spatial boundaries or changes in the condition of the career actor (p. 58).

It is important that we do not lose sight of the role of agency and fall into the trap of contextual determinism. As we discussed earlier, context offers both constraint and structures of opportunity or enablement. Depending upon the resources they have available to them and their mode of engagement (Duberley & Cohen, 2006), people will act in different ways. Some may take a predominantly deterministic view, privileging social structures, others champion free will and their own capacity for action. This interaction between individuals and their context is an area where career studies can and should flourish, developing more theoretically sophisticated understandings of the relationship between structure and agency. This paper examines this interaction in a very particular type of situation: one where individuals face unexpected and uncontrollable change. We focus on the retrospective accounts of professional women who have reached the top of their fields in order to explore their accounts of how dramatic exogenous change and their responses to it have shaped their careers.

Research design

Our dataset for this article comes from the *Desert Island Discs* archive, and includes all of the women castaways that fall into Robinson's professional groupings (with the exception of the Church because there are too few women in this category). Our respondents, the castaways, are listed in Table 1 below, organised by date of appearance, including profession, the year the programme was first broadcast and the presenter.

Name	Field	Appearance on DID	Presenter
Sonita Alleyne	Academia (Arts & Humanities)	02-02-2020	Lauren Lavern
Kimberley Motley	Law	15-11-2019	Lauren Laverne
Sally Davies	Medicine	28-07-2019	Lauren Laverne
Monica McWilliams	Academia (Sociology)	09-06-2019	Lauren Laverne
Margaret McMillan	Academia (History)	24-02-2019	Lauren Laverne
Mariana Mazzucato	Academia	16-12-2018	Lauren Laverne

	(Economics)		
Sue Black	Academia (Computer Science)	20-05-2018	Kirsty Young
Manouf Shafiq	Academia (Economics)	20-02-2018	Kirsty Young
Jane Francis	Academia (Climatology)	07-02-2016	Kirsty Young
Amanda Levette	Architecture	19-03-2017	Kirsty Young
Ann Dowling	Academia (Engineering)	24-07-2016	Kirsty Young
Louise Richardson	Academia (Political Science)	20-05-2016	Kirsty Young
Sue Ion	Engineering	06-03-2016	Kirsty Young
Zaha Hadid	Architecture	21-02-2016	Kirsty Young
Carol Black	Academia (Medicine)	07-02-2016	Kirsty Young
Monica Grady	Academia (Astronomy)	26-07-2015	Kirsty Young
Lisa Jardine	Academia (History)	07-06-2015	Kirsty Young
Angie Hobbs	Academia (Philosophy)	01-02-2015	Kirsty Young
Nancy Rothwell	Academia (Physiology)	04-01-2015	Kirsty Young
Wendy Hall	Engineering	27-07-2014	Kirsty Young
Elish Angiolini	Law	04-02-2014	Kirsty Young
Jane Somerville	Medicine	07-07-2013	Kirsty Young
Baroness Hollins	Medicine	18-05-2012	Kirsty Young
Mona Saddiqui	Academia (Theology)	21-10-2012	Kirsty Young
Sheila Hollins	Medicine	13-05-2012	Kirsty Young
Frances Wood	Academia (History)	05-09-2010	Kirsty Young
Gwen Adshead	Medicine	11-07-2010	Kirsty Young
Maggie Aherin Pocock	Academia (Astronomy)	07-03-2010	Kirsty Young
Mary Beard	Academia (Classics)	31-01-2010	Kirsty Young
Baroness Scotland	Law	06-12-2009	Kirsty Young
Athene Donald	Academia (Physics)	22-03-2009	Kirsty Young
Kay Davies	Academia (Genetics)	15-02-2009	Kirsty Young
Halah Ashfar	Academia (Politics and Women's Studies)	28-12-2008	Kirsty Young
Mary Midgley	Academia (Philosophy)	20-11-2005	Sue Lawley
Alison Richard	Academia (Anthropology)	06-03-2005	Sue Lawley
Jane Goodall	Academia (Anthropology)	09-01-2000	Sue Lawley
Jocelyn Bell Burnell	Academia	24-12-2000	Sue Lawley
Helena Kennedy	Law	25-01-1998	Sue Lawley
Susan Greenfield	Academia (Neurology)	02-03-1997	Sue Lawley
Tessa Blackstone	Academia (Politics)	25-04-1993	Sue Lawley
Barbara Mills	Law	10-01-1993	Sue Lawley

