Article

In the Eye of the Hurricane: Careers under Lockdown

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has created career disruptions and shocks for many individuals, due to layoffs, reduced work hours and increased work–life conflict. Our study aimed to explore individual-level perceptions of people regarding their careers during the first lockdown in the UK, and to test potential implications of the situation for individuals' career sustainability. For a deeper understanding of these perceptions, we used a sequential mixed-methods research design. First, we conducted a qualitative study, using semi-structured interviews to explore how people perceive their careers during early stages of the pandemic. We identified two themes that characterize the common experiences during this time period, namely employer support and careful optimism, that play an important role in the way careers unfold. Then, in the quantitative study, we conducted an online survey to empirically test a research model that links the concept of employer support with employability, career satisfaction and mental well-being. We also investigate the mediating role of career empowerment, which is a motivational cognitive construct that captures individual cognitions of agentic control over one's career. Our research provides a rich snapshot that depicts people's perceptions of careers during a shock event, which has both theoretical and practical implications.

Keywords: career shocks; COVID-19; career outcomes; organizational support; career empowerment; motivation

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic created a major challenge for people's career security. The isolation measures and government-declared lockdowns have had a deep economic impact on national economies. While some industries, and specific organizations, were able to adapt and move the work online, others were not able to keep functioning, and provide their employees with financial security. For example, some businesses were able to furlough employees, supported by the Government, while others had to lay off people or fully shutdown. While the COVID-19 pandemic is not completely over, the prognosis for the global economy is pessimistic, expecting a recession that will have implications for many individuals' careers, both in terms of financial security and health [1–3].

The COVID-19 pandemic falls under the definition of a career shock, 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" [4] (p. 4). Shocks were originally conceptualized to understand voluntary turnover; thus, the shock was a harsh event that evoked thoughts of quitting one's job [5]. Seibert and colleagues [6] extended this concept to study its impact on career choices, as a shocking event may be negative or positive (e.g., a significant promotion). Research has supported the impact and influence of negative and positive shocks on the career development of individuals in various samples and settings such as among academics in Estonia and USA, young professionals in Holland, and Indian MBA graduates [7–10]. Therefore, studying career shocks helps to comprehend the impact of the context or other unplanned events on individual careers.

A particularly important vocational aspect that is expected to be affected by career shocks is career sustainability. Sustainable careers are 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" [11] (p. 7). Sustainable careers are characterized by three broad indicators: health, happiness, and productivity, suggesting that people who have a sustainable career are more productive in terms of work performance, are more employable, have less stress, better physical and mental health and report being more satisfied with their career progress as well as with life in general [11]. Yet, when discussing career shocks, it is important to differentiate between the valence of the event itself and that of its outcomes: beyond the meaning of the negative or positive career disruption that may be caused by career shocks, the outcomes of such disruptions are likely to vary among individuals because of the context they are in and the way that people deal with the situation, such that career sustainability may not necessarily be damaged [12,13]. For example, in the case of COVID-19, the events are generally considered to be negative, as layoffs and an unstable job market led to loss of career security [14]. With that, following a layoff people may reconsider their career path and take a new direction in which they will be more satisfied [15]. In that sense, the disruption caused by a negative shock may not necessarily lead to negative career outcomes.

The responsibility for sustainable careers is shared between multiple stakeholders such as employers, managers, and the organization [12]. Managers play a critical role in career sustainability by creating a positive organizational climate, motivating, and supporting employees [10,16,17], thus helping them to deal with career shocks. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a rare opportunity to follow a major career shock that is unfolding in real time, capturing snapshots of people's experiences of their careers. Most research on career shocks has been conducted after the shock, therefore providing a post-shock reflection rather than a raw description of perceptions before they have been processed, which may significantly change them in retrospect. What is still missing is a portrayal of people's experiences during an event, which has important implications for our understanding of how career shocks are interpreted and dealt with.

In the current paper, we report the findings of a mixed-method study that was conducted during the first lockdown in the UK. In our research, we employed an exploratory sequential research design, where a qualitative study was followed by a quantitative one [18]. This approach allowed us to investigate the same underlying phenomena using complementary methods, thus enriching and elaborating on the insights. Beginning with a qualitative study allowed us to examine the individual perceptions of individuals regarding their career in light of the shock created by the pandemic and identify themes that informed the hypotheses for the quantitative study. Then, in Study 2 we test a theoretical model that links one major theme that emerged in the study, namely organizational support, with the second theme of optimism, expressed in three types of positive outcomes. Therefore, our research aims to address the following questions: 1. What are the career perceptions of individuals during early stages of a lockdown, 2. What is the relationship between organizational support and career outcomes, e.g., well-being, employability and career satisfaction, and 3. What is the role of career empowerment in the relationship between organizational support and career outcomes?

