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A critical perspective on career shocks in a volatile environment: Red Cross staff and volunteers aiding migrants on their way to Europe in 2016

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the career shocks of Red Cross (RC) of Serbia staff and volunteers providing aid during the 2016 migrants' influx. Specifically, the authors explore what the volatile environment in which RC staff and volunteers work can teach us about career shocks, and what makes a career shock for people whose everyday work entails stressful events.

Design/methodology/approach – This study examined a number of anecdotes that reflect the career shock construct to a greater or lesser extent. These anecdotes were developed by RC staff and volunteers as part of a communications training storytelling exercise.

Findings – The authors analyzed these events from the perspective of recent developments in career shocks research and examined whether the anecdotes contained elements that would enable us to differentiate between career shocks and stressors. Those anecdotes found to be the most prototypical of career shocks, as opposed to stressors, were found to instigate in-depth reflection about the career, were identity related, and had a tangible career impact. Shocking events in the eyes of RC people entailed work demands that go beyond expectations, excessive media scrutiny, and conflicting values. The authors discuss how organizational values, fostering person–organization fit, providing organizational and collegial support, and deploying "weathered" staff, could comprise the "vaccine" that makes the organization immune to career shocks.

Originality/value – By taking a data before theory approach to the study of career shocks, this paper provides a novel perspective on the lived experiences of RC people, and how such experiences may be classified into career shocks or stressors.

Keywords Red Cross staff and volunteers, Migrants' influx, Career shocks, Stressors, Organizational intervention, Serbia

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

The study of career shocks as stressful events, which may have a serious impact on personal career pathways, is a fresh topic that sheds new light on our current understanding of careers (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018b). By revitalizing the importance of context (Akkermans and Kubasch, 2017), career shocks challenge the notion of the career as wholly self-manageable, controllable, or amenable to individual crafting (e.g. Krumboltz, 2009; Savickas, 2013; Tims and Akkermans, 2020). In this sense, the topic of career shocks represents a revival and reappraisal of the consequential role of (social) context within the study of individual careers. Previously, in the careers literature, operationalizations of context were largely constrained to the organization. The introduction of the career shocks construct domain has opened the door to study the dynamics of individual career paths in light of disparate contextual factors deriving from the family, the organization, society, the economy, and/or the natural environment in which the focal employee resides (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018b).

Despite the intuitive appeal of the idea of career shocks, when new constructs emerge in the research arena, we have to ask ourselves a number of honest questions: Does the construct in question have the potential to contribute to our theoretical understanding of how individual careers evolve? Is the construct in question sufficiently different from existing constructs (such as stressors, for example) to warrant its introduction from a parsimony/construct non-proliferation perspective? Does an understanding of the construct in question have the potential to inform practical interventions aimed at enhancing individual careers? Does the collective "branding" of disparate events as career shocks make sense, when such events may be as seemingly different as winning the lottery and the passing of a loved one, and when the experience of the seemingly same event may have radically different effects across people or even within a person over time? How can we ascertain that a shock has occurred, when as of yet we have no comprehensive taxonomy of all the different shocks that may exist and when the thought processes that define them (cf. Akkermans *et al.*, 2018b) are likely to be idiosyncratic to the individual, not directly observable, and may not, in the end, culminate in a tangible effect on the career? Although it is certainly not the objective of this more practice-oriented contribution to provide definitive answers to these foundational conceptual questions, we felt the unique context of our study may at least provide some hints as to where such answers may be sought. Hence, it is with these (and other) questions in mind that we felt it would be worthwhile to revisit a series of more or less prototypical shock-like events that Red Cross (RC) staff and volunteers in Serbia had reported experiencing while aiding migrants on their way to Europe in 2016.

Specifically, the descriptions about these events were developed in 2016 as a part of a storytelling group exercise in which each of three groups of participants was tasked to come up with a strong, dramatic, extraordinary, and thought-provoking anecdote that could later be used to communicate with different audiences. Later on, we realized that even though this program had not been targeted at eliciting descriptions of career shocks as such, some of the stories that emerged are highly reminiscent of what has since become known as career shocks. In retrospectively and abductively analyzing these anecdotes from the perspective of career shocks, we set out to, on the one hand, explore whether they could help us derive tentative answers to some of the aforementioned questions, and on the other, whether the career shocks perspective could teach us anything new about the experience of these real events (such as how to address them) that we did not already know.

Aims and objectives

This contribution to the *Career Development International* Special Issue on the role of career shocks in career development sets out to illustrate and further inform career shocks theory, practice, and research by exploring the career shocks of humanitarian workers, i.e. RC staff

and volunteers during the 2016 influx of migrants. RC staff and volunteers comprise a unique population, in that they are regularly confronted with specific, highly challenging, and stressful situations that may occur at any point in their day-to-day activities. Along with other workers who provide humanitarian and life-saving services, it is to be expected that this group of people is more likely than most others to experience stressors and/or (career) shocks, and to do so on a more frequent basis. In addition, all RC staff and volunteers are trained in, and experienced at, protecting themselves from suffering burnout. This being the case, RC staff and volunteers may be argued to represent extreme cases, that due to their predisposition to shocks could elucidate novel aspects of shocks and their impact, that more typical cases may not. Indeed, Etikan *et al.* (2016) have suggested that extreme case sampling may be useful when developing best practice guidelines and/or defining what not to do. Seen from this perspective, lessons gleaned from the lived experiences of RC staff and volunteers, can have broader implications not only for starting to answer some of the questions that were raised earlier but also for how the naturalistic sharing of such experiences in the context of a communications skills training may provide a means of addressing the consequences of career shocks.

