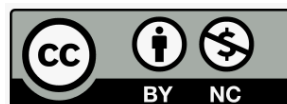


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# A Study of Career Shocks from the Perspective of Personal Construct Psychology: Small Business Owners in the Jaws of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Serbia

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## **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic could be considered as a career shock for employees in different industries around the world. The aim of this research was to gain insight into the dynamics of Serbian small business owners' career shocks caused by the COVID-19 pandemic by using personal construct psychology (PCP) as a theoretical framework. We conducted 18 semi-structured interviews with 9 small business owners on two separate occasions and analyzed their personal stories. The data were collected during the most restrictive lockdown in Serbia in April 2020 and again at the end of June 2020 when the number of the people infected was on a rapid rise. The reaction to the career shock caused by the pandemic can be understood by analyzing transitions (how people perceive career shocks), people's coping strategies and the way in which their dependencies were dispersed. This study contributes to understanding the career shock issue by viewing it through the lens of the personal construct theory.

## **KEYWORDS**

*Career shock; COVID-19 pandemic; Personal Construct Psychology (PCP); Serbian small business owners; narratives*

The COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020 and it has resulted in deaths of nearly five million people around the globe (on October 7; WHO, 2021). According to Akkermans et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic could also be considered as a career shock that may have an impact on people's career dynamics. A career shock is a major career event that triggers the process of the (re)consideration of one's career (Akkermans et al., 2020; Akkermans et al., 2018). Career shocks can be both positive and negative and they entail events that are relatively outside the individual's control (i.e., losing a job in an unexpected way). Research into career shocks has not been in focus until recently, since scientific endeavors were more focused on the concepts that almost exclusively emphasize individual agency as a key competence leading to career success (Akkermans et al., 2018; Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). In referring to some of the recent labor-market developments (e.g., careers are becoming less secure), Akkermans et al. (2018) call for further research on career shocks. New outlooks within different cultural, economic and social contexts, using different methodological and theoretical approaches, could deepen our understanding of this phenomenon (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017).

In this paper, we analyze the career shock stories of Serbian small business owners, the owners of micro companies (up to 10 employees) which were hard hit by the state response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Namely, from 20 March 2020, all restaurants, cafes, and the majority of shops selling non-essential goods, as well as public transportation in Serbia, were closed down. From 21 March the government established a curfew from 5 pm to 5 am, followed by an

additional weekend curfew from 28 March. All these restrictive measures lasted until 6 May when the curfew was lifted. The lifting of measures was followed by the second wave of COVID-19 cases at the end of June imposing incredible challenges on small business owners.

The contribution of this study is to understand the dynamics of the career shocks experienced by small business owners as a specific segment of the working population during the COVID-19 pandemic in the context of personal construct psychology (PCP; Kelly, 1955). As pointed out by Kelly, everyone is a scientist and “the scientist’s ultimate aim is to predict and control” (p. 4). In an effort to anticipate and control, the person-the-scientist is not a victim of internal or external circumstances but is capable of making free choices between different ways in which s/he can construe the surrounding world. By using the PCP approach, we will analyze the interplay between individual agency (i.e. small business owners’ personal strategies) and the chance event (COVID-19 pandemic), and its impact on career outcomes. Following Kelly’s (1955) constructive alternativism, we take over the assumption that “there are always some alternative constructions available to choose among in dealing with an event” (p.11) such as the COVID-19 pandemic. As pointed out by Cipolletta and Ortu (2021), this approach enables us to be prolific in search of different interpretations of the COVID-19 pandemic, in our case, as seen through the lens of small business owners.

Winter and Reed (2021) have already shown that the COVID-19 pandemic can be analyzed and understood by using PCP diagnostic constructs – a set of theoretical constructs used by a PCP practitioner for mapping the personal constructs of her/his clients. We believe that the PCP diagnostic constructs could offer some useful interpretive insights into the ways in which people can construe the same burdensome event (the COVID-19 pandemic) in different ways, which further leads them to choose different coping strategies associated with different career outcomes for small business owners. Thus, by using the PCP approach we offer to both researchers and career counselors some fresh, non-pathologizing concepts for understanding different reactions to career shocks. We believe that by appreciating both personal strengths and weaknesses, PCP could offer an inspiring stage for creating career interventions that could facilitate development of more adaptive strategies in dealing with career shocks in turbulent times.

### **Career shocks in light of the COVID-19 pandemic**

According to Akkermans et al. (2018), a career shock is defined as “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” (p. 4).

Career shocks have certain major attributes – they are infrequent events, they engage people in rethinking their careers, and, to some extent, they are outside of individual’s control and are unforeseen (Akkermans et al., 2018). Thus, a career shock may be perceived as some kind of *earthquake* (Akkermans et al., 2020) that can catch someone *off guard* during different life and career stages. A career may be defined as a series of positions held during the life course (Super, 1980). According to Super (1980), during the course of the person’s life, people play different roles such as that of a worker, homemaker, citizen, parent, etc. Although each role is usually related to one *theater*, such roles may be played on different stages simultaneously (e.g., being in a parent role at home and at school). When it comes to career shock, it seems that certain shocking events such as losing a job may serve to employ multiple roles at the same time. On the other hand, when a shocking event occurs within the context of

a small or family business, the spillover effects of shock on different roles at the same time are more likely.

Applying the Job Demands-Resources Theory (JD-R, Bakker & Demerouti, 2018) and the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR, Hobfoll, 2002), we assume that individuals differ according to the available personal and organizational resources for dealing with shocks. People attempt to accumulate and protect their personal resources in order to maintain their wellbeing. Personal resources (e.g., hope and optimism) may help individuals when facing career shocks. On the other hand, having organizational and governmental resources, especially when it comes to specifically vulnerable workers, could alter the effects of shock leading to more favorable outcomes.

Akkermans et al. (2020) assert that the COVID-19 pandemic could be considered as a career shock for many employees from different industries around the world. According to the International Labor Organization, ILO (2020), at least 436 million enterprises are at high risk of significant disruption, and the small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) sector emerges as the most vulnerable. Akkermans et al. (2020) highlighted some very important *lessons* for understanding and exploring the implications of COVID-19 for individuals' careers. The first lesson refers to the possible implications of the interplay between individual and contextual factors on the effects of COVID-19 as a career shock. Within this interplay, access to personal resources could buffer the negative implications of career shocks and other negative career events.