We utilize the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model [19] that theorizes well-being as an outcome of a combination of resources and demands. Both demands and resources can be physical, organizational, psychological and/or social. While demands are factors that require effort and thus deplete energy, resources can be used as a buffer to relieve such demands, to achieve work goals and to facilitate personal development. The JD-R model is often used in research of motivation. Particularly in the field of careers, job resources have been found to be linked with career competencies where both factors serve as predictors for each other and each one predicts work engagement [20]. Xu and colleagues [21] used the model to explore how digitization of manufacturing in China

creates new demands that can be offset with career competencies (resources). In our study we use the JD-R framework to propose and test a model where organizational support (resources) leads to increased employability, satisfaction and well-being, when this relationship is mediated by a different motivational variable, namely career empowerment—individual-level cognitions of career control. This sequence of a qualitative followed by a quantitative study allows us to triangulate and cross-validate our findings, enhancing the theoretical implications. Our contributions are as follows: 1. We contribute to a better understanding of the nature of career shocks, providing evidence for cognitive processing that helps individuals deal with career disruptions without necessarily leading to negative outcomes; 2. We provide evidence for the relationship between organizational support and career outcomes, therefore reinforcing the sustainable careers model; 3. We provide pioneer evidence for the important role of career empowerment as bridging between organizational support and career outcomes.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

A career is commonly defined as "the evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" [22] (p. 8), implying that an individual's career consists of various work roles and experiences within organizations and takes place in a context, and not in a vacuum, such that society, politics, and economy influence the individual [23]. Over the past decades, careers have changed from the traditional long-life employment in the 50s and 60s, to more boundaryless careers emerging in the beginning of the 90s until today. The change in careers, from lifelong employment to more dynamic and unstable, has been triggered by various economic and social events. For instance, the financial crisis of 2008, just as the COVID-19 pandemic, has had a powerful impact on careers resulting in individuals losing their jobs, experiencing job insecurity and loss of human capital, leading to changes in career perceptions, planning and management [24]. Such events intensify the need for individuals to sustain their careers. The sustainable careers model [13] includes components of individual agency and contextual variables such as organizational support. Complementary to our qualitative exploration, we aimed to test a theoretical model of the relationships between employer support and positive career outcomes, namely employability, career satisfaction and well-being. In addition, we introduce a mediating variable of career empowerment that is proposed to explain these predicted relationships.

2.1. The Role of Organizations in Employee Careers

The idea of perceived organizational support (POS) refers to beliefs that employees hold regarding their organizations valuing their contributions and caring about their well-being [25]. Employees interpret the treatment they receive from their organization, e.g., organizational policies and feedback, and develop expectations regarding the organization's reaction to potential situations such as improved performance, but also mistakes and potential illnesses [25]. POS is an important potential resource, and it needs to be available to employees to maintain performance and cope with stressful situations [26]. Among the consequences of POS are organizational commitment, job satisfaction, job performance, and reduced strain [27]. A recent study found that the positive relationship between POS and job satisfaction is mediated by psychological empowerment [28].

In the context of careers, for a while a prominent assumption was that each individual has to deal with the world of work on their own [29,30]. With that, more recent theoretical developments brought the organizations back into the conversation, suggesting that employers are not completely free from responsibility for their employees' careers but are an important part of a broader career context, or eco-system [11,23,31,32]. In line with JD-R model [19], we propose that POS will be linked with career-related variables, serving as a resource that helps dealing with stressful demands created by career shocks: employees will experience shocks as more manageable if they receive help (i.e., psychosocial support) and are not dealing with the shock by themselves:

Hypothesis 1a (H1a). *Perceived organizational support is positively associated with career satisfaction.*

Hypothesis 1b (H1b). *Perceived organizational support is positively associated with employability.*

Hypothesis 1c (H1c). *Perceived organizational support is positively associated with well-being.*

2.2. The Mediating Role of Career Empowerment

In the context of career management, we propose that the relationships between perceived organizational support and positive outcomes are mediated by career empowerment. Career empowerment is a set of cognitions that constitute a sense of agentic control over one's career [33,34]. It is a cognitive motivational construct which predicts a wide range of career-related proactive behaviors and career outcomes: people with high career empowerment are more internally motivated, as a result they are more proactive in developing their careers and engaging in career self-management [33]. Career empowerment consists of seven dimensions: self-determination (autonomy in making career-related decisions), meaning (fit between career and personal values), competence (capability to perform career-related activities), impact (influencing external outcomes), focus (clarity of career goals), growth (seeking challenge and learning) and relationships (connections with career-supportive people) [33].