Although the retrospective analysis of a very limited number of these experiences from the perspective of career shocks may come at the cost of "rigor" or a highly systematic approach, we felt this exercise was worthwhile because these experiences occurred in a palpable "real-world context" (e.g. Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p. 25). Participants were not primed through elicitation by means of a survey instrument or interview protocol, but the anecdotes emerged spontaneously through group discussion combined with storytelling approach in a psychologically safe workshop climate (Diversity Icebreaker method, Ekelund *et al.*, 2015, later explained). It was our hope that this "data before theory" approach to some extent would keep us from falling victim to the theory dictating what we would see (as Albert Einstein famously put it) and would allow us to determine whether or not these experiences exhibited some degree of convergence or compatibility with the career shocks framework.

The aim of this article is to explore what the unique and presumably shock-satiated environment in which RC staff and volunteers work can teach us about career shocks, and particularly what makes a career shock for people whose everyday work entails stressful and extraordinary events. In seeking instances of career shocks, we looked for specificities of shocking events happening along the hotbed of what is to date the largest movement of people in Europe since the Second World War (Pajic *et al.*, 2018; United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2017). A key question we had in revisiting these descriptions was thus whether they conformed to what has since become our understanding of the career shocks construct, and if so what the career consequences of these events had been for the RC staff and volunteers that were impacted by them. Furthermore, on a conceptual level, we set out to examine whether the anecdotes contained elements that would enable us to differentiate between career shocks and stressors. The reason for this is that there is remarkable compatibility between the attributes that Akkermans *et al.* (2018b) suggest may be used to differentiate between different types of shocks, namely, frequency, controllability, predictability, and valence, and the characteristics of stressors that Dohrenwend (2010) discusses in his conceptual work on broadening the antecedents of post-traumatic stress disorder to include non-life-threatening events and situations. Specifically, Dohrenwend suggests the following characteristics determine the impact of a stressor: source, valence, unpredictability, magnitude, centrality, and the tendency to exhaust the individual. By evaluating the experiences of RC staff and volunteers on these characteristics associated with career shocks and stressors, we hoped to gain insight into whether career shocks represent a different construct altogether or whether career shocks may be better conceived of as a special type of stressor. Finally, we examine the organizational resources that RC incumbents could draw on to help reduce the impact of these events, in an effort to

gain a greater understanding of what organizations may undertake to soothe their negative effects and/or catalyze their positive effects.

Work context of Red Cross employees and volunteers

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is the largest humanitarian network operating worldwide, comprising 192 National Societies, 472 thousand paid staff, and nearly 14 million dedicated volunteers (The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, 2021). The IFRC operates based on the following seven fundamental principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality, that together form the basis for all RC activities. Working and volunteering for the RC is about engaging in different duties (such as fieldwork), as well as carrying out administrative tasks aimed at saving lives and improving the living conditions of people in need around the world. RC people are always among the first to provide vital support to people in disasters and emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic, earthquakes, floods, heatwaves, winter storms, humanitarian crises caused by wars, and armed conflicts. In all of these situations, RC staff and volunteers are exposed to diseases, can get hurt, or indeed even lose their lives.

Analytical approach

Helping migrants in 2016 posed new challenges and demands for the Red Cross of Serbia (RCS) people. As a part of the IFRC organized response, there were new rules to comply with and new procedures (including reporting) that needed to be followed. Following the Job Demands Resources model (JD-R; Bakker and Demerouti, 2018), communication was singled out as one of the core competencies that needed to be strengthened and improved. Specifically, by analyzing new specific job demands brought on by the migration crisis, adequate and accurate communication was recognized as the main resource needed for confronting many of the coinciding and emotionally taxing demands, such as communicating with migrants, coping with aggressive media queries, as well as recognizing their own needs and being able to disclose these to colleagues and superiors.

To mitigate the effects of problems faced by staff and volunteers of the RC of Serbia during the first wave of the migration crisis, a training program entitled "Humanity in Communication" was introduced with the support of the IFRC People Movement response. Specifically, as RC volunteers, the first and second authors were in a position to closely observe and participate in aiding migrants passing through the Republic of Serbia. Collaborating with the communication experts from the RC of Serbia and IFRC – Europe region, a training program aimed at supporting RC staff and volunteers involved in working with migrants was developed and implemented. The aim of the program was to improve communication of RC staff and volunteers amongst themselves, and with migrants and the media.

Even though this program was not specifically aimed at eliciting or dealing with impactful work events as such, many such events emerged naturally due to the highly volatile and changeable environment in which the RC staff and volunteers found themselves. This being the case, and with the benefit of hindsight, the authors found themselves wondering whether at least some of these naturally emerging (i.e. non-primed) recollections of events as part of the storytelling exercise, and the impact they had had on the RC incumbents, could be qualified or classified as career shocks "avant la lettre." We felt this exercise not to be trivial, because career shocks existing independently of the researcher concerned with their existence, is one of the cornerstones of any generalizable theory proposing antecedents and/or consequences of career shocks in the "real" world. Or stated differently, if individuals *only* perceive

experiencing career shocks when prompted to do so, this would significantly curtail the viability of career shocks theory.

During the preparation and implementation of the training project, we had an opportunity to talk not only with RC staff and volunteers but also with other professionals engaged in supporting migrants. The lessons learned from these discussions were of help in defining and shaping the training program. Specifically, and adhering to the scientist–practitioner–humanist approach (Lefkowitz, 2008), we set out to meet the needs of staff and volunteers by conceiving and delivering a series of training in the midst of an ongoing crisis. In creating and delivering the training program, we relied on a number of well-established theories and models (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001; Ekelund *et al.*, 2015; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004; Swap *et al.*, 2001; Woodside *et al.*, 2008) that are discussed in greater detail below. At the same time, we wanted to "leave the door open" for insights that could further help us to shape future research and interventions.