The second lesson concerns the way in which the pandemic-related career shock outcomes could differ in terms of their short- and long-term implications, as well as the life and career stage at which an individual encounters a pandemic. The third is whether the negatively valenced shock could still have some positive consequences for the individual, such as opportunities for the emergence of brand new industries or inspiring the individual to (re)evaluate their career or life trajectory (Akkermans et al., 2020).

Leading a small or micro business in Serbia is marked by economic, social and political turmoil. Since the early 1990s, Serbia has been constantly struggling with social, economic and political instability (Petrović et al., 2017). Even though some research shows that the development of the SME sector in Serbia is positively linked to national competitiveness (Petković & Ivanović Đukić, 2018), this sector seems to be particularly vulnerable to some COVID-19 pandemic measures.

### **PCP at the heart of understanding career shocks**

In PCP (Kelly, 1955) a great deal of attention is paid to how people change, what the change process looks like and which obstacles are faced by those going through change. Furthermore, Kelly's constructivist theory offers an elaborated set of professional constructs (dimensions used to diagnose a person's construing in personal construct terms) that have proved to be useful tools for interpreting transitions in the system of personal constructs.

Anticipating events is vital in PCP as it highlights the proactive nature of the *person-as-construer*, who strives to predict and control the course of events in life. This point is particularly important in understanding how people deal with career shocks, which strategies they implement, and how these strategies determine the *aftershock* dynamics. According to PCP, changes are initiated by the influence of new "experiential" insights as a person faces the

necessity of revising the existing constructs when they cease to be an adequate means for anticipation (Kelly, 1955; Stojnov, 2007). One of the most common challenges faced by someone who is confronted with change is the existence of extraordinary events that lie outside the range of convenience of a person's construct system; this awareness is what Kelly (1955) calls *anxiety*. This concept is particularly interesting when studying the reactions to career shock as a major event, which, to some degree, is triggered by factors outside the individual's control (Akkermans et al., 2018).

The basic premise of PCP is that people construe events by using their systems of bipolar personal constructs, with one pole being opposite in meaning to the other. Constructs are organized into a hierarchical system as suggested in the organization corollary (Kelly, 1955). This is a personal network of channels for anticipation of events. *Superordinate constructs* exert control over the *subordinate* ones, which means that subordinate constructs are placed into the jurisdiction of superordinate constructs (Kelly, 1955). This implies that a change in one part entails a wider change in the rest of the system of meanings. Thus, a shocking event within the *professional* realm of meaning (e.g., losing a job), could disrupt the system as a whole and call for wider changes. Some highly superordinate constructs are *core constructs* because they form the "backbone" of our life as social beings and largely determine one's identity. The notion of implicative relations between constructs, and the coreness in the system of constructs, enable a deeper understanding of both the short- and long-term implications of the initiated changes (e.g., the short- and long-term implications of career shocks provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic).

Some events in the outside world pose a relatively minor challenge to one's system of constructs and can produce peripheral changes. However, there are events that carry far-reaching consequences for an individual's construct system. The challenge a person encounters in such a case might result in the need for change, which then grows into a *chain reaction* that spreads across the network of constructs, thus threatening the core beliefs. The awareness of an imminent and comprehensive change in the system of constructs in PCP is called *threat*. When faced with the invalidation of a personal construction, the person-as-construer may take several actions or adopt certain coping strategies. One way of dealing with a challenging event is to make an additional effort to elaborate the perceptual field

(Kelly, 1955, Vol. 2, p. 7) in order to ensure the sustainability of the existing construction. Kelly calls this strategy *aggression*. Thus, a person could be *aggressive* and try to elaborate new ways of satisfying her personal theories, to engage new resources or to explore new approaches to relying on old resources (Kelly, 1955). Within the context of a career shock, this could mean finding a way to *exploit* the shocking situation in order to produce favorable opportunities for career development. Further coping strategies that could lead to somewhat deeper changes include: *dilation versus constriction*, changes in the *permeability* of the superordinate structure; *propositional construing*, and *loosening versus tightening*. Faced with the increased complexity of the situations brought about by a threatening event, a person may expand their perceptual field (i.e., to dilate) in order to enable the existing superordinate structure of constructs to encompass the multiplicity of situations that are encountered experientially. On the other hand, one can resort to narrowing the perceptual field construed by personal constructs and thus protect oneself from a multitude of experiences that are incompatible with each other (i.e., to constrict). What a person could further do, in order to reach more comprehensive change within the system, is to expand the definition of the superordinate construct which is affected by the change.

This enables the construct and its related narrative to be sustained because their range of convenience for new experiences has been increased (permeable construing). One of the strategies to reach more profound change is to construe a critical experience with a large number of different constructs, to view it from a multitude of perspectives (*to construe propositionally*), instead of interpreting each one unilaterally with only one construct (*to construe preemptively*). Thus, the career shock could be perceived like one of many other stressful events that can be handled successfully using existing strategies. Finally, individuals could choose to *loosely construe* a shocking situation, employing more flexible, less precise construing, in order to avoid their core structure being crushed on the hard rocks of an overly rigid approach to reality. On the other hand, sometimes the way to overcome a threatening situation is to make the constructions more precise, which gives them predictive power and ensures easier action. Some of the restrictions introduced by the Serbian government were expressed loosely, causing confusion among citizens as well as fear and disappointment. When our constructs fail to achieve a clear prediction by using some of the previously mentioned strategies (e.g., aggressiveness, permeability), another strategy is available to us. Kelly uses the term *reconstruction* to describe the process of creating brand new meanings which involve new perspectives on certain issues, as well as new actions and new ways of coping with problems. This is the change with the most far-reaching implications in the construct system because it changes the system itself and not just changes within the system (Fransella, 1993). However, a threat can be one of the main reasons why strategies to resist change may be adopted (Fransella, 1993). A person may strive to maintain his/her constructions at all costs, by finding validation evidence even when it is quite clear that those personal constructions have become unsustainable. Kelly (1955) refers to such a strategy for coping with change as *hostility*. Another term which may indicate a hostile way of using personal constructs is *anger*. Even though we cannot consider anger as the same thing as hostility, it could refer to someone's concern to maintain his/her constructs by all means (Lester, 2009).