While career empowerment is somewhat similar to the concept of protean careers, which consist of two components: self-directed career management and values-driven predispositions [35] and may be manifested in a sense of career ownership [36], it is different from protean careers in the following ways: first, unlike protean careers, career empowerment does not embody career self-management but rather predicts it. Second, it does not include a values component, although it refers to the fit between such values and individuals' careers. Third, it is focused only on cognitions, thus being a malleable construct, rather than on more relatively stable predispositions [37,38]. Finally, while protean careers mostly reflect the idea of subjective success, i.e., job satisfaction and career satisfaction [39], career empowerment was previously linked to both subjective and objective career success, i.e., salary [34,40] as well as career adaptability [41]. Thus, career empowerment is proposed to mediate the relationship between POS and career outcomes, similarly to the way psychological empowerment mediates the relationship between POS and job satisfaction [28].

Specifically, we argue that employers can support their employees through different dimensions of career empowerment, that will in turn lead to positive outcomes. POS was previously linked to various motivation processes, as fulfilling psychosocial needs and strengthening performance-reward expectancy [27,28]. Because career empowerment is a cognitive, multi-dimensional motivational construct that is malleable, organizations can play a role in its development by supporting their employees, for example, by providing training opportunities, thus increasing their competence, which will later result in increased productivity. Allowing flexibility is expected to support autonomy [42] and providing access to career counselling may help to develop focus (clarify career goals), which is later expected to translate to improved satisfaction [43]. Maintaining positive relationships and showing concern is associated with the relatedness aspect of career empowerment, which is expected to support mental well-being. Thus, organizational support via career empowerment is expected to result in positive outcomes—improved employability, mental well-being, and career satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2a (H2a). *The relationship between perceived organizational support and career satisfaction is mediated by career empowerment.*

Hypothesis 2b (H2b). *The relationship between perceived organizational support and employability is mediated by career empowerment.*

Hypothesis 2c (H2c). *The relationship between perceived organizational support and mental well-being is mediated by career empowerment.*

The research model is depicted in Figure 1.
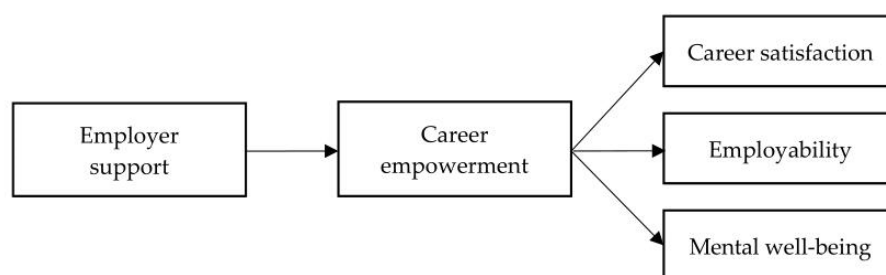
Figure 1. Theoretical model (quantitative study).

3. Research Methodology

The qualitative Study 1 captured the career perceptions of employees in the UK during the first lockdown, when information on COVID-19 was very limited and general uncertainty was high. On 23 March 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK Government imposed a lockdown: the public was instructed to stay at home and leave the house as infrequently as possible, e.g., only for essential shopping for food and medicine, for health reasons (e.g., exercise and medical assistance), and for work when working from home was not possible [44]. These measures caused societal and behavioral changes to all aspects of daily life. Many employees were instructed to work from home, some were furloughed, and others lost their jobs [45]. People were instructed to avoid physical interaction outside of their household, which limited the opportunity for face-to-face socialization for many people. These changes had significant consequences for how people experienced the world around them, and their careers in particular [46].

During April–May 2020, the first author conducted 15 interviews with people who are employed in various sectors in some form—full-time, part-time, and self-employed (including people who are furloughed). Because of the unique situation, a convenience sample with a snowballing sampling approach was used, striving to reach semantic saturation. As demonstrated by Guest et al. [47], saturation is possible with even twelve interviews, and in our case no new insights emerged after 15 interviews, such that we deemed it acceptable. If the interviewing would go beyond the lockdown period, it would affect the working conditions and thus the answers of the interviewees, which would undermine the purpose of our study, i.e., capturing the initial impressions of careers in crisis. Table 1 presents the demographic details of the participants (all names have been replaced with pseudonyms).