Josephine Barnes	Medicine	05-03-1989	Sue Lawley
Miriam Rothschild	Academia (Biologist)	23-04-1989	Sue Lawley
Mary Archer	Academia (Solar Power Science)	17-04-1988	Sue Lawley
Germaine Greer	Academia (Literature)	30-10-1988	Sue Lawley
Mary Warnock	Academia (Philosophy)	04-12-1988	Sue Lawley
Elizabeth Longford	Academia (History)	11-08-1979	Roy Plomley
Jean Plady	Academia (History)	24-06-1972	Roy Plomley

Each episode of *Desert Island Discs* starts with an introduction to the castaway, including something provocative or at least noteworthy about their narratives. The castaway is invited to respond, and the interview proceeds from this initial exchange, punctuated by short extracts from the chosen discs. Most interviews take a broad sweep over castaway's life and career. However, the exact questions asked vary, as befits a particular person's story, and the style of the presenter. Whereas Roy Plomley worked from a script, tended to be quite formulaic and focused on the music, Kirstie Young delved more deeply into castaways' emotional and psychological lives – indeed, her interviews feel more therapeutic and even confessional. Clearly, this difference in approach significantly impacts on the nature and quality of the data available to us, and is an interesting aspect of working with data which we did not generate and cannot influence.

As avid listeners of *Desert Island Discs* over decades, we both recalled instances when castaways spoke of things that happened to them that they described as 'pivotal', or as 'turning points' – things that in their view unexpectedly and fundamentally changed what happened next. We decided to examine these instances more specifically, focusing on professional women castaways working in Robinson's six traditional sectors, for the reasons noted above. Our data generation and analysis proceeded in six key steps. However, typical of qualitative research (McAulay, 2004), although it is useful to think of these processes as distinct, in practice they are inextricably linked.

Using the *Desert Island Discs* website, our first step was to compile a list of women who fell into Jane Robinson's six professional categories. There were 48. Next, we listened to each of the interviews and made notes on where castaways spoke of jolts. Notably, we did not start with a theoretical framework through which to explore the concept. Rather, our approach was inductive. We knew from our initial listening of the interviews that the jolts castaways recounted fell into two broad categories: things that happened to them personally (like illness) and collectively (like war). This was the start of our inductive analytical process. Then, consistent with the approach outlined by Gioia and colleagues (2013), we moved from the data to open, descriptive coding, more conceptual, second order analysis, and finally leading to aggregate dimensions at a higher level of abstraction, forming the basis of the discussion.

The tables which we present at the start of each of the two data sections depict this process. Let's take the first of these, 'personal jolts', to describe our approach in greater detail. Having made initial notes, we went back to respondents' stories of parents dying, close family members having accidents and becoming ill etc, listened to them again, and transcribed them. We then grouped these extracts together under descriptive headings, eg illness and death. We considered the implications of these first order experiences on respondents' accounts of their career development. We called these 'second order analytical dimensions'. We used the first order, descriptive themes to structure our analysis, and the second order dimensions to shed light on our commentary. Finally, the aggregate dimensions, not noted in the tables: the complex interweaving of structure and agency in the

process of change; and impact of jolts on the career imagination, emerge from this analysis. They are the focus of the discussion.

Findings

Desert Island Discs castaways spoke of unexpected and uncontrollable events that fundamentally changed how they thought about themselves, their working lives, and their future possibilities. Broadly, these can be distinguished between those that are personal and intimate, like illness and bereavement, and those that are impersonal and experienced more widely, like war. Castaways talked about how these external jolts had consequences for their own lives, but for their professions. These in turn influenced their opportunities within these sectors. Accordingly, our analysis is divided into two sections: the impact of personal jolts, and the impact of external jolts on individuals and professions. Notably, some castaways experienced all three, some one or two, and some spoke of none at all. Such is the random nature of these events.

Personal jolts

Punctuating castaways' accounts are references to life events that they described as critical 'turning points'. As indicated in Table 2 below, these included death and illness, accidents, and others' transgressions.

Data	1st order descriptive themes	2nd order analytical dimensions
Death of parent Death of child Death of former husband Child's illness Parent's illness	Death and illness	Perspectives on life and work Sense of personal agency and responsibility Triggered new interests Changed ideas of what was possible
Father's involvement in accident Train crash victim	Accidents	Perspectives on life and work
Financial hardship Sex scandal	Others' transgressions	Perspectives on life and work

In the course of their interviews, castaways spoke of how these events triggered deep reflection on life and work. For some this led to a change in focus and priorities, while it reminded others of what was most important. Personal jolts also led to differences in castaways' mode of engagement (Duberley et al, 2012) with their work, at once introducing a sense of personal agency and responsibility, and a desire to seize the day – to make the most of a life that is fragile, transient and unpredictable.