When it comes to analyzing the relationship networks and their functions when a person is faced with a career shock, PCP offers a unique approach to the notion of *role* as a construing process that takes place in social relations (Kelly, 1955). The role is defined as a social process undertaken by a person who tries to construe parts of the construct system of another person with whom they strive to be in a joint venture. The main feature of the role as a notion is that it is an ongoing endeavor that carries a person's specific interpretation (not a culturally predefined set of duties) of what is expected from him/her as a social actor. Some roles form the essence of a person's professional and personal identity as they portray the relations that are of a key importance in their life or career. Those roles in PCP are referred to as the *core roles*. Efforts to maintain the core role in volatile relationships might be challenging in circumstances that call for behaviors that are incompatible with a previous role. This unpleasant awareness that a person is dislodged from the core role is called *guilt* in PCP (Kelly, 1955). Thus, someone might feel guilt when being dislodged from the role of successor of the family business.

Apart from that, a person could experience *sadness* as being aware of losing a connection between his/her core structure and some highly valued object (Lester, 2009; McCoy, 1977). Thus, in being sad, a person tries to maintain contact with a valued object. At this point, it is important to highlight that *sadness* as well as *anger* are not included in the professional constructs listed by Kelly, but those concepts have been in wide use since McCoy introduced them more than four decades ago. Apart from that, those constructs proved to be valuable in their interpretative potential in analyzing career shock narratives that are presented later in text. In facing career shocks during COVID-19, the importance of personal, social, and institutional

resources in meeting challenges should be taken into account. The constructs whereby PCP conceives others as resources are termed *dependency constructs* because they indicate that in common interpersonal relationships there is a *healthy* measure of people relying on each other (Kelly, 1955; Walker, 2003). When it comes to dealing with challenging situations, a functional strategy involves the *dispersion of dependencies*, which refers to the ability to break down our needs into narrower and more specific ones and build a diverse network of resources to connect with each need. Such resources are not exclusively related to other people. The resources for meeting our needs may be financial, institutional, and material.

## Aim

The aim of this research was to gain insight into the dynamics of career shock faced by small business owners during the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on their career outcomes by using PCP as the theoretical framework. Within our research we will try to achieve a deeper understanding of: 1) how people perceive the “extraordinary event” of a career shock (transitions in small business owners’ personal constructs such as anxiety, threat, guilt, and sadness); 2) what an individual does when faced with an event outside their personal control (coping strategies such as hostility, aggressiveness, reconstruction, constriction/dilation, permeable/impermeable construing, preemptive/propositional construing, and tight/loose construing), and 3) the possible dynamics of the interplay between individual and immediate contextual factors (dispersion of dependencies, the role relationship). In order to achieve our aim, we will analyze the owners’ personal stories (narratives) as a whole so as to discover the specific dynamics of each COVID-19 pandemic-induced shock. The theoretical framework for our analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. F framework for the analysis.

Questions (based on Akkermans et al., 2020; Akkermans et al., 2018)	Categories (Kelly, 1955)
Transitions, i.e. how people perceive a “disruptive and extraordinary event” of a career shock	Anxiety Threat Guilt Sadness <sup>a</sup>
Strategies of coping, i.e. what an individual does when faced with an event outside of their control that triggers deliberation about his/her career	Aggressiveness Reconstruction Hostility Constriction/Dilation Permeable/Impermeable Tight/Loose Propositional/preemptive
Interplay between person and her immediate context	Dispersed/undispersed dependencies Role relationship

<sup>a</sup>Constructivist interpretation of sadness is offered by McCoy (1977).

Table 2. S ample characteristics.

Respondent number	Area of work	Foundation year	Number of employees (owner + employees)
1	Tooth imaging	2017	1+2
2	Tourism	2019	1+2
3	Beauty salon	2009	1+3
4	Dental clinic	1990	1+7
5	Consultancy office	2000	1+0
6	Pub	2017	2+4
7	Physiotherapist practice	2008	2+6
8	Recording studio	2015	1+(2 external consultants)
9	Apartment renovation office	2010	1+(5,6 part time workers)

## Method

### *Sample*

The sample consisted of nine small business owners interviewed on two occasions – during April 2020 and at the end of June 2020 (18 interviews in total). In order to provide diversity of the sample we interviewed business owners of different ages (from 31 to 71 years), different educational backgrounds (four with vocational education and five with a university diploma), and from different industries (Table 2). We had only two women in our sample, which is in accordance with the greater representation of men among business owners (Bosma et al., 2020). The owners were from two Belgrade municipalities – one central (three participants), and other peripheral (six participants).

### *Procedure*

We adopted a purposive sampling approach in which we sought out the owners of micro businesses (up to ten employees) from Serbia (Belgrade) who had closed their firms due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. We particularly looked for those who did not have any online or delivery alternative in order to see the impact of an extreme situation on their perceptions of career shocks. The first and the third author contacted the owners of such small businesses directly and asked them to participate in this research. They contacted small business owners which they had previously known from earlier research projects and who met the sampling criteria for this research and conducted the interviews with them. The aim of the research was explained to participants and how the information about them would be used. Confidentiality was guaranteed to all and they all agreed to participate. All the interviews were conducted online. Majority of interviews (six interviews) were recorded and transcribed. Complying with the desire of three participants who said they would not feel pleasant to be recorded, the remaining three interviews were not recorded, but the interviewers took notes in detail. Following Novek and Wilkinson (2019), we believed that allowing such flexibility to participants would secure inclusivity and allow the participants to have control over the research, especially in the challenging times of pandemic. Both interviewers are highly competent in interviewing and taking notes. The obtained data from the transcribed material and from the notes were of equal quality, which enabled treating them as belonging to the same sample. Parts of the narratives that could be revealing regarding the participants' identity were not included in this paper. The business sector in which a participant worked was included, but details that might endanger anonymity were omitted. The research project was approved by the



Institutional review board of the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade, Serbia.