We employed a semi-structured in-depth interview protocol to facilitate the understanding of unique perspectives on the research phenomena. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by phone for safety reasons (the average interview lasted over an hour), recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviewees were asked to tell their career stories and focus on their perceptions of their careers during the pandemic and its implications for them. Once all the interviews were complete, both authors coded the interviews separately. We followed the guidelines for thematic analysis [48]: identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set. Themes were formed inductively, which allowed us to examine how ideas were evolving. The analysis was performed independently by both authors, who then compared their analysis and discussed their ideas until reaching consensus. Each author read every interview a few times and noted initial ideas, and then proceeding to code main ideas and features. Because of the small sample size, the coding was carried out manually. After the initial coding, similar codes were aggregated into themes and the themes were reviewed for coherence. The authors held frequent online meetings to discuss themes until consensus was reached. Our findings are outlined in the results section, together with illustrative quotes from participants.

Table 1. Participants.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Educational Level	Job Title	Employment Status
Steven	Male	37	M.Sc.	Engineer	Employed
Peter	Male	38	M.Sc.	Dentist	Self-employed
Beatrice	Female	43	M.A.	School assistant	Employed
John	Male	36	B.A.	IT specialist	Furloughed
Angie	Female	37	M.A.	School psychologist	Employed—maternity leave
Heather	Female	42	College	Accountant	Employed
Beth	Female	37	M.A.	Special needs teacher	Employed
Ryan	Male	38	High school	Warehouse supervisor	Employed
Elaine	Female	34	B.A.	Nurse	Employed
Amy	Female	35	High school	Bar manager	Furloughed
Olivia	Female	38	M.Sc.	Medical doctor	Employed
Jacob	Male	45	College	Hairdresser; take away owner	Self-employed
Eddie	Male	43	M.A.	IT specialist	Employed
Paul	Male	41	M.A.	Musician/Music teacher	Employed
Sarah	Female	53	B.A.	Preschool teacher	Furloughed

The research sample for the quantitative Study 2 was collected using Qualtrics panel services and limited to participants from the UK, who work for an employer either full-time or part-time. The sample was collected in two waves to minimize the risk of common method variance. The time lag between the waves was two weeks, to ensure sufficient participant retention, as the data were collected in June 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data on employer support, career empowerment and personality and demographic variables were collected in Wave 1, and the predicted outcome variables were collected in Wave 2. The final sample consisted of 179 participants (54.2% male, 91% white, average age = 49.94) who completed both surveys and passed data quality checks. Of the participants, 82.1% were employed full-time and 17.9% were employed part-time, in a wide range of industries.

Perceived organizational support was measured with six items from Eisenberger et al. instrument [25]. Participants indicated their agreement with each statement using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"). Sample item: "My organization really cares about my well-being" ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Career empowerment was measured with the 21-item career empowerment scale [34]. Participants indicated their agreement with each statement using a seven-point Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 7 = "strongly agree"). Sample item: "I have sufficient knowledge to achieve my career goals" ($\alpha = 0.96$).

Employability was measured with 25 items from Fugate and Kinicki's employability scale [49] which includes an optimism dimension. Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they agree with the statements describing their feelings on a five-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"). Sample item: "I always look on the bright side of things at work" ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Career satisfaction was measured using the five-item career satisfaction instrument by Greenhaus and colleagues [50]. Respondents were asked to express their agreement or disagreement with the statements on a five-point Likert scale (1 = "strongly disagree" to 5 = "strongly agree"). Sample item: "I am satisfied with the success I have achieved in my career" ($\alpha = 0.93$).

Well-being was measured with 14 items from the Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale [51]. Participants were asked to rate the extent that best describes their experience of each feeling over the last month, on a five-point Likert scale (1 = "none of the time" to 5 = "all the time"). Sample item: "I've been feeling good about myself" ($\alpha = 0.90$).

In addition, we collected demographic variables and social desirability [52] as potential control variables. Because the data were collected in June 2020, we also controlled for the perceived impact of COVID-19 on the participants' physical health, mental health, and working situation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Qualitative Study Findings

From the qualitative study two main themes emerged: employer support and careful optimism. Each theme had multiple subthemes (see Figure 2).