Five castaways talked about how bereavement had changed their outlooks on life, impacting too on how they made sense of and approached their work. Alison Richard, anthropologist and university Vice Chancellor, described her baby son's death, and its resounding impact:

Our wonderful daughters were born in 1980 and in 1982, and then our son Gavin was born in 1987, and at the age of 6 weeks he died. It was a so-called cot death, an inexplicable, inexplicable, meaningless and appalling thing. And it plunged me and my husband to the bottom of a deep, deep black hole. As you can imagine it was just, there are no words to describe that. I do think of my life as before Gavin and life after Gavin, and we have worked very hard to give, to give meaning to his life and to the meaningless tragedy of his death and one of the ways I see that is that I like to think that I can reach out to people who are deeply distressed now because I've been there too at one point in my life, in a way that I couldn't up to that point because I'd led this sort of fortunate life. And so from time to time, still, I think to myself, 'chalk another one up to you, Gavin, thank you'.

The importance of doing things that she finds meaningful, and her strong sense of empathy permeate Alison Richard's interview, and appear to have guided her career decision making. Philosopher Angie Hobbs told a similar story about her sister's early death, an event which highlighted the fragility of life, and made her aware of our mutual dependence:

It was an extraordinary day I just knew that she was dying. I couldn't deal with it. I took our new puppy out for a walk. I didn't want to be in the house when she died. ... And the house did become quiet. ... It wasn't at all a morbid household, but I was just very aware of the fragility and the finality of life, not just the fact that it's going to end, but how vulnerable we all are, and how we all need help. I mean my sister clearly needed help, but I'm very aware that all of us, everybody, me included, we all need help.

In contrast to this sense of interdependence, three respondents highlighted how when their mothers died, they realised that they were on their own and with no one to rely on, they had to take responsibility for their own lives. In the words of computer scientist, Sue Black:

SB: Because when my mum died we had my dad, but when my dad remarried I kind of felt like an orphan really, so from the age of 13.

KY: ... What effect did it have then and what effect does it have now?

SB: Well I think it's taught me that at the end of the day, I've only got myself to rely on really, so if I want to make something happen, I need to get on with it.

Personal agency is a central theme in Sue Black's interview, from her description of leaving an abusive marriage and living in a women's refuge with her young children, to embarking on computer science and ultimately becoming a leading advisor in technology policy. Likewise, in the case of architect Amanda Levete, the death of her former husband galvanised her to take control of her career. For years she and her husband, a revered architect, practiced together. They subsequently divorced and were in the process of splitting their business when he died. From that point she experienced the deep undercurrent of sexism in the profession, and made it her mission to succeed in spite of the challenges:

What I hadn't expected after Jan's death was that the press would be very antagonistic towards me, you know, Jan was such a revered and loved figure, and I wasn't in that way. But it was the only time that I felt that [misogyny]. So I felt a great need to prove myself, and to prove that I wouldn't fail.

Whereas the discussion so far has been mainly around existential considerations about the world and one's place in it, two respondents spoke of how the experience of illness (in one case her own, and in the other her mother's) led to more substantive change, in particular giving them new ideas about their future careers. Dr Carol Black was doing her A-levels when her mother was diagnosed with lung cancer:

CB: My interest in medicine, although I didn't know it at the time, came through going with her to the hospital. There was a fantastic woman surgeon who operated on my mother who was extremely kind to me

KY: that must have been very unusual at the time

CB: It was exceedingly unusual to have a thoracic surgeon who was a woman. Looking back, I really related to what was going on, and to that particular woman.

Until her mother became ill, Carol Black had not been aware that women could be surgeons. This experience awakened her to the opportunities for women in medicine, and her mother's surgeon became a kind of mentor.

In addition to personal jolts of illness and death, two castaways, both lawyers, described accidents as triggering changes in how they made sense of the world and their place in it. In 1982, having recently embarked on her career in the law, Elish Angiolini was involved in a train crash in which thirteen people died. Along with a deep sense of 'survivor's guilt', she was left with a 'sense of survival which was, seize the day, you have no idea at all how long you'll be here', reminiscent of the bereaved castaways discussed above. Like the others, Elish Angiolini's determination to live life to the fullest seeps through her interview.