Training took place in those parts of the country that were facing a particularly large influx of migrants. It was organized in three groups with a total of 62 participants, covering over 95% of people involved in aiding migrants in Serbia at that time. All participants were involved in supporting the migrants. Some were mainly involved in activities that entailed immediate contact with migrants (such as the provision of food, clothes, blankets, and assisting with any pressing issues that migrants had), others were in mixed roles – including various additional tasks, such as logistics and engaging with the media (depending on the size of the team). Training sessions took place in the spring of 2016 (March–June).

Aiming for an open, non-judgmental atmosphere characterized by personal sharing and open interpersonal interactions filled with humor, we based the training on Ekelund *et al.*'s (2015) Diversity Icebreaker Workshop. This workshop introduces preferences for interaction, communication, and problem-solving styles as "frames" for collective reflection, developing shared understanding, appreciating differences and diversity, reflecting on the impact of putting labels on other people, as well as for understanding different communication styles.

The Classical Diversity Icebreaker method consists of a questionnaire and a workshop. At the beginning, each participant fills out the brief questionnaire that is, indeed, a certified test (Human Factors AS, 2021). Based on the instantly scored results, in the following workshop, the participants are divided into three (color) categories: "red," "blue", or "green." Colors represent different communication preferences that participants discover and co-construct themselves in groups without being presented with their meanings upfront (red denotes focusing on feelings, blue on facts, and green on ideas). These categories serve as the basis for creating an open, non-judgmental atmosphere through personal sharing and interpersonal interactions characterized by a strongly developed climate of trust and filled with humor. The Diversity Icebreaker tool was used throughout the training as a framework for communicating with/about/for migrants, as well as responding personally to the crisis. It was especially important for understanding different reactions, values, and communication styles, and for quick adaptation to, and understanding of, a contributor to the dialogue. When it came down to communicating about stressful, events with others, this technique turned out to be particularly conducive, not only to open sharing, but also to recognizing and (re)framing specificities and commonalities of personal experiences with dramatic events.

The next part of the training program was dedicated to familiarizing trainees with the JD-R (Demerouti *et al.*, 2001; Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). First, participants learned about the JD-R model as a framework for understanding stressful events. Training participants discussed their own thoughts and emotions related to different situations with migrants while recognizing different job demands and linking them with possible resources that either they already had or were in need of.

During the workshop, participants passionately discussed all new demands and obstacles they faced. Demands and obstacles were listed on flip charts and then the number of

participants who had encountered each was counted. While counting participants that encountered each of the obstacles, those with different wording but the same meaning were redefined and/or generalized, and redundant ones were crossed out. Thus, some events were merged into more general categories. For example, the death of a beneficiary, health emergencies, and beneficiaries' severe injuries were all labeled "dealing with traumatic situations."

As the most common demanding events, typical of their current working circumstances, that we later identified as stressors based on the analysis presented in Table 1, participants mentioned: *work overload* – meeting many people (mentioned by 71% of participants) and working long hours (mentioned by all the participants), *time pressure* – demand to work at a fast pace (mentioned by all the participants) and *poor working conditions* (mentioned by 47% of participants), *working in the open* (32%), *extreme (outside) temperatures* (32%), *emotional demands* – dealing with beneficiaries' strong emotions (81%), *no room for error* (listed by all participants), *health hazard* – the risk of contracting a disease (48%), *the impossibility of planning* (100%), *lack of control over work in general* (100%), and *dealing with traumatic situations* – the death of a beneficiary, health emergencies, severe injuries (mentioned by 11%), *being completely consumed by work* (100%), and *language barriers that affect work* (56%).

It should be noted that training participants also highlighted concerns, such as *unexpected emotionally intense work demands, excessively negative and hostile media attention*, and *conflicting values and a clash in how to approach a particular situation*, that were more profoundly related with core aspects of their work, attitudes, and long-term prospects (disillusion). In gearing up to write the current paper, it became clear to us that some of the stories RCS people shared in the 2016 "Humanity in Communication" training were indeed stories of career shocks (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018b). These three particular concerns were perceived by participants as having been extraordinarily taxing relative to the other experiences they had had while aiding migrants. Specifically, these events were experienced as being beyond direct control and triggered (for some of them for the first time ever) thought processes concerning their humanitarian career (which will be explored in detail below).

The third part of the training was dedicated to developing the art of "storytelling," both in words and through photographs, as one of the important communication skills (e.g. Bal and Veltkamp, 2013; Barraza *et al.*, 2015). Storytelling, in addition to being important for advocacy, happened to be also vital for adopting the idea of the possibility of multiple ways to interpret these diverse and stressful life experiences, to integrate idiosyncratic life perspectives, and (eventually) to integrate diverse career experiences, yielding a whole meaningful and personally consistent (career) narrative (Savickas *et al.*, 2009).

In the first round, participants in each group (consisting of four to seven participants each) listed a number of stressful events and were asked to tell a story about each event. In each group, participants discussed all of these stories and, in line with the storytelling scenario, chose the one they found to be both dramatic and ultimately resolved in some way. In this way, stories were chosen that group members unanimously identified with. It turned out that the stories that almost all the groups decided to share with others as the most powerful ones were those that were related to participants' work and career in the resolution part. Indeed, these events had shaken core career beliefs and resulted in considerable rumination. It should be noted that despite the Diversity Icebreaker and efforts taken to create a safe atmosphere in which these stories could be shared without hesitation, individuals within groups or the groups themselves may have decided not to share painful or sensitive events particularly insofar as these could lead to the re-identification of specific individuals. Having said that, we feel that the events presented below are by and large representative of the types of events that participants experienced in their day-to-day activities.