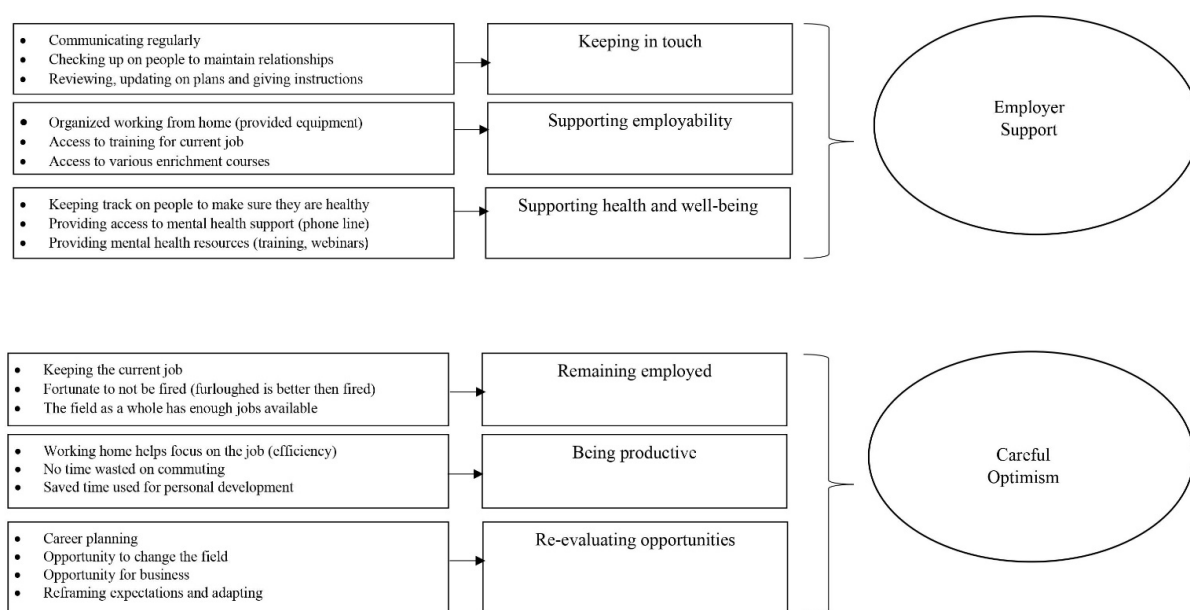**Figure 1: Data structure**

Figure 2. Data structure (qualitative study).

4.1.1. Employer Support

Employer support can come in multiple forms. In our study it was manifested as follows: keeping in touch (communicating regularly, checking up on people to maintain relationships, providing directions), supporting employability (access to training, working from home) supporting health and well-being (keeping track on people, providing resources).

Keeping in touch:

"Yeah, they've been really good from the start. Soon as the lockdown started, they just told everybody to work from home . . . the IT department had to get laptops for everybody . . . the chief executive about once a week informed us on where everything's up to and what's happened. So, yeah, everyone stayed in touch and was being very supportive." Heather

Supporting employability:

"We all did online training just to keep the professional development going as well. We had a speech and language course as a whole team via Zoom, but we also did individual courses, we were suggested to do them, so we picked what we were interested in" Sarah

Supporting well-being:

"They do check with us regularly to see if we are in good health, that we don't have any symptoms so, that's a good thing in my opinion, they try to keep track of people, the activities they do and the tasks they are doing and their physical and mental health." Eddie

"They are very proactive when it comes to mental health, and very aware of it. So, they do have a lot of support available. They also have a help line that you could phone up 24 h a day. So, if you struggle, you can call that number." Heather

For people who are self-employed, employer support is not available although they are expected to provide support for others:

"I have my own staff. I don't have any support from the practice owner, because we are self-employed people". Peter

4.1.2. Careful Optimism

Most of the interviewees, while admitting that they do not have much information about the future, expressed optimism regarding keeping their job and staying employable, being productive, and dealing well with the stress, using the time to re-evaluate priorities.

Remaining employed or employable:

"Yeah, because I did not lose my job, a lot of people lost their job ... and because I am still employed, I have been quite lucky with my job. And I was furloughed and not sacked." Sarah

"So, we are still getting 100% of our wage which is really good ... I know a lot of people who were fired before the government said they would pay for the furlough of people. So, I was very fortunate in that regard". Amy

"[My job] is secure because once the government decides that we are going to operate, we are going to go back and provide dentistry, in that sense it is secure". Peter

Being productive:

"I think it's business as usual. Nothing has changed in terms of work. Actually, it was the opposite because travel was cancelled ... So now we are doing the same things via teleconference. The effect on the job is none and for me it is better. I am more relaxed ... I would say more, more productive." Steven

"I am as efficient or even more efficient. I don't have the disturbances that I had when I went into work. A lot of people talking in the background, going to meetings, just generally things you did at work that have stopped ... working really hard and trying to improve the work that I do." Heather

Re-evaluating opportunities:

"Personally, because I am really optimistic, I feel ok mentally and physically. The first few days were strange, and you find yourself in a situation that you haven't seen before. So, you know, I have my down moments, but I try to keep myself positive." John

"We are doing good because we have food to eat and a house and businesses and working, so I think we are doing good and in the future we will do better. I always think positive." Jacob

"I am not happy because I am not in the correct field and that is why I am looking to change jobs and go to another field. [Change industry] is something that I have been thinking about... Now I have the time to try these processes and think". John

"[The pandemic] will create new opportunities, because there will be more debt and there will be a requirement to reduce expenditures. We can offer [companies] services that can accommodate these reductions in the budgets. So, there are going to be even more opportunities arising especially with the oil prices now." Steven

To sum up, these two themes represent common perceptions of careers during the early stages of the pandemic. It is possible that in this stage the shock was strong, making these factors particularly salient.