Kimberly Motley's experience was different. She was raised in what she described as a tough neighbourhood in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in the US. When she was a child her father, a janitor at General Electric, was involved in an accident which resulted in him losing his job. He embarked on a long legal process to get his job back, which was eventually unsuccessful.

My father was in a horrible car accident... We were doing pretty good. And then once he had the car accident everything changed... And my father was so hopeful he would win this case and the case went on for at least 7 or 8 years. He would go and talk to his lawyers about the wrongful termination. They had terminated him based on his disability and at the end of it, he lost. He lost and it was a big blow to him... I remember being very sad. I remember thinking, 'ok, if he wins this case, everything will go back to being as it was... and it just didn't happen. And it made me angry to be honest. Angry on one hand, but on the other hand I felt like, 'well of course, poor people don't win'.

From this event, Kimberly Motley learned about the consequences of inequality and about how difficult it is for poor, black people to get justice. This realisation fuelled her to fight for a more just world, which ultimately led to her being the first foreign lawyer to litigate in Afghanistan.

The final personal jolt to emerge in the data is the result of others' misdemeanours. Only one castaway, Mary Archer, a scientist, identified this type of jolt, we have included it because it helps to illustrate the varied, and potentially intimate nature of these personal jolts. Mary Archer explained how her husband Jeffrey, previously a Conservative Member of Parliament, was first involved in fraudulent financial dealings, and later accused of bribing a prostitute. Together these led to the family's financial ruin, reputational damage and the loss of Jeffrey Archer's seat in the House of Commons. Mary Archer spoke of two main impacts –

one was her realisation of her own deep resilience: *'because I thought what we had done, faced before was worse, and I knew we'd come through that, so I gave me the courage to face that second disaster'*. Second, she learned that working life could be a sort of refuge – a place to go to escape from the very public drama of her domestic situation.

External jolts

You're an ordinary woman who gets thrown into extraordinary times and you do the best with what you've got (Monica McWilliams).

This quote elegantly conveys what this section is all about – external events that we do not expect and cannot control, but that shape us in fundamental ways. We are calling these 'external jolts'. Whilst at first there may appear to be overlap between personal and external jolts, the key difference is that personal jolts impacted only on the career of the women speaking whereas external jolts have a far wider reaching effect, potentially impacting on many people's careers, though in different ways. Several castaways spoke of how external jolts had profoundly changed what happened next – personally, at the level of the professional field, or both. These data are summarised in Table 3 below. From the point of view of the professions, they are particularly interesting because they highlight some of the triggers of field level change, and the nature of their impact. As above, we are using the first order, descriptive themes to structure our analysis.

Data	1st order descriptive themes	2nd order analytical dimensions: Individual level	2nd order analytical dimensions: Field level
Introduction of Egypt's nationalisation programme Iranian revolution Death of Belfast journalist President Clinton's visit to Northern Ireland Bloody Sunday murders in Northern Ireland	Political events	Approach to life and work Changed ideas of what was possible (behaviour and career choice)	New structures of opportunity and constraint
US moon landing Three mile	World events	Changed ideas of what was possible and acceptable	New structures of opportunity and constraint

island/Chernobyl		(behaviour and career choice)	Changed public perception of field
Fewer men at university Interrupted undergraduate experience	War	Changed ideas of what was possible (behaviour and career choice)	New structures of opportunity
Open competition for senior civil service positions Imposition of targets for female trainee doctors	New policies and practices	Changed ideas of what was possible (behaviour and career choice)	New structures of opportunity

For two castaways, academics Minouf Shafik and Haleh Ashfar, political upheaval in their countries of origin fundamentally changed how their lives unfolded, their career prospects, and their own approaches to life and work. Minouf Shafik was born into an established family in Alexandria, Egypt. Her family were industrialists, landowners, and both her father and grandfather had PhDs from top universities in the West. She described how after nationalisation everything changed:

It wasn't exactly over night, but it was nationalised in a kind of rolling fashion. And my father in particular was very hard hit, lost his land, lost his house, lost their company that my grandfather had set up.