### ***Interview questions***

On the first occasion, we opted for the direct reactions of small business owners to the COVID-19 lockdown, while on the second we looked for the ways in which their businesses had adapted to the *new normal* and how they had managed this transition. During the first interview, we asked each one of them whether and to what extent closing their businesses due to the pandemic represented a career shock for them (according to the definition provided by Akkermans et al., 2018) and they all agreed that their current situation could be described in this manner. We asked them how they had started their own businesses, what their exact thoughts and feelings were when they faced the shutting of their companies and what decisions had to be made. We also asked them about their employees and how they had reacted, how their relationships with clients had changed, what their predictions about the future were, whether they had been given any kind of support, and, finally, if there was anything positive in this situation. In the follow-up interview, we asked them to describe their current situation, whether they had continued with their business, what their relationship with clients and employees was like, and what their expectations were regarding the future.

### ***Data analysis and quality assurance***

We used the case study approach as the general methodological framework for data analysis. This approach allowed us to comprehensively present the individual specifics of the psychological response to career shock and at the same time to identify patterns for generalizing the findings in cross-case analysis (Yin, 2014). Within the case study, we applied a qualitative thematic analysis of the deductive type (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We used the diagnostic constructs from PCP (Table 1) related to insights into career shocks offered by Akkermans et al. (2020) and Akkermans et al. (2018) as the categories for the classification of the interview material. To ensure intersubjective agreement, authors that conducted interviews independently coded the entire interview material. In the next step, the codes were compared and analyzed for any similarities and differences in the two independent coding alternatives. Based on critical dialogue, negotiations were held on the meaning of those sections that were categorized differently. The most common disagreements were due to the fact that some excerpts contained parts that could be placed in several categories, resulting in differences among the evaluators. Therefore, we decided to fragment them and arrange these different parts into separate categories. Finally, we proceeded to compile the case studies based on the initial thematic analysis, negotiating the individual elements of the description and returning to the material from the interviews in several iterations.

### **Results and discussion**

Firstly, we present the cases of those participants whose answers to the pandemic were predominantly aggressive, followed by those who initiated a movement toward reconstruction and, finally, we introduce the cases involving some less adaptive strategies.

#### ***The owner of a consultancy office***

The owner of the consultancy office started his business after a major career shock: “I started my career as a consultant after losing my job in a state-owned company.” When confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic, the consultant felt anxious about the future of his career, he was taken aback to the point of feeling almost like a beginner. “I wonder what the scope of my work will be, how we will communicate with clients directly. How will we deal with a large number of people in the offices, how safe will it be?” Anxiety is even more expressed in the consultant’s story in comparison to the other interviewed participants, possibly due to his being in the later stage of his career. “I don’t know what will happen, it can’t be predicted... I haven’t made any special decisions, at least not for now... I can always retire.”

The retirement option sounds like an elaboration of the possibility to constrict due to the uncertainties he was facing. The reorganization enabled by the constriction opened up the space for additional efforts in maintaining the core structure related to professional identity, thus proving its sustainability. “Now I’m using the situation to work on a very extensive project. The project is complex and I have to invest a great deal of effort in it. I can do that now.”

This career shock seems to have also opened up some new opportunities for him, stemming from his core professional structure – like the need to slow down and revive some previously neglected professional needs. After the lockdown was over, he started to work as hard as he had previously. He efficaciously dilated (widened) his professional field and almost dove into his work again (an aggressive approach), but unfortunately contracted COVID-19. This meant another crisis for the consultant’s professional activities, with the effect of serial invalidation of his anticipation processes. He responded again by constriction due to the urgency to focus on his health problem. He behaved as if the capacities for an aggressive approach (i.e., the elaboration of his perceptual field) to the crisis had collapsed due to the challenges faced within the second wave of the epidemic. In the follow-up interview sadness prevails, not only because of his current health condition, but also in light of its implications for his further career: “Maybe I should reconsider retiring.”

### ***The owner of a recording studio***

The owner of the recording studio is an artist at the beginning of his career who is trying to maintain his business by relying on family resources. When confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic, the owner of the recording studio responded with an adaptive loosening (i.e., making varying predictions about the pandemic) and with constriction (i.e., narrowing his perceptual field). “As an artist... I will tell you honestly, at the beginning, I enjoyed this isolation. We all love to be a little lonely in order to compose. Now I am starting to miss my work.” This withdrawal can be understood as a strategy in the service of reorganization within the system of constructs. This enables him to focus on the activities with which he can easily identify but that have been neglected in the previous period. It is evident that he also applies an aggressive strategy to overcome the feeling of isolation. “I have one post-production project on which I have been working a lot recently, during the confinement.” On the other hand, some parts of his narrative point to threatening anticipations. For example, the threat of having to reconsider his attitude toward health. He will have to elaborate the undesirable pole of the construct related to health (*be careless*) for the sake of continuing cooperation with his clients. This career shock seems to have “brought to the table” certain issues that he had not considered at all during his career (i.e., that his job could endanger his health). Apart from that, the pandemic also raised the question of whether and how he can disperse some new dependencies (*i.e.* implementation of public health measures) as he started to perceive his clients as unreliable partners in this endeavor, especially when the

implementation of public health measures for prevention and control of COVID-19 was not systematically monitored on the state level. “The musicians do not give a damn about this situation. They will not respect any hygiene protocols, distance... On the other hand, I am not like them. I’m scared.” He sees himself as a musician and emphasizes that music production is the job for which he was educated and the only job he can do. So, in his case, it is not only a career crisis, but also an identity crisis. “For me it is either this job or going to work in construction.” This could be marked as a preemptive construction, as if he were telling us: I have to be a musician and nothing else but a musician! However, there is a tendency to aggressively seek a way to sustain his career despite the unfavorable circumstances, and to construe the crisis as a long term chance. “Again, there is hope... When this is all over, people will rush to concerts, and they will be delighted to make music again. It will be like a shower in the desert.” Only the perspective of future events will show whether these hopes are a good opportunity to take advantage of, or a new type of hostility which is marked by insisting on the constructs which have been proved to be futile. The follow-up interview points to further movement toward aggressive elaboration of his career. This movement is characterized by more permeable construction of his professional identity on the one side, and more focused targeting of his clients as a way to achieve financial sustainability. “Now I have decided that I will focus on exclusive clientele, and I will try to earn the rest of the money by doing something else close to my profession – campaigns for music bands.”