Table 1.
Differentiating between stressors and career shocks encountered by Red Cross people aiding migrants in 2016

Stressful events	Frequency (Within-person)	Predictability	Controllability	Valence	Duration	In-depth reflection about career	Identity-related	Tangible career impact
Stressors								
Work overload	Often (4)	Very predictable (5)	Very controllable (5)	Negative (1)	Enduring (3)	No (1)	Not (1)	Somewhat (2)
Time pressure	Often (4)	Very predictable (5)	Somewhat (3)	?	Medium (2)	No (1)	Not (1)	Somewhat (2)
Poor working conditions	Sometimes (3)	Very predictable (5)	Uncontrollable (2)	?	Enduring (3)	No (1)	Not (1)	Somewhat (2)
Working in the open	Often (4)	Very predictable (5)	Somewhat (3)	Neutral (2)	Enduring (3)	No (1)	Not (1)	Somewhat (2)
Extreme temperatures	Sometimes (3)	Very predictable (5)	Uncontrollable (2)	Negative (1)	Brief, isolated events (1)	No (1)	Not (1)	Somewhat (2)
Emotional demands	Often (4)	Very predictable (5)	Uncontrollable (2)	Neutral (2)	Brief, isolated events (1)	No (1)	Not (1)	Somewhat (2)
No room for error	Often (4)	Very predictable (5)	Somewhat (3)	Negative (1)	Enduring (3)	No (1)	Not (1)	No (1)
Health hazard	Rarely (2)	Very predictable (5)	Uncontrollable (2)	Negative (1)	Enduring (3)	No (1)	Not (1)	Somewhat (2)
Impossibility of planning	Often (4)	Very predictable (5)	Somewhat (3)	?	Enduring (3)	No (1)	Not (1)	Somewhat (2)
Lack of control over work	Often (4)	Very predictable (5)	Somewhat (3)	Negative (1)	Enduring (3)	No (1)	Not (1)	Somewhat (2)
Dealing with traumatic situations	Rarely (2)	Unpredictable (2)	Uncontrollable (2)	Negative (1)	Brief, isolated events (1)	Somewhat (2)	Not (1)	Somewhat (2)
Language barriers	Often (4)	Unpredictable (2)	Somewhat (3)	Negative (1)	Enduring (3)	No (1)	Not (1)	Somewhat (2)
Career shocks								
Unexpected emotionally intense work demands	Rarely (2)	Very unpredictable (1)	Uncontrollable (2)	Negative (1)	Brief, isolated events (1)	Yes (3)	Yes (2)	Yes (3)
Media hostility	Sometimes (3)	Very unpredictable (1)	Uncontrollable (2)	Negative (1)	Brief, isolated events (1)	Yes (3)	Yes (2)	Yes (3)
Conflicting values and clash in approach	Rarely (2)	Very unpredictable (1)	Uncontrollable (2)	Negative (1)	Brief, isolated events (1)	Yes (3)	Yes (2)	Yes (3)

In deriving our list of events encountered by RC people aiding migrants in 2016, we applied a hybrid approach (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Specifically, we iteratively examined the fit of the Dohrenwend (2010) stressor impact characteristics and the Akkermans *et al.* (2018b) characteristics of career shocks, with the stories derived from the training. Applying an abductive approach, we added identity relatedness as one of the defining characteristics for evaluating demanding events faced by RC people in aiding migrants. We found theoretical support for introducing this criterion by relying on Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory that will be explained further in the course of the discussion of the career shock anecdotes. There is also empirical support for the importance of the meaning of humanitarian work in general and in aiding migrants (e.g. Aguirre and Bolton, 2013; Florian *et al.*, 2019).

Demanding events as recollected by RC people engaged in aiding migrants were assessed by the first two authors (who at the time were volunteering at the Red Cross) on each of the characteristics listed in Table 1. Assessment categories were defined for each characteristic. To be precise, we opted for dual, verbal, and numerical scales with varying numbers of degrees, either five-point, three-point, or two-point rating scales. In the case of valence, we added an option that acknowledges that the valence of some shocking events is highly dependent on the target's personal attitude (we put "?" in those cells where valence was dependent on personal attitude). It should be noted that the sources of all events mentioned in Table 1 were external to the person, so we did not include that criterion within the table. Also, we have omitted the Dohrenwend (2010) criterion "tendency to exhaust the individual" from Table 1 because all events exhausted the individual concerned, and often in different ways.

We first independently assessed the events, and in the next step, based on critical dialogue, we arrived at the consensual assessments presented in Table 1. In an effort to confirm the credibility of evaluating our demanding events on the selected criteria, we included research participants as legitimate judges (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Specifically, we enlisted the help of four people from the RC of Serbia that were immediately involved in aiding migrants to independently check and confirm the evaluation that is presented in Table 1. Once we had completed our evaluation, we found that although each of these anecdotes exhibited characteristics of stressors, only disillusion/conflicting values and clash in approach, media hostility, and work demands beyond expectations that are emotionally intensive could be qualified as career shocks. This suggests that career shocks may need to be subsumed under the broader classification of stressors. Stressors are put into three major categories (Troits, 1995): life events (intense and sharp changes that need major behavioral readjustment), chronic strains (frequent demands that involve readjustments over the prolonged period of time), and hassles and uplifts of daily living (small events leading to small readjustments). Pondering on their valence, although research mostly explores negative stressors, they are conceptualized both as positive and negative (Dohrenwend, 2010; Thoits, 1995). As most relevant for the conceptualization of career shocks, (major) life events that prevail in the stress literature could both be positively and negatively valenced. The birth of a child and getting a first job are often cited as examples of positively valenced stressors and divorce as a negative one. That is, it seems that career shocks may be a special type of stressor, a finding that we will return to in the discussion.