Faced with such losses and no feasible prospects in Egypt, the family moved to Georgia in the United States. Their Savannah neighbourhood was 'not very cosmopolitan'. Minouf spoke of 'tension', and of her feelings of displacement. This was exacerbated by her 'fragmented educational experience'. It was the era of racial segregation in the US south, and local school boards had started to use school bussing programmes, whereby children were taken to schools outside of their communities, to create greater ethnic integration. Between bussing and house moves, Minouf ended up going to at least nine different schools. However, in spite of this constant disruption, the family saw education as their 'salvation':

'They could take away everything, but they couldn't take away your brain'. That's what [my father] used to say to us when we were growing up. Having lost everything, he could not have looked after his family. So instilled that in us from a very early age.

Minouf's account is defined by her belief in the value of education, the importance of diversity, and by her strong sense of personal agency and self-efficacy. These values likewise resound in Haleh Ashfar's interview. After the Iranian revolution, Haleh left to go to

school in the UK. Not only did Tehran offer few prospects, but it was a dangerous place for people who were considered to be part of 'the establishment'.

Many of the kids that I had grown up with were actually killed afterwards because they were the establishment. And I remember after the revolution I used to get a daily paper from Iran and they used to publish the names of all the people who had been executed. And I used to open the paper, read the names, cry and then go to work because it was just a massacre of young, intelligent, talent.

In her account, Haleh described how this experience continued to shape her. Though her work as a political scientist and women's studies scholar, she has continued to fight for women's rights, at times putting herself at risk in the process.

Political events similarly fuelled Northern Irish social scientists, Monica McWilliams and Louise Richardson. In Louise's case, the Bloody Sunday killings in 1972 and continued political violence fuelled her political commitment and her belief in the importance of looking at all sides of an issue, a perspective that continued to dominate her academic and political work ever since. Monica highlights how events in Northern Ireland not only impacted on her understanding of the country and the troubles, but also began to create cracks in the landscape through which seeds of change could begin to take root. In the following extract, she speaks of President Clinton's visit to Belfast in 1994:

It was a moment that the cessation of conflict had been declared, the ceasefires, and it was a moment we'd all waited on. And it was one of those moments where you weren't sure, 'is it going to last this time?'... In fact, it was a turning point for me because I began to think, 'how can I contribute now, to make this last'? Little did I think that 2 years later I'd be at a peace table.

Clinton's visit created new opportunities for Monica to participate in the peace process, work that has been central to her career ever since.

Although less politically charged, astronomer Monica Grady and nuclear engineer Sue Ion described world events that changed what was possible, impacting on structures and on their own perceptions of opportunity and constraint. For Monica, watching the first Apollo moon landing at age 11 awakened her to the beauty of outer space, and made her realise that space exploration was a field that she could actually participate in. Sue's story was a bit more complicated. She recounted how the Three Mile Island nuclear accident in 1979, the year she joined British Nuclear Fuels, tarnished the reputation of the industry, creating an image that was frightening, dirty and out-of-control. This was amplified by the Chernobyl disaster seven years later, in 1986. Not only did these events impact on the status of nuclear science, but also on investment. Interestingly, this began to change in the early 2000s in the wake of increasing alarm at the pace of climate change and the role of fossil fuels in this process:

I think generally they were starting to look more at the fact that, well, the figures just don't add up. You can't have the electricity you need in the UK by only having renewables. Nuclear energy has 2 things going for it. Number 1, it is a very dense form of energy so you only need a tiny amount to create a huge amount of energy... [And] the safety systems that accompany modern nuclear power stations do enable you to have confidence in that type of technology going forward.

Gradually, nuclear power's reputation in the public imagination began to change, and with it, investment and opportunity.

As noted in the introduction, a key theme in Jane Robinson's book, *Ladies Can't Climb Ladders*, is the impact of the war on professional women's career opportunities. We're going to return to her text in the discussion to further contextualise and reflect on our findings. In this section, though, we consider references to the war made by two of our castaways, Mary Midgley and Baroness Mary Warnock, both Oxford educated philosophers. Robinson highlights how the war created spaces in professions that had hitherto been closed or at the very least unwelcoming to women. In occupations where access is a critical dimension, this was a significant change.

Mary Warnock had originally gone to Oxford to pursue classics, but during the war left her studies for a period to teach in a girls' school. On her return, she switched to philosophy where she was warmly received. Mary Warnock became the first woman secretary, then president, of the Oxford Undergraduate Philosophy Society. Mary Midgley was one of Mary Warnock's contemporaries at Oxford. In her interview, she explained how the absence of men in the philosophy department during the war created opportunities for women to assert themselves in ways that might have been difficult in normal circumstances. She explores this situation with Sue Lawley:

MM: Well by the time the war got going there were very few men around.