### ***The owner of a beauty salon***

The owner of the beauty salon faced the COVID-19 pandemic with optimism. She faced this crisis as the owner of a well-established business, with reliable employees with whom she had a strong role relationship and with regular customers. She sees her job as the realization of her career plans. “I do what I was educated for, I do it with passion, which gives me the opportunity to be creative, satisfied and to make a nice living.” She also sees the beauty salon as an extension of her home (“The salon is the fourth room in my apartment”), which indicates a strong identification with the business she runs.

In that sense, the feeling of sadness she experienced at the closure of her salon is understandable, since it was a potential loss of what was valuable to her. She vividly described the initial shock of the sudden breakdown of her anticipations, which ranged from plans to hire a new worker due to increased workload to the fear that she would be forced to lay some of them off. “At the beginning of the year I was planning to hire another employee and now I am thinking about how to keep all my employees, and not to lay anyone off. This is the first time I’ve seen my salon door closed... That was sad.” Nevertheless, an aggressive effort to keep the existing business *bets* is corroborated by an optimistic belief in a favorable outcome of the crisis. “This has to end at some point sooner or later, so when it stops, I will reopen my salon... As soon as the lockdown is over – first thing in the morning, people will come to me. There will certainly be losses, but they are not irreparable.” This confidence in a favorable resolution of the crisis seems to have helped her to overcome the initial anxiety and the feeling that her business was in jeopardy. However, her career story took a desirable turn, which could be explained by the predominance of narratives such as “it is difficult for everyone”, the further course of events “does not depend on me”, but also that she can hope for a good outcome and feel safe because: “I am done with my loans – I am the owner of this salon”. She shows the ability to resort to a resilient strategy in the face of career shock. She perceives the change in some clients’ habits as potentially threatening, calling for a more extensive reconstruction of the current approach to business. Her professional role is going to stay intact, however, her wider approach to the business might need to change substantially. “What has happened now

on the market is that suppliers have made an unfair move by selling salon equipment and materials to bloggers. I am afraid that women will start to do their nails by themselves... I don't know whether I will have to change my offer in the salon... It is hard." She feels the responsibility to protect her employees, to provide them with financial security and to maintain closeness with them in the conditions of the upcoming economic crisis caused by the epidemic, pointing to the *role relationship*. This particular approach is especially caring and empathic in the economic context of Serbia, in which small business owners were not financially supported enough to maintain their business. On the other hand, it should be noted that their employees are not from the professions that are in deficit in the market. Her decisions were obviously not led solely by business calculations, but rather by personal reasons. "I still pay my employees and I will definitely continue to do so because it is necessary in order to keep these girls, they are my family."

In the follow-up interview, she still remained optimistic, even though she seemed to be struggling to disperse her dependencies (to share responsibilities) between herself and her customers. "In the beginning everyone was enthusiastic, it was a pleasure to see our customers again. Now... somehow our clients come in a bad mood, they cancel their appointments, there is no exchange of positive energy among us, like there was before... and then we are losing enthusiasm too. We need to remind them to wear masks, not to come accompanied, not to cancel at the last minute." Nevertheless, she responded to the initial crisis with resilience even in the condition of repeated shock. "I am still an incorrigible optimist. I believe that this will end in a good way, and that this crisis will soon pass."

### ***The co-owner of a pub***

The pub owner construed the shock caused by the COVID-19 pandemic using narratives about the harsh experience that people in Serbia went through during the 1990s, which made them resistant to new challenges. He runs the business with his partner (significantly older than him) and noticed differences in the strategies they use to overcome this crisis. "How have we experienced this? My partner has reacted to it worse than I... He has had enough of everything – the 1990s, the wars, the (NATO 1999) bombing. I think differently. Precisely because we live here, I don't think anything can surprise us anymore." This permeable approach ensures the survival of his superordinate structure and indicates its willingness to support further elaboration, relying on dilation. Prior to the epidemic, the superordinate and comprehensive construct that led his course of action in the professional field was step by step, slowly, thoughtfully versus recklessly, dynamically, in adapting to changing market needs. "My partner and I started this business three years ago, systematically, step by step, brick by brick. First we found and chose the space, and then we started to build a relationship with suppliers and customers. We had analyzed the market and made a unique offer, in a perfect location – in the central area of the city." The COVID-19 pandemic abruptly and sharply changed the business conditions, and the pub-owner faced problems with his strategy to develop his business slowly and gradually. He realized that the step-by-step approach should be replaced by a more prompt response to the dynamic market needs. This indicates a tendency toward reconstruction of the construct "slowly and step-by-step versus abruptly and without preparation". "You can't wait for the second half, matches must be played in parallel... What I have learned in this situation is that you must not allow a comfort zone at any time. It was only when this happened that we activated Instagram, started to think about takeaway options, and deliveries of craft beer. Until then, it was in the long run, in a 'take it easy' mood." We found out that after the lockdown he continued to work, anticipating that the conditions would be similar to those before the pandemic and he felt ready to manage the new circumstances. While facing the second wave of

the coronavirus in Serbia, he struggled to disperse dependencies (i.e., to share responsibilities) between himself and his customers. “The specific type of clients are those who come in the evening. It’s challenging for them, they are reluctant to keep a physical distance, they don’t wear masks... You can’t do much there. When the measures are completely relaxed, you can only warn them, and it is up to them whether they follow the advice or not, and they are your customers.”