4.2. Quantitative Study Findings

For the quantitative study, Table 2 presents the means, standard deviations and correlation coefficients for all variables. The hypotheses were tested using SPSS Process macro v. 3.5 [53].

Table 2. Means, standard deviations and correlations (Study 2).

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Org. Support	3.34	0.97	(0.92)							
2. Career empowerment	4.96	1.20	0.60 **	(0.96)						
3. Employability	3.69	0.57	0.54 **	0.67 **	(0.92)					
4. Mental well-being	3.27	0.66	0.40 **	0.52 **	0.61 **	(0.93)				
5. Career satisfaction	3.52	0.81	0.47 **	0.71 **	0.55 **	0.56 **	(0.90)			
6. Social desirability	13.92	2.25	−0.28 **	−0.13	−0.24 **	−0.26 **	−0.20 **	(0.68)		
7. COVID-19	4.46	2.34	−0.10	−0.08	−0.08	−0.37 **	−0.21 **	0.19 *	1	
8. Age	49.94	9.91	0.10	0.06	−0.01	0.14	0.17 *	−0.10	−0.19 *	-
9. Gender	1.46	0.50	−0.01	0.03	0.17 *	0.00	−0.03	0.06	0.31 **	−0.12

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$. Note: N = 179; List-wise deletion; values on the diagonal are alpha reliability estimates. Gender coded as: 1 = male, 2 = female.

Hypotheses 1a–1c referred to the link between organizational support and career outcomes. Hypotheses 2a–2c predicted that these relationships are mediated by career empowerment. To test these hypotheses, we ran simple mediation models (Model 4). The analyses controlled for age and gender as well as effects of social desirability and perceived impact of COVID-19. The results indicate that organizational support had a significant positive effect on employability (B = 0.301, LLCI = 0.227, ULCI = 0.375), mental well-being (B = 0.240, LLCI = 0.151, ULCI = 0.329) and career satisfaction (B = 0.372, LLCI = 0.260, ULCI= 0.484), supporting Hypotheses 1a–1c.

The indirect effect via career empowerment was significant positive for all outcomes: employability (B = 0.186, LLCI = 0.123, ULCI = 0.255), mental well-being (B = 0.171, LLCI = 0.112, ULCI = 0.237) and career satisfaction (B = 0.336, LLCI = 0.250, ULCI = 0.432). The 95% bootstrap confidence intervals based on 5000 samples did not include zero. Thus, career empowerment mediated the positive relationship between organizational support and career outcomes, leading to support for Hypotheses 2a–2c. Table 3 presents multiple regression results and Table 4 presents results for the mediation hypotheses with detailed total effects, direct effects and indirect effects.

Using two complementary studies, we explored the perceptions of individuals regarding their careers during a pandemic-caused lockdown. Together, these two studies present a rich snapshot of a moment in time when there is little information available regarding the potential duration and economic impact of the pandemic, when treatments and/or vaccines are not yet available and when there is still no prediction about the effectiveness of lockdowns which is the only early intervention measure available at the time.

Our findings support the idea that the implications of career shock are directly impacted by the interplay between contextual and individual factors [14]. Hence, a supportive working context may help individuals to maintain productivity and some optimism. Our participants were provided by their employers not only with the necessary equipment and training, but also with psychological support. Although the COVID-19 experience was perceived as a shock, the participants remained productive and optimistic, largely due to their positive perception of the organizational support available to them. With that support, working from home was perceived as positive by our participants, who claimed that it gave them time to plan their day better, have fewer interruptions, a quieter work environment, and reduced travel.

Our findings also suggest that a career shock may have positive outcomes too. First, it allowed more free time that was used to replenish their resources via training or to search for other jobs. Hence, our findings support the view that after a while, a negative career event may give rise to opportunities for career exploration and trigger a thinking process which may bring new career opportunities and skill upgrades [4,6,54–56].

Our quantitative findings provide empirical support to the relationships between organizational support and career outcomes (employability, career satisfaction and mental well-being), which is consistent with previous studies [57,58]. They also provide novel evidence for mediating role of career empowerment, as an individual-level motivational variable.

Table 3. Results for multiple regression (Study 2).