SL: But was it ultimately a disappointment an advantage that there weren't so many men around?

MM: Well, it caused it to be much easier, I think, for us to get our mouths open and speak in classes, and you see I think this is why a number of us who were up at Oxford at that time have made ourselves known in philosophy, there was Philippa Foot, Elizabeth Anscomb, Mary Warnock and a few others. There have not been so many in philosophy since, proportionally I think.

This quotation is interesting in so many ways: that women felt able to speak out because there were few men, that this led to the emergence of an exceptional group of women philosophers at Oxford, and that this was a one-off. The suggestion is that once the men returned, old patterns were re-established. This is a theme that Robinson explored, and that we will pick up in the discussion.

The last type of jolt identified by the castaways concerned workplace policies and practices. Three women, one in law and two in medicine, explained how the introduction of new approaches to recruitment, promotion created access to and opportunities within their professions that previously been almost unimaginable. In what follows, Barbara Mills and Sue Lawley talk about the introduction of open competition for senior positions in the civil service. Twice in her career she was able to take advantage of this policy change:

SL: You're not only the first woman DPP, Director of Public Prosecutions, Barbara Mills, but you're the first DPP to be appointed as the result of open competition. The job was advertised, which was revolutionary for the civil service, wasn't it?

BM: Well yes, in fact it had been done for the Director of the Serious Fraud Office [her previous post], and I felt to some extent I'd been a guinea pig, in that I was the first person to have done it, and I've now done it twice. But I think it's very important. I'm very much in favour of openness and having a wide selection for any post.

Josephine Barnes and Jane Somerville both mentioned the importance of the government's introduction of quotas and targets for female medical trainees upon their access to the medical profession. Whilst their stories focus on personal agency and how they navigated

such a masculine environment, both were well aware that many women before them would not have had the opportunity. As Josephine Barnes comments:

*they had to allow 9% (women) by order of the government and the senior physician who was a real woman hater and everything that went with it who trailed around with his retinue of boys would swear as you passed them, 'there's one of those **** women'*

Although Josephine had gained access, this was a far cry from gaining acceptance.

Discussion

It's been a pleasure working with the *Desert Island Discs* data. Delving into this iconic programme has given us insights into the relationship between music and life histories, how professional women at the top of their fields publicly account for their careers, how this changes over time, how interview norms have developed through the years, and even into notions of Britishness. However, notwithstanding this richness, it also has certain limitations: the focus on elites, the fact that the aim of *Desert Island Discs* is to entertain.

Another consideration, especially relevant to this paper, is the recognition that our data are not simply what the castaways say, but the interview as a whole. On the one hand, this adds a new dimension into *DID* narratives as co-created by castaways and presenters in the course of the interview process. But it also means that as researchers we are totally removed from the process. As we listen to *DID*, we hope that the presenter will follow up a line of argument, we think about how we would have handled the interview differently, and are disappointed when presenters fail to ask the question that would unlock our puzzle. This happened several times in this study. For example, philosopher Mary Midgley recounted her experience of being in Vienna when the German tanks rolled into the city. She described it as a turning point, but Sue Lawley didn't ask why. And when she was eight years old, scientist Nancy Rothwell contracted tuberculosis and had to spend 18 months in bed. This too was a life changing experience, but again Kirstie Young didn't ask how. To fill in some of these empirical gaps, in the section that follows we return to *Ladies Can't Climb Ladders*, Jane Robinson's history of women in the professions, introduced at the start of the paper. From there we turn to our theoretical contributions.

In the second section of our analysis, 'external jolts', we talked about the impact of war on two women's accounts – both highlighted how the absence of men gave them opportunities in Oxford's philosophy department which they suspect had not previously been available. Although they and their cohort went on to become prominent philosophers, Mary Midgley's hunch was that the women who followed them at Oxford found a more constrained environment, and certainly did not make their marks in the same way. Robinson asks the question of whether, having been granted access to the professions during the war, they were then accepted in their own right, or seen as 'placeholders', and as 'trespassers' once the men returned. Mary's account suggests that she and her peers may well have been standing in for the men. Beyond the wartime context, although the new quota system in medical training enabled Josephine Barnes to join the profession, the senior physician made it clear that she was not welcome.