### ***The owner of a specialized tourist agency***

When faced with business closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the owner of a specialized tourist agency experienced anxiety. She was new in the business, and enthusiastic about starting her own business. She was in the process of transitioning from a “regular” job to entrepreneurship when she encountered the massive lockdown and curfew. “I thought for a while about what I could do, I wanted to start my own business... and then I realized that I should do something with as little risk as possible, and with reasonable investment in order to test my entrepreneurial abilities.” She describes her business as a *friendly endeavor*, in which she relied on her friends in order to start up her business – her friends helped her with the campaign and creation of a website. She also employed two friends to work for her. Her initial response to the shock was confusion and a flood of negative emotions – in her case, the crisis could be described as threat. It was a new career chapter that turned into a dead end – a call for an imminent and comprehensive change in her core construing of professional identity. Nevertheless, the narrative of the valuable experience gained in this endeavor prevailed after confrontation with anxiety and threat. “At first, I thought this was something that would last for a short time, and then I realized, no matter how long it lasts, the last thing that will happen is for people to start traveling! It’s so far from that... I felt very bad, I was so sad. I just thought I could change my job and start something new.” The key moment for securing an adaptive response to the crisis could be described as a kind of *narrative turn*, in which her belief that her life is more than just her business comes as a valuable insight. By propositionally constructing her identity, she seemed to have achieved *de-identification* with the business, which enabled effective de-investment from the further elaboration of some earlier constructions. Such a strategy served to encourage a new cycle of experience and reconstructive tendencies in her system of constructs. “I was in a very bad mood... for maybe a week. Until the moment I realized that I as a person was not that business. I will get out of it just as easily as I got into it. The positive thing is that I learned a lot during the whole process... When you buy a shelf for business premises, you don’t buy one that costs 20,000 dinars, but 10,000.”

However, this also indicates a tendency toward hasty withdrawal from business (“I will get out of it just as easily as I got into it”), made possible by the sharp elaboration of the opposite pole of the construct related to her business experience. She initially invested herself fully in her business, and then began to construe the business as something she could easily give up. In the follow-up interview, we learned that she had decided to shut down her business. As she pointed out, she lost her enthusiasm for entrepreneurship having encountered so many uncertainties and obstacles. She is currently planning to continue to work on her main paid job and to maintain her well-being. “Maybe at some point in the future I will return to this idea, but now I have to compensate for my financial losses and to structure my experiences regarding this adventure.”

### ***The co-owner of a dental clinic***

The co-owner of the dental clinic inherited the long-term family business from his father, who withdrew after retirement. When facing the crisis, he opted for some tight constructions in

relation to his business philosophy – to maintain reliable employees and put people before profit. Nevertheless, he seemed to be angry because his approach differed from that of his colleagues. “I know that there are some colleagues who are carrying on with their work in these conditions. There are also some easy clients... The other day one of these clients called me and said that she had returned from her holiday in Italy and wondered whether I could whiten her teeth... I was very rude to her, and I do not regret it. And you certainly have those colleagues who find a way to receive such clients and earn in spite of everything. They don’t care about themselves or their employees. It is not my cup of tea.” However, the far-reaching implication of such a choice is to question certain priorities and expectations regarding his lifestyle, which is a reasonable response to the crisis. This situation leads to a reexamination of his career, which could be understood as a tendency toward reconstruction. “To tell you the truth, I am increasingly wondering, during this isolation, what is important to me in life, whether I can live more modestly. Of course, there are a lot of things that have to be taken into account, it’s a family business, but again, I am wondering where the limit is.” A tendency to encapsulate the *inherited* values in the form of family constructs related to the reputation of the clinic, the way clients’ needs should be addressed and what relationships with them should be like was noticed. This pressure to keep up family traditions that burdened him may have made him expect his clients to view his profession the way he did. “This is a family business that has been in existence for decades. I worked with my father, took my first steps here, and developed professionally... We are a well-known clinic... I think that the only positive thing about this pandemic is that people will start to respect doctors a little more and that they will be able to understand the risk we are taking to treat them. They can’t take us for granted just because they pay us.”

He has several roles activated at the same time – the role of a professional, a follower of the family tradition, and a business owner – and they all seem to be affected by this shock. By reviewing his current business model, which implies relying on a significant number of clients and having a heavy workload, the dentist actually tries to validate his role as the successor of the family tradition. In his relationship with his employees, it seems that many of their dependencies (i.e., employees’ needs and fears) are *hooked* on him. “I am talking to everyone, it’s not easy, we are making mutual agreements, we are discussing every issue we face. I somehow manage to calm them down, to cheer them up, but only in the short run.” In the follow-up interview, the dentist had started to work, but he was very angry. He was considering emigrating and leaving the role of the bearer of the family tradition: “I am seriously thinking about emigrating... I can’t bear this situation in our society.” This is interesting because he applied functional strategies to cope with the shock at the beginning, but obviously there is anger as an indicator of serious invalidation of the constructs used in a hostile way (McCoy, 1977). His reaction is motivated by dissatisfaction with the way the authorities managed the health crisis. The turmoil caused by the epidemic is perceived as a sign that new rules have been established and that he cannot adapt to them and preserve his core roles at the same time.

### ***The owner of an apartment renovation office***

The owner of the renovation office started his business after he had left his main paid job. It seems that during his career he has already had two major career shocks. The first one was the realization that he needed to start his own business in order to secure his family’s financial future: “I started this business because it was a way to earn decent money in difficult times”. The second was related to a sudden illness he faced at one point in his life that affected his business to a certain extent. The shock caused by this pandemic was obviously a major one because it made him reexamine whether or not to end his career. “This situation has now

completely changed my life. I didn't stop with this business even after two heart surgeries, and now I have to seriously reconsider ending this business... I didn't count on it, because I love my job, I have a team of people whom I trust... But when it comes to evaluating whether I will keep on with my business and get sick or stay alive... I think I will probably stop." He also seems to be using an aggressive approach to secure some validation of his professional identity as an engineer, by "helping my granddaughter learn math". Thus, he found an alternative way to use his knowledge and expertise in order to satisfy one of his interests (i.e. in math). He appears to be loosening along the construct of working in the field vs. working from the office, but he feels a big threat. "I may change my position from working in the field to working solely from the office – to be a contractor or to draw up the plans. But my associates are experts – they do not need an office person, but they need someone to be with them in the field... Maybe I should stop working." The pandemic has confronted him with the threat that, for the sake of cooperation with his associates, he will be forced to explore the opposite pole of his construct of caring for personal health as the only way to maintain business partnerships. He notices that he differs from his closest associates precisely along that dimension, which became very important during the epidemic. While constructing himself as someone who is concerned about health, he constructs his associates as: "people who are not afraid of anything, their motto is – we can survive everything." In the follow-up interview, we found that he did not continue his work. He appeared to be even more afraid. "My expectations are just to be healthy and to survive this, I am not thinking about work at all." Faced with the repeated invalidation related to his professional life as well as the threat to his health, he responded by limiting his anticipations to the very near future. It is a common strategy for coping with overwhelming anxiety which enables a person to establish control on a manageable level.