Movement of people as a hotbed of career shocks

Having distilled three distinct shock episodes from the series of stressors that RC staff and volunteers had experienced, below we describe these episodes in greater detail, and compare and contrast these shocks from the perspective of recent developments in career shocks research, highlighting where these cases appear to be in line with career shocks theory (as it is

emerging), and where this does not appear to be the case. Given the limitations inherent in our data, however, we chose to focus our analysis specifically on (1) what we learned about career shocks under atypical circumstances; (2) the organizational resources that RC staff and volunteers could draw on; and (3) generating tentative recommendations (both at the individual and organizational level) as to how the impact of career shocks on relevant career outcomes may be (further) mitigated.

Anecdote 1: Work demands beyond expectations that are emotionally intensive

Location: Presevo south of Serbia, a border crossing with the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, (currently the Republic of North Macedonia). Hot summer day, July 2016. Over 10,000 migrants cross the border on a daily basis. Time: 01:00 p.m., temperature was over 30°C. RC people are welcoming migrants with water and food. First aid volunteers are nearby, on alert. The crossing gets crowded. Men, women, and children are exhausted, impatient to cross the border, and to move on to relative safety. Some of them have been on the road for days, deprived of proper sleep and food. Suddenly, a stampede breaks out. Not being able to avoid the pressure of the moving crowd, and trying to protect themselves, everyone runs with full force. People are dropping their backpacks. In this life-threatening situation, a young couple is unable to hold on to their less than one-year-old baby. While the baby is on the ground, the parents are carried away by the crowd. From a seemingly safe position at the doorstep of the RC bakery, an RC person who prepares freshly baked bread for migrants had been observing their arrival. Becoming aware of the stampede, in disbelief, the RC person jumps into the unruly crowd, fights for some space, stops the crowd for a split second, and grabs the baby from in front of countless feet, almost trampling him/her. The crying baby is safe at the bakery in the RC person's soothing arms. Just as it broke out of nowhere, the stampede is over all of a sudden, and the baby is returned to desperate parents. The RC person returns to giving still warm bread to migrants. The following days, that picture of the baby on the ground facing countless feet that were rushing without any control, repeatedly came to his mind. The horrifying thought was "What if I had not managed. . . if I had not fulfilled what is expected by the Red Cross, to be there and help under any circumstances... We try to do our best... Suddenly when everyone can expect these migrants are safe, after everything, they have been through on their way to a better life, *as we are supposed* to support them under seemingly controlled conditions, we find ourselves in a situation almost impossible to deal with. What if all this that I am doing is not good enough?"

Anecdote 2: Media hostility

Location: Presevo border crossing, Southern Serbia. Freezingly cold autumn day, November 2016. Time: 11:00 a.m., the temperature was hardly above 0°C; and it was below that the night before. All the local RC people, staff and volunteers have been at the border crossing (Presevo) for months now, working day and night. They are exhausted and need assistance. RC staff from various branches across Serbia have been taking part in aiding migrants. One of the RCS professionals working in administration comes to support colleagues in communicating with the European office of the International Federation of the Red Cross about the supplying of food, warm blankets, and clothes. Due to the immense foreign media interest in the proper care and well-being of migrants who are exposed to harsh weather conditions, there is an immediate need for an English-speaking spokesperson able to provide all the information about the migrants' current situation and the aid they are being provided with. During the media conference, worried about migrants' well-being, and doubting if they received proper aid, some of the journalists became rather annoyed and hostile. An RC professional working in administration jumps in to provide fresh information in English and unexpectedly finds

herself on the front line of the media fire. The very first day she has been helping at the border, she feels torn between meeting exhausted, hungry, and desperate migrants, and working with hostile journalists. At first, she feels almost paralyzed. This stressful situation lasted for days. Later she said it was the most intense period of her life. Gradually she realized that she could handle these situations with journalists quite well. One day, after successfully closing a media conference with some particularly unpleasant and even aggressive journalists, amidst all that suffering, an unexpected thought crossed her mind "I knew that day, whatever the circumstances may turn out to be, I could be of help to these people." For days she kept thinking: "What does it mean to be there for colleagues? Maybe the greatest help lies in accepting the most stressful task? On the other hand, it is not quite my job, I do not feel as if I am in my own place, I have left my family and my office, and this is not what I am used to... And I am not used to these scenes with journalists... What am I doing right now?" Although inexperienced and untrained in dealing with aggressive truth-seeking media, by openly giving all the relevant information about aid and everything done for the migrants, she became a highly sought-after spokesperson.

Anecdote 3: Conflicting values and clash in approach

Location: Northern Serbia, road close to the border crossing towards Hungary. August 2016, pouring rain. A long line of busses has been waiting to exit the country for days. Food parcels earmarked for children arrive. It is before lunchtime and the food for the adults has not arrived yet. RC volunteers need to hand out the children's food parcels in a very short time because some movement is expected soon. Volunteers are instructed to respect standing regulations about food distribution. A volunteer enters the bus to hand out food to children and, while quickly walking through the bus, has to determine a young person's age in a split second – is the person younger or older than 18? Migrants do not always have personal documents. Given that translators are needed to help those that need medical assistance, they are not available to help with food distribution. The volunteer is not yet familiar with the foreign faces, and has difficulty determining the age of young people around the age of 18. He is confused because migrants get very upset when he passes them by without giving them food. Some were even suspicious about the food that was given only to children. "I did not expect this, what does it mean to be a volunteer?, I just wanted to come and help people – It is so difficult to follow all these rules... I could not imagine that I could find myself in a situation like this, to have a meal in my hands and not be allowed to give it to the asking hands. I have never experienced anything like this."