	Model 1	**Model 2**	**Model 3**
	Employability		
Constant	4.36 (0.37) **	2.60 (0.40) **	2.27 (0.35) **
Gender	0.24 (0.09) **	0.19 (0.08) *	0.18 (0.07) *
Age	−0.002 (0.004)	−0.002 (0.004)	−0.003 (0.003)
Social desirability	−0.06 (0.02) **	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)
COVID-19	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)	−0.02 (0.01)
Organizational support		0.29 (0.04) **	0.11 (0.04) **
Career empowerment			0.24 (0.03) **
R^2	0.10	0.36	0.52
	Career Satisfaction		
Constant	3.95 (0.54) **	2.12 (0.61) **	1.52 (0.49) **
Gender	0.08 (0.12)	0.07 (0.12)	0.04 (0.10)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.004)
Social desirability	−0.06 (0.03) *	−0.01 (0.03)	−0.03 (0.02)
COVID-19	−0.06 (0.03) *	−0.06 (0.03) *	−0.04 (0.02) *
Organizational support		0.37 (0.06) **	0.04 (0.06)
Career empowerment			0.45 (0.04) **
R^2	0.09	0.27	0.55
	Mental well-being		
Constant	4.05 (0.41) **	2.60 (0.49) **	2.29 (0.45) **
Gender	0.17 (0.10)	0.12 (0.10)	0.10 (0.09)
Age	0.01 (0.01)	0.004 (0.004)	0.003 (0.004)
Social desirability	−0.06 (0.02) **	−0.02 (0.02)	−0.03 (0.02)
COVID-19	−0.10 (0.02) **	−0.11 (0.02) **	−0.10 (0.02) **
Organizational support		0.23 (0.05) **	0.07 (0.05)
Career empowerment			0.22 (0.04) **
R^2	0.19	0.31	0.42

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$.

Table 4. Results for direct effects and simple mediation (Study 2).

Outcome	B	t	*p*	LLCI	ULCI
Employability					
Total effect	0.30	8.06	0.000	0.23	0.38
Controlling for age, gender, social desirability, COVID-19					
Direct effect	0.12	2.90	0.004	0.04	0.19
Controlling for age, gender, social desirability, COVID-19					
Indirect effect via career empowerment	0.19			0.12	0.26
Controlling for age, gender, social desirability, COVID-19					
Career satisfaction					
Total effect	0.37	6.57	0.000	0.26	0.48
Controlling for age, gender, social desirability, COVID-19					
Direct effect	0.36	6.47	0.518	−0.07	0.15
Controlling for age, gender, social desirability, COVID-19					
Indirect effect via career empowerment	0.34			0.25	0.43
Controlling for age, gender, social desirability, COVID-19					
Mental well-being					
Total effect	0.24	5.32	0.000	0.15	0.33
Controlling for age, gender, social desirability, COVID-19					
Direct effect	0.07	1.34	0.181	−0.03	0.17
Controlling for age, gender, social desirability, COVID-19					
Indirect effect via career empowerment	0.17			0.11	0.24
Controlling for age, gender, social desirability, COVID-19					

5. Implications

These findings make a few significant contributions. First, we provide evidence for viewing careers as a shared responsibility between individuals and employers [13,23].

Second, we demonstrate that during a large-scale career shock it is possible to maintain, or at least support, careers, if employers are willing to invest in their employees. This is consistent with previous arguments for possible outcomes of career shocks [14]. These findings are in line with the JD-R theory [19], as physical and psychosocial resources that are provided by employer help deal with increased demands. Our findings on employability, career satisfaction and mental well-being can contribute to the understanding of sustainable careers, that are marked by three indicators—productivity, happiness and health [12]. Future studies can directly measure career sustainability using the newly developed scale [59] that was not yet available during our data collection. Third, we contributed pioneering evidence for the value of career empowerment, representing the view of personal agency as mediating the relationship between organizational inputs and individual outcomes. These findings are consistent with the conceptualization of this new construct and contribute to theory development on career motivation as an agentic construct [34]. Within the JD-R model our findings demonstrate how type of resources, namely organizational support, facilitates development of individual resources, namely career empowerment.

5.1. Implications for Theory

Our two studies provide evidence for the ability to maintain and/or develop careers during a career disruption. While careers unfold over time, they are punctuated by chance events [60] and potential career shocks [14]. Our study demonstrates a time point in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the optimism that is shared by the participants despite the challenging conditions. Future studies may examine different time points and identify patterns and trends. For example, it would be interesting to follow-up with the initial interviewees to see if their perceptions changed as the crisis prolonged and resources might be depleted. In addition, a sensemaking perspective can be employed to explain the optimism and hope that were expressed by the interviewees. Finally, as a crisis can be evaluated in terms of both risks and opportunities [61], future studies can provide additional insights for understanding career shocks.