### ***The owner of a dental imaging office***

The owner of the dental imaging office invested considerable financial resources into opening his business and he sees his business as the "paved" career path for his children. In his early endeavors to cope with the shock, he seemed to be predominantly aggressive – struggling to maintain things in their previous state. "I am currently living on my savings. My loan payments have been frozen, hopefully. My parents were my endorsers so it would be highly problematic if something unexpected happened. The owner of the clinic's premises reduced the rent. It was really nice of him. But I definitely have a lot of expenses even though I'm not working ... I pay my employees the minimum wage. I don't know how long I will be able to sustain everything." He construes this situation as pressure to give up the current way of doing business as someone who "respects the rules of the game", even though it seems that following the rules in challenging times could be a "business killer". He also expresses his concern via the narrative about the situation that favors those who are willing to take advantage of human suffering for profit. "You can't believe what kind of people called me after this had happened and asked me, since I knew a lot of people in healthcare, how to buy some healthcare equipment cheaply in order to resell it." This kind of tight and impermeable construction concerning his core role structure and his business philosophy have put him in danger of choosing potentially maladaptive strategies. Guilt prevails, as well as a strong feeling that he is departing from the core role of a helper by choosing to stay at home. "You know, I'm a health worker after all, and I'd love to help in this situation. I really don't need this privilege – to stay at home. I know how to give an injection, how to bandage a wound, how to put on a cast... The state should call me." Another core role is also at stake – the core role of someone who, like a father figure, takes good care of his employees – without any attempt to disperse his dependencies. Here we have guilt associated with the threat of questioning the core belief about the importance of taking care of people and the pressure to switch to the opposite pole of the construct – exploiting

people for business. “I think that the market will endorse those who do not protect their employees – who are ready to risk their health just to maintain their own business.” It is noticeable that he deals with all the aforementioned challenges predominantly with the help of rather dysfunctional strategies. The first one concerns reconsidering his decision to start his own business: “It seems that the cleverest ones are now those who work both for the state (state-owned organizations) and privately. When the *private* influx stops, at least you have something.” This strategy has the characteristics of loosening at the level of superordinate constructs or the core narrative of business as a career peak, and a career opportunity for his children, which introduces more confusion, disappointment and further intensifies the feeling of deviating from the core role. The second one is related to the expectation that the only acceptable solution for him is: “if everything returns to the way it was before the pandemic”, which might indicate a hostile strategy since he highlighted it decisively, in a quarrelsome way. The strong impression of the interviewer was that he was not ready to accommodate his business strategy in facing a crisis, but rather expected the circumstances to fit his previous constructions. Certain adaptive coping strategies may be noticed such as willingness, in a permeable and aggressive way, to consider cooperating with some reliable dentists: “I am thinking about calling some of my reliable dentists who are good people – to see with them how we can cooperate.” He continued to work after the lockdown had ended. Everything seemed to have returned to normal, but the new wave of the epidemic confronted him with additional anxiety and anger. Similarly, like in the case of the dental clinic owner, the presence of anger points to the existence of an underlying hostile strategy in dealing with the crisis. “I feel very bad and I am angry – because of my work, and the political situation in the country.” The first aggressive reactions to the crisis seem to have turned into hostile expectations as the pandemic unfolded. He is also afraid of losing workers, which would mean additional uncertainty for the future of his business. “My people are scared, I can’t force them to come to work because I wouldn’t be able to find such reliable workers.” However, the increased reliance on the role of a parent and family man helps him to overcome this difficult period. “The only thing that makes me happy are my children. I only relax with them. You know, I’m a family man, I could easily endure this, I don’t miss going out so much, summer vacations and so on... I only miss my previous life.”

### ***The owner of a physiotherapy practice***

The owner of the physiotherapy clinic started his business because it is a “transitory solution” until he decides to emigrate. He works relatively independently, in partnership with a few colleagues. He visits his patients at home and helps them with their recovery from injuries. Facing the complete cessation of his activities, he confronts anxiety and resorts to tightening at the level of subordinate constructs. He also tends to limit his anticipations to the near future in order to gain control over the course of events. “For now, we are closed. So, we are thinking about how to organize our work when we reopen our clinic. We have to get protective equipment, masks, gloves, disinfectants... We do not plan to work at full capacity immediately... Firstly we will only see the most complex cases. And that is just for the beginning. In that way we will be able to organize ourselves better and work safely.” However, the seriousness of the challenge he faces at the level of core construing is indicated by the tendency to develop certain suspicious interpretations. “I think that this situation with the virus is a hoax. I have read a lot about the virus on the Internet.” In the continuation of the story, however, the experience of the second wave of the epidemic seems to have confronted such constructions with their unsustainability. That is evident in the follow-up interview in which he expressed concern over the number of patients and the fact that people did not wear masks, as well as the uncertain business conditions. The anxious feelings manifested in the follow-up



interview represent the response to the circumstances that have characteristics of serial invalidation (Bannister, 1963). “I am tormented by uncertainty. I am hoping that things will get better somehow... There is great dissatisfaction. My business is suffering.”