In all three cases, actors recalled the exact thoughts that crossed their minds and that ended up defining the event as a career shock (the shock that made them think whether they were "the right person in the right place"). At the heart of these shocks, the actors reported: (1) conflicting values and a clash in approach on almost a daily basis for some period of time that made work hard or even impossible: the values of donors and the RC organization on one side (e.g. food for children; third anecdote) and personal values and expectations of those in need (that are unaware of the mission of an otherwise well-known organization and claim their "rights), on the other"; (2) excessive hostile media attention (energy invested in working with less than friendly media as a way to explain and defend some value of the organization while people are in immediate need and colleagues need help); and (3) work demands that go beyond expectations and that are emotionally taxing (the first anecdote). Thus, the excessive work demands with conflicting values (disillusion) and media hostility actually were the major antecedents or "building blocks" of the career shocks of volunteers and staff in these situations.

Some of these problems illustrate some well-known attributes of career shocks, e.g. low frequency or even uniqueness of an event; contextual source (i.e. geopolitical

turmoil); and foreseeability (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018b). Nevertheless, some other important attributes emerged from specific organizational and employee/volunteer characteristics that may bring some new insights to the still-nascent conceptualization of career shocks (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018b). In the first and third stories, the protagonists were faced with situations that actually made them *(re)think the underlying values and mission of their jobs*. RC staff and volunteers are guided by humanity as one of the basic principles of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement. Belonging to this highly organized movement they have to respect and obey specific guidelines and defined job duties. In both situations, the shock could be perceived as a conflict between basic personal, organizational and job principles, and core values on the one hand, and limitations imposed by the immediate task and context on the other.

For the second story protagonist, the thoughts about this situation were: "This is not what I am here for; I do not know how to do this job." In reflecting on these different situations, these people all shared some defining thoughts questioning the career (e.g. whether they should give up or move on). What stems from these deep reconsiderations, in the case of jobs saturated with meaning, is that the impact of the stressful career event takes the form of the tangible career impact for a career with a YES/NO outcome. It could either be YES, this is still the career that I want for myself and there are no sharp changes or turns, an impact that denotes "re-marrying" the career and making new vows, or NO, this is not a career for me, I should leave (leaving would most probably mean leaving the job, the organization, and the calling itself, and would result in a sharp change to the career). It should be noted that there could be some nuances under the YES – thus in anecdote two, the event led to crafting and broadening the job role to incorporate new assignments. That also meant making stronger career vows. Indeed, this was the reason we suggested modifying the career impact criterion to significance for a career that does not need to constitute some visible change but may also include a deep attachment to the job (or detachment?) which could also be considered as a tangible career impact, at least for the focal person. Clearly, both career calling and job crafting constructs have a role to play in career shocks. We would expect an exacerbated impact of shocks for people who have a calling (as in the case of RC people), particularly when they need to abandon their calling as a result of the shock. This is a situation in which the shock impacts a person's identity. On the other hand, job crafting may constitute a resource in dealing with career shocks, in the sense that it may help mitigate their impact.

Theoretical perspectives on the three career shock anecdotes

Given the pre-paradigmatic state of research into career shocks, there is still ample opportunity to see which of the broad set of psychological theories we have at our disposal may best foster a greater understanding of the thought processes about the career, such as those described in the above, that define the experience of a career shock (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018b). For instance, insofar as we accept the idea that career shocks may constitute a special type of stressor, the aforementioned work on post-traumatic stress syndrome (Dohrenwend, 2010), may help us to gain a better understanding of which combinations of characteristics of career shocks may determine the more malignant individual outcomes, particularly those that negatively impact physical and mental well-being. For example, Dohrenwend has suggested that major stressful events in hazardous situations, such as those found in war zones (and presumably also those regularly encountered by RC staff and volunteers), have in common that they are negatively valenced, have an external source, are unpredictable, are large in objective magnitude, and tend to exhaust the individual. The ability to identify those career shocks that are most likely to have severe negative ramifications for individual well-being has clear implications for preventing the career shock from occurring in the first place. For instance, the career shock reported in Anecdote 3 could perhaps have been

prevented had the protagonist been granted more autonomy to decide how to distribute the food parcels (effectively neutralizing the external source) and more adequately briefed as to what to expect after boarding the bus (effectively making the situation more predictable). Following Dohrenwend's work, it could further be argued that beyond changing a career (which is not always a realistic option), career shocks may result in negative attitudes, bitterness, distrust, disengagement, lower career self-efficacy, lower career aspirations, and consequently, lower career success. At the extreme end, we could even argue that career shocks may result in learned helplessness if people do not have the resources, i.e. career resilience to deal with them.