Running through Robinson's history is the importance of legislation and policy in opening women's access to the professions: from the Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act in 1919, to Civil Service policies of 1922 which enabled women to sit the entrance exam for higher administrative grades, the BBC's lifting of the uniform marriage bar in 1935, the 1975 Equal Pay Act, and the Equality Act in 2010. Robinson argued that although the impact of such initiatives was neither uniform nor inevitable, they were often a critical first step:

It was obvious that things were beginning to change, not just because of legislation like the SDRA but thru force majeure. ... Seasoned by 4 years labour on the home front and abroad, armed with a vote (some of them) and given a fanfare by the SDRA, women were poised at the brink of this new decade to enter the stage and start playing their parts as responsible wage-earning citizens' (2020: 77-78).

Only three of the castaways in our dataset specifically referred to new laws and policies, but their existence made professional advancement possible, if not easy.

Much of our data sheds light on individual jolts – illness and death; accidents and others' transgressions. Here again, Robinson helps us to contextualise these findings. Two important themes permeate her analysis: role models and the role of family – themes that we suspect underpinned many castaways' accounts. For example, Carol Black highlighted her mother's surgeon as her role model – it was only upon meeting her that she realised that women could even be surgeons. Only a handful of castaways identified specific role models, but we can speculate that they were there – creating networks, challenging stereotypes, and helping other women to 'crawl through cracks' in the seemingly solid walls of professional occupations. In Robinson's words: 'gradually, person by person and institution by institution, habits alter and expectations grow' (2020: 292).

Our last point from *Ladies Can't Climb Ladders* analysis is the role of family. It is typical for *DID* interviews to meander between professional and home arenas, and our dataset is no exception. As careers researchers, this is interesting because it reminds us of the inextricability of these domains. With respect to this paper, respondents did not experience environmental jolts in isolation, but rather as members of families: castaways' siblings, spouses, parents and children had accidents, got sick and died; their families and communities found themselves in the midst of political upheaval, lost their money and status, became refugees. The family provided a context which helped participants to see what was possible and what wasn't; encouraged or constrained their access to education; helped them to develop a sense of self-worth and confidence, or left them to develop their own resources and navigate their way through life.

So where does this take us theoretically? We offer two contributions. First, our findings fundamentally reinforce the complexity and multi-layered nature of context, and the important point that change is not necessarily one-directional. Participants' discussions of their lives and careers highlighted the complex interaction between the societal, organisational, family and individual levels of analysis over the life course. As demonstrated in the findings section, jolts vary in their nature between those personal experiences that impact solely at an individual level and those that potentially alter the structure of opportunity of a career field, shaping what is available both to them as individuals and also to others. Again, this distinction is not as neat as we suggest in that change can be both individual and can potentially affect professional structures. In other words, the way that an individual respond to environmental jolts may influence the evolution of a career field (Barley & Tolbert, 1997; Duberley & Cohen, 2006).

This complex interweaving of context and agency was deeply embedded in castaways' accounts. Whilst at first glance it might be assumed that external jolts are deterministic, it was interesting that facing uncontrollable events often seemed to galvanise a sense of agency. As a starting point, the framework developed by Emirbayer and Mische is useful to help understand this. The interviews highlight the importance of human agency as 'a temporally embedded process of social engagement' (Emirbayer & Mische (1998, p. 962). Participants described their behaviour as informed by the past (in terms of habit and socialization). For example, there was much discussion of how the cultural context and upbringing of individual castaways underpinned much of their routine career behaviour and their views of what was, for a woman, legitimate and possible were deeply embedded within

this. Their agency was also oriented toward the future, as a 'projective capacity' (ibid: 962) or capacity to imagine alternative possibilities (discussed further below); and toward the present, as a 'practical-evaluative' capacity (ibid: 962) to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies faced at a particular point in time. The women talked at length about how the external jolt had provided them with an opportunity to really understand what mattered most to them in their lives and to realize their own capacity for action. For some, such as Alison Richard, this may have related to their immediate future and how they did their jobs; for others such as Minouf Shafiq it was a much longer-term process.

However, we must be mindful of the 'fundamental attribution error' – the tendency to overemphasize dispositional causes of behaviour at the expense of situational causes' which Johns (2006: 403) argues is common in career studies. Whilst castaways did not discuss social structures, these are clearly of importance in respect to the positioning of individuals to take advantage of opportunities presented. Depending upon the resources they have available to them and their mode of engagement, it is clear that individuals will act in different ways (Authors, 2006).