In addition, while our mixed-methods study represents a moment in time, it can provide an opportunity to discuss the sustainable careers model, that has an integral time component [13]. We raise a possibility that sustainable career studies may benefit from examining "snapshots" that capture the various sustainable career indicators in a single time point, thus enriching our understanding of sustainable careers.

Finally, the relationship between organizational support and career empowerment may be reciprocal: as demonstrated previously in regard to career competencies [20], both job resources and individual resources, i.e., career empowerment may enhance each other, each serving as a potential independent and/or mediating variable in prediction of career outcomes. Investigating the synergy between the two types of resources will enrich the JD-R model and contribute to a better understanding of POS and career empowerment.

5.2. Implications for Practice

By examining workers' experience and understanding of their careers during the COVID- 19 pandemic, our study has the potential to inform stakeholders on how to improve conditions in the employment relationships in the long-term especially when experiencing career shocks. Our findings suggest that careers are best attainable when employees and organizations cooperate and support previous arguments for the value of organizational support in order to maintain employee careers. Specifically, we argue that human resource management practices such as training, practical support for people who work from home and psychosocial support are recommended and can not only sustain but also enhance employee productivity. While the COVID-19 pandemic moved many organizations to remote work, which creates some concerns regarding employee performance, our findings alleviate these concerns and demonstrate that work from home does not necessarily have a negative impact on work and career outcomes, given that required conditions are provided. Training may help not only to adjust to work from home, but also provides additional

benefits such as increased employability and employee satisfaction [24], which will also be beneficial for organizations [54]. Support to employee health—physical (allowing people to work from home and providing protective equipment) and mental (providing resources for psychological coping)—will also result in improved career outcomes [62]. An important implication here is that self-employed people often do not have support available, such that it is recommended for governments to consider providing resources beyond financial aid, such as socio-psychological support for business owners.

5.3. Limitations

Despite our efforts, there were a few practical limitations that had an impact on our research project. First, we aimed to collect data during a limited and relatively short period of time. Given the challenges to recruitment and attrition of participants, during this unprecedented period in time we aimed to ensure data quality without risking the main goal of the study, to stay within the time frame, i.e., before the lockdown was over. While we were able to reach saturation in the qualitative study, the sample size for the quantitative study did not allow us to test more complex theoretical models and conduct advanced statistical analyses such as structural equation modeling, due to statistical power constraints. For the same reason, we were not able to collect the data for the quantitative study in three waves to further minimize the concern for common method bias. In future studies it is recommended to separate the collection of predicted independent variables, mediators and dependent variables.

We also faced challenges with recruiting participants and were aware of self-selection of people who chose to participate in the study. We made the best effort to recruit participants from various vocational backgrounds, including those who could (e.g., an engineer) and could not work from home (e.g., a nurse, who went to work during the lockdown, and a bar manager who was furloughed). For this reason, our sample also does not allow comparing employed and self-employed people, which would be beneficial for identifying factors that affect each group. Finally, the study was conducted in the UK, which limits its generalizability across social and cultural contexts. It is possible that in countries that did not have a full lockdown (e.g., Sweden), the findings would be different. It would also be interesting to compare our findings to countries with low tolerance of ambiguity, such as Singapore, where career shocks may be interpreted differently.

6. Conclusions

Large-scale global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic may create career shocks that endanger the sustainability of people's careers. As these events are uncommon, there is limited research where data are collected during the event itself rather than in the aftermath. COVID-19 provided a rare opportunity to learn about people's perceptions as the event was unfolding and before its impact could be apprehended, which enriches our understanding in a unique way. In our mixed-method study we aimed to understand how people see their careers in the context of the pandemic, and to explore a potential theoretical mechanism that may explain how the different components of an individual's career are connected. One of our main findings was that early in the pandemic people were quite optimistic regarding the sustainability of their careers, especially where employer support was provided. Rather than worrying, people used the disruption that was forced upon them to reinforce their sense of security and employability, and/or to reframe and re-evaluate their career trajectories. This finding provides an interesting glimpse of a human ability to process information in order to successfully deal with career shocks. In addition, our findings reinforce the important role of the employer in career sustainability, a notion that is coming back to light after a period of time where careers were deemed to be self-driven by individuals. Our study supports a more balanced view of shared responsibility between individuals and employers, which is also seen in the quantitative findings that explain how employer support enhances career empowerment on the individual level, which then is translated into career outcomes. We provide implications for both career theory, particularly

career shocks and career sustainability, and for practice, namely recommendations for employers for ways to support their employees for improved outcomes.

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