From the perspective of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), actual-ought and actual-ideal discrepancies may be useful to enhance our understanding of shock experiences such as those outlined above, in which these discrepancies imply theoretical mechanisms and testable hypotheses, about the specific emotional outcomes that may follow as a result of a specific type of discrepancy. Furthermore, the definition of career shocks in terms of such discrepancies may also help us gain a better understanding of the interrelatedness between stressors and career shocks in future theoretical work. Indeed, none of the non-shock stressors entailed such higher-level thought processes pertaining to discrepancies between current circumstances and how things ought to be or should ideally be (see Table 1: "Identity-related" criterion). For instance, the third anecdote ("to have a meal in my hand and not to be allowed to give it to the asking hands") appears to exemplify the notion that people are likely to experience shame, embarrassment or feeling dispirited as a result of the situation demanding a different approach than the one dictated by the instructions of donors. Along similar lines, the first anecdote ("What if I all this that I am doing is not good enough?") appears to exemplify an actual-ideal discrepancy in that the focal person is actively wondering about the incongruence between current experience and what he or she would like to attain, and feeling frustrated and dissatisfied as a result. Discussing career shocks from the perspective of Higgins' self-discrepancy theory we come across an inevitable question: Whether a career shock that does not impact identity is still a career shock? Typically, career shocks are perceived as an interruption of one's career path, but perhaps a deeper issue is their identity relatedness. Confirmation or disconfirmation of one's identity could be the essence of career shocks.

Likewise, psychological contract theory is not necessarily limited to employee–employer relationships, and may indeed pertain to describing the outcomes of broken promises and obligations between any two parties (such as donors earmarking food packages only for people under the age of 18 in the third anecdote). Hence, psychological contract theory too may provide a tangible framework for specifying expectations about the proximal (emotions) and distal (attitudes and career behaviors) outcomes (cf. Zhao *et al.*, 2007) of career shocks. Specifically, affective events theory may explain how immediate emotional responses (i.e. feelings of violation) to the career shock at hand ultimately result in career impact. By focusing our attention on the cognitive and emotional processing of particular events, as opposed to the events *an sich*, we may also improve our understanding of the interaction between person and environment in determining the individual-level outcomes of career shocks. Person–environment fit theory may help in generating such understanding, because it suggests that when negative changes in perceived fit exceed certain thresholds this may trigger employee behaviors such as turnover (cf. Sylva *et al.*, 2019).

In seeking to understand the interplay of highly emotionally demanding situations or value-challenging situations and personal resources, we could furthermore apply the conservation of resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 2001), i.e. building personal resources that provide resilience to shocking situations. At the same time, there is a need to define new resources (apart from resilience). We propose searching for these new resources within the notion of life-long self (re)construction ability, the ability to engage in actions that enable a

person to construe some new personal perspective of him- or herself and to integrate the experience of career shock, when it has occurred, into a personal narrative (Savickas *et al.*, 2009). This particular personal resource or ability could be crucial for developing life-long immunity to further career shocks. Pondering about the valence (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018b) of the specific chance events occurring within the humanitarian crisis, it is hard to picture them as either positive or negative. At the exact moment, they are rather negative, but what "counts" from the perspective of one's career and core professional self-evaluations for our three protagonists is the awareness of helping someone and doing good for someone in need at the end of the day. It is in moving beyond the somewhat murky distinctions such as that between positive and negative career shocks, and opening the black box of the thought processes that specific types of career shocks entail, and the personal resources and narratives that people draw upon when confronted with a career shock, that we may start generating the much needed evidential bases for specific career outcomes.

Organizational response

Although the experiences such as those presented in the anecdotes were not explicitly recognized as career shocks, nor treated as such at the time, we explore below the resources, policies, and practices, that RC staff and volunteers experiencing such shocks, had at their disposal within the organization, in an effort to enhance our understanding of what other organizations may do to mitigate the negative effects of shocks that their employees may experience. Given the relatively greater likelihood, relative to organizations operating in less turbulent contexts, that RC staff and volunteers experience career shocks, it was our suspicion that resources, policies, and practices may have naturally evolved to mitigate the negative effects of career shocks, and perhaps also, albeit to a more limited extent, to nourish the positive effects of career shocks.

In Serbia, the first formal waves of training staff and volunteers to provide psychological first aid were initiated as a part of the response aiding refugees and victims of the civil wars in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. From then until now, organizational and collegial support, organizational learning, as well as informal collegial support are part of the organizational culture of the RCS. Psychological first aid training and interventions are at the disposal of RC Serbia staff and their beneficiaries. Providing psychological support is both an element of work procedures and a part of the overall value system and culture of the organization. The RCS also developed many other resources that are available to staff and volunteers, such as manuals, including those focusing on how to plan an action (e.g. blood donation action); good practices (e.g. inclusion of Roma children); and public advocacy (for further resources please see Red Cross of Serbia, 2020). It is important to highlight that the content of all resources is an inseparable part of the organizational culture and organizational socialization practices. All the experienced RC of Serbia staff are trained not only to mitigate but also to recognize the early signs of a colleague's burnout. It is not unusual to see that some older volunteer or staff member would approach the younger one offering him/her support or even jumping in to help and replace a colleague looking overwhelmed with demands. Saving and protecting others, but also protecting and valuing staff and volunteers are thus very much part and parcel of everyday living and working for the RC of Serbia. In sum, in order to be efficient in providing all sorts of aid, the RC as an organization has developed various tactics to sustain staff and volunteer mental health, ranging from specific activities to shared organizational values. The most prominent examples of these organizational solutions are: organizational support; the ethos of jumping in to help colleagues with work overload; or sending people to other branches to help with work overload as well as to share organizational expertise. Supporting people in these ways to work across RC organizations in affected communities within the boundaries of the national organization or internationally could thus be seen as some sort of naturally evolved career shock "vaccine."

The presented anecdotes, finally, show how career shocks have become part of the organizational narrative and culture. As the stories about specific important events "mature," their message underlying the meaning and values of humanitarian work and the common (collective?) sense of power in dealing with shocking events and growing through career shocks are being passed on to new generations of volunteers and staff. Thus, the organizational narrative could be a source of ever-growing wisdom in dealing with career shocks.