Second, notwithstanding their diversity, what the jolts have in common is that fundamentally they seem to have brought about a change in the castaways' career imagination (Cohen, 2014) – causing them to see a different potential future for themselves. In some cases, they also created a possibility of a different potential future for others as the nature of the professional field is altered.

The career imagination is how an individual thinks about their working life. It defines and delimits what they see as possible, legitimate and appropriate in a particular landscape and timescape, and where a person positions them self within this setting. The career imagination offers a career trajectory and prescribes (sometimes competing) criteria for success. Despite its poetic connotations, it is not infinite, but rather is defined and delimited by the structural contexts in which people find themselves – and thus is consistent with the interplay of structure and agency described above. Importantly, we do not claim that the career imagination reflects respondents' truest interpretations or deepest understandings because we have no direct access to these. Instead, its expression is a local accomplishment, a product of a particular time, place and social circumstance, informed by experience and history.

Our data on individual jolts vividly elucidated the impact of such unexpected events on castaways' career self-concepts – how they saw themselves in their working lives. Illness, grief and accidents caused them to reflect on themselves, their priorities, and the meaning and purpose of their work. Women explained how these altered perceptions led to new approaches: greater self-reliance, an urgency to get things done, a heightened sense of duty and social responsibility. Sometimes castaways described these as new perspectives, while for others, personal jolts intensified what was already there. More indirectly, these individual jolts also informed how they made sense of these fields, their career world views, and the structures of opportunity and constraint within them. understood and engaged with these field: following her mother's cancer experience, Carol Black decided to dedicate her life to taking care of people; although she had previously seen medicine as a male domain, she realised that this was not inevitable.

So what new insights can our analysis offer to what we know about women in traditional professional fields? Here our data on external jolts come to the fore. As the literature on women in the professions has argued, described eloquently by Robinson, women continue to be stymied in their access to and promotion within the professions: a problem which is has been reproduced over the years in the interplay of structural, cultural and agentic factors (Evetts, 2000; Acker, 2006; 2009; Sommerlad & Sanderson, 1998). However, our data offer some insights into how external events can intervene to break this cycle. The absence of

male philosophers during the war created a space for Mary Warnock, Mary Midgely and their illustrious group to enter and make their mark in this traditional male discipline; and twice in her career Barbara Mills was able to take advantage of new recruitment policies in the Civil Service to gain promotion. The introduction of open competition for senior positions in the Civil Service. Significantly, in changing the rules of the game, these events also shaped castaways' career imaginations, creating new pictures of what was possible. And, of course, their presence in the career field potentially had a longer-term impact on the career imagination of other women, showing them that it was possible to progress in what may have been perceived as inhospitable environments.

Our point here is that environmental jolts can lead to change in the career imagination: in existential questions about the meaning and purpose of one's working life; ideas about how careers work and the structure of available opportunities, and notions of what and how it is possible to be. The *Desert Island Discs* data, enhanced by Jane Robinson's historical analysis offer new insights into how this can play out for women professionals, particularly highlighting processes of exclusion and inclusion with respect to access, advancement and achieving legitimacy.

Notwithstanding examples of external jolts triggering dramatic change, clearly the story is not always one of dawning opportunities. Mary Midgely explained how the door to the philosophy department began to shut once the men came back, to some extent rendering her group a kind of quirk of history. And for both Minouf Shafiq and Halah Ashfar, social upheaval in Egypt and in Iran did not create new spaces that they could easily slot into. Instead, both experienced the challenge of re-creating their lives and careers in ways they could not have envisaged. They had to re-imagine their career futures in their adopted countries where they occupied different social locations and were faced with a whole new set of constraints, opportunities and identity positions. Thus the career imagination is not a static entity, but rather evolves over time in response to both internal and external change.

Conclusion

At the start of the paper we discussed the impact of Covid-19 on our working lives. This highlighted for us a lack of concern in careers literature to date for the impact of environmental jolts upon the ways in which people enact their careers. Our findings highlight the ways in which jolts can force or enable a re-imagining of individual careers and how they can also change the shape of career fields, thus opening new opportunities for individuals to act. Of course, the paper has limitations. As we discussed earlier, there are shortcomings with regard to the data set, though we would argue that there are also strengths in the access it affords to such senior women. We also recognise that whilst the paper is about the careers of professional women we do not provide an explicitly gendered analysis. Future work could do this more thoroughly through a comparison of the careers of professional men and women, exploring differences in the ways in which they account for the importance of context, their agency and the role of structural enablement and constraint in responding to fundamental change.

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