## **General discussion and conclusion**

The aim of this research was to gain insight into the dynamics of career shock faced by small business owners confronted with the COVID-19 pandemic by using the PCP framework. Similarly to other findings about the reactions to COVID-19 pandemic (Cipolletta & Ortu, 2021; Winter & Reed, 2021), we noticed that the pandemic had caused small business owners to experience anxiety, threat, guilt and sadness. Those experiences were common among small business owners and unrelated to the type of their business. Having heterogeneous types of small business represented in our sample helped us to obtain some more generalized conclusions about the dynamics of career shocks. The *type of transition* they faced highly determines *the strategy they use* (Table 1). Those who feel anxiety and sadness opt for more adaptive strategies in facing a career shock – such as aggressiveness, reconstruction, dilation and propositional construing (e.g., the owner of a recording studio, the owner of a beauty salon, the owner of a consultancy office). Those who experience a high level of threat and guilt, especially as a call to reconstruct their core roles, usually use less adaptive strategies such as hostility, constriction, and preemptive constructing (e.g., the owner of a dental imaging office, the owner of a physiotherapy practice). Aggressive efforts seem to prevail in overcoming the threatening aspects of the crisis. Thus, some small business owners mobilize new resources by finding new contexts where they can validate and sustain their professional values and career choices (e.g., an engineer is giving math lessons to his granddaughter). Further research is needed in order to study how entrepreneurs create and maintain successful coping mechanisms such as those related to finding new opportunities or keeping up with optimistic expectations. The way they perceive this career shock, as well as the strategy they use, is also highly dependent on many personal and social circumstances. Those circumstances encompass their career phase (Akkermans et al., 2020), the phase in their business development, their economic situation (i.e., the loans they have), and their previous career shock experiences or motives to start their own business (Bosma et al., 2020). The major issue for understanding the career shock of small business owners in the COVID-19 pandemic was the interplay between the personal and immediate contexts, i.e., *dependencies in the crisis situation* (Table 1). Two messages prevail in their narratives concerning dependencies. The first is that they construe themselves as the resources on which their employees are dependent (e.g., the co-owner of a dental clinic), and the second is that they do not count on state support in tackling their financial problems. They describe their employees as people of trust and reliable workers, but what characterizes this relationship the most is their perception of employees as family members (e.g., the owner of a beauty salon). They appear to view their role as majorly parental and position themselves as the only ones responsible for their employees’ well-being. The role of the business owner seems to be played simultaneously within different theaters (Super, 1980) – both the personal and professional. Nevertheless, some strategies that are desirable in normal times (such as building the business as a family project and having family members as employees) do not function in a crisis (e.g., the case of the owner of a specialized tourist agency). It seems that the more consumed a person is by their career, the more overwhelming the shock is, resulting in the generation of less adaptive coping strategies and career deliberation. The second message regarding dependencies was not described within singular stories because they all agreed that they do not count on state support. Namely, most perceive the state as an inadequate source of support, because financial assistance will not be enough or because some of them do not meet the conditions for receiving such support. Thus, these small

business owners generally rely on themselves, their workers, and their families in overcoming the challenges posed by the current shock. This strategy of dispersing dependencies, i.e., relying on a wider social network, has proved to be an adaptive strategy within these difficult times. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has also confronted small business owners with the threat of losing their client network. A significant number of the business owners point out that they have stable, long-term relationships with their clients (e.g., the owner of a pub, the owner of a dental clinic, the owner of a beauty salon). The inability to do business due to lockdown confronts them with the threat that their customers will leave them and that it will be difficult to rebuild that long-standing network based on trust and recommendations from other clients. A particular challenge is related to the fear that their clients would not comply with the epidemiological recommendations, which raised their worries as they needed to strongly rely on clients' will and awareness (e.g., the owner of a pub, the owner of a recording studio). This could put them in the situation of having to choose between their own health and maintaining their clientele.

### *Limitations and future research*

In this study, we have chosen to observe small business owners within two occasions, but some valuable information could still be gathered in a longer, follow-up study, even after the pandemic is over. Namely, in analyzing the follow-up interviews we learned that for some small business owners the career shock caused by the pandemic was an earthquake followed by minor aftershocks. The question remains as to how long these aftershocks should be monitored. Following the pandemic waves could be one solution, but as Hite and McDonald (2020) indicated, the COVID-19 pandemic legacy remains to be seen. Following business owners during and after the pandemic could clarify some of the most important attributes of their career shocks (Akkermans et al., 2018), as mentioned in the introduction – their ultimate career outcomes (whether the shock significantly changed one's career) and valence of that outcome (whether it was positive or negative at the end). Apart from that, it could also open up the space for further discussion of some new criteria in recognizing and defining career shocks as such (Petrović et al., 2021). This point is particularly interesting because it could have some important theoretical implications for the career shocks literature, such as whether the shock could change someone's professional identity to some degree or lead a person to make stronger "career vows" (Petrović et al., 2021, p. 606).

The relationship that was not explored in the interviews is that with their family members. Most of them rely heavily on their families to sustain their businesses and career, so in that sense exploring the effect of this situation on their relationships with family members would also provide some valuable insights. Including employee and customer voices would also be valuable for getting a more thorough insight into how all actors see each other and themselves in this challenging situation. Thus, we could obtain a fuller picture of owners' career shocks and an extent to which they could be impactful for the business as a whole and possible shock of other employees.

As stated by Bosma et al. (2020), entrepreneurship is the key driver of societal well-being, innovation and economic growth. Sustaining small business owners in developing adaptive strategies to career shock will certainly be a way to address some of the major societal challenges that will emerge in the following years. We witnessed that the owners of small businesses had different constructions of the pandemic as a career shock, which led them to choose different coping strategies that had diverse impacts on their business. This implies that small business owners like personal scientists could be encouraged to explore new possibilities

of dealing with career shocks, instead of being locked in one way of construing. In that sense, PCP could offer a propositional discourse that could give unique encouragement to all interested and affected parties (e.g., professional associations, counselors, business owners, their employees and families) to constructively tackle some negative career events. In other words, PCP offers a set of principles and heuristic tools for approaching shocking events in a non-judgmental and non-pathologizing way. This is specifically important for those who seem to be skeptical in maintaining their careers as business owners or those who need to rethink their business in order to sustain it and survive as business owners.

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