Concluding thoughts

The aim of this contribution was to explore career shocks deriving from the extreme case of the stress satiated work environment of the 2016 migration crisis. In so doing, we analyzed the career shocks of RC staff and volunteers, humanitarian workers whose everyday work entails dealing with potentially stressful and upsetting events. Specifically, we provided a post hoc analysis of a limited set of work-related events that RC staff and volunteers had recounted and recorded as part of a communication skills training that was delivered to 62 participants who had been deployed to provide assistance and relief to migrants passing through Serbia. Given that participants had not been primed to recall career shocks *per se*, a first objective was to examine to what extent the career-related events that participants recollected could be qualified as career shocks "avant la lettre". It is noteworthy that, that which ended up setting career shocks apart from the more general classification of stressors derived not from the more or less observable criteria, such as the frequency with which the event occurred, its predictability, its controllability, its valence or its duration but instead from the degree to which the event instigated in-depth reflection about the career, its identity relatedness, and the degree to which it had a tangible career impact (Table 1). It is by these three latter criteria that we were able to identify *unexpected emotionally intense work demands, media hostility*, and *conflicting values and clash in approach* as major career shocks.

Although these shocks are in line with the Akkermans *et al.* (2018b) definition of career shocks, the implication is that the occurrence of a career shock can only be ascertained and distinguished from stressors by having cognitive access to the way in which the focal person processes the event. More problematic from the perspective of operationalization is that if the occurrence of a career shock can only be ascertained by its impact on the career (whether it is in terms of reflection, identity, or impact), this greatly curtails our ability to prevent an as of yet unidentified shock from occurring. Indeed, there is something tautological about defining a presumed antecedent (i.e. the career shock) in terms of its consequent in this way, not in the last place because the implication that only events that impact the career can be qualified as career shocks would serve to artificially inflate correlations between the occurrence of such events and their consequences (even if these are but correlates of career outcomes). Stemming from the career shock definition (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018b, 2021) discuss career shock as the combination of an external event with a deliberate reconsideration of career goals. Based on the examples of experiences of RC people providing aid in the humanitarian crisis, clearly people with a strong calling, we could argue that career goals are anchored in the consequent. Goals that have to be abandoned or changed mean that their originally targeted outcomes may not be reached. The point we were trying to make is that if career shocks are an independent construct, why do we need to have knowledge of the outcomes (or the associated goals) to identify them. Furthermore, given that goals are likely to be idiosyncratic, it still means that the same event may have different consequences for different individuals.

We feel that the answer to this dilemma must be sought in the development of a more or less standardized and comprehensive taxonomy of career shocks. In a manner analogous to how algorithms are trained using knowledge of the outcome (for instance in training a spam filter to distinguish between spam and ham), we could set out to identify a finite and exhaustive set of

career shocks by investigating the impact that different events have on sustainable career outcomes (De Vos *et al.*, 2020) and indeed the personal dispositions that determine the severity of that impact for different individuals. Coupled with the likelihood of particular (combinations of) events occurring in particular contexts, we could then target organizational resources to efforts at prevention and/or amelioration by seeking to reduce their frequency and duration, and increase their predictability, controllability, and valence, insofar as that is viable. For those shocks that do transpire, we expect that interventions targeted at cognitive and emotional coping may be most effective in mitigating their negative impact.

These practical solutions for the organization and its staff and volunteers "surviving" this situation could also be perceived as interventions aiming to mitigate the negative consequences of career shocks. This is particularly important when it comes to a humanitarian organization with low turnover, where employees seldom voluntarily leave the organization. Job embeddedness and years of accumulating experiences across numerous stressful events highlight employees' value for the organization. That way low turnover supports developing high organization-based self-esteem that could, in turn, be part of the answer to mitigating the negative effects of career shocks. But it could also be a problem if an employee would perceive changing a job or leaving an organization as a viable option but in reality, was not in a position to pursue it. This poses a wider question of leaving the job and/or organization as one possible career shock outcome in the context in which these are unrealistic options. When experiencing a career shock, as pointed out in the invitation for this special issue (Akkermans *et al.*, 2018a), exploring the interplay between an employee and the context is highly needed. The multilayered context in which RC people provide aid clearly suggests why it could be fruitful for career shocks researchers to explore people working in different jobs and in the different job market and economic conditions.

As pointed out earlier, the retrospective analysis of a restricted number of events reported in the particular context of RC staff and volunteers working to assist during the 2016 migration crisis has clear limitations, not in the last place in terms of methodological rigor. Clearly one can question to what extent the shocks identified as part of the current endeavor will generalize to different contexts, organizations, places, and times. Nevertheless, we also see opportunities for future research where it comes to gaining a richer understanding of the context in which shocks transpire through more systematic qualitative approaches.

In sum, we hope that future researchers will take inspiration from the different experiences of RC staff and volunteers that were reported on in this article. It appears that organizational values, fostering person–organization fit, providing organizational and collegial support, and deploying "weathered" staff and volunteers, could collectively comprise the vaccine that makes the organization as a whole immune to career shocks. It is our hope that our exposition on the topic of the career shocks of RC staff and volunteers will inspire future researchers and practitioners alike to gain a deeper appreciation and understanding of the antecedents, experiences, and consequences of career shocks, and that the domain of career shocks will further mature by (1) a clearer understanding of the similarities and differences between career shocks and stressors, (2) the development of a comprehensive taxonomy of career shocks, and (3) the identification of those preventative and curative measures that may be taken in light of specific shocks (including a more personalized approach that accounts for individual differences in cognitive appraisal and emotions).

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