

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 163: JENNIFER PETRIGLIERI

Welcome to The Disrupt Yourself Podcast. A podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the s-curve of learning in your professional and personal life. Disrupting who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host Whitney Johnson.

And today our guest is Jennifer Petriglieri, associate professor of organizational behavior at INSEAD. She's been shortlisted for the Thinkers50 New Thinker and Talent Awards and been named one of the world's best business school professors under 40 by Poets and Quants. Jennifer is an expert on how people craft and sustain their personal and professional identities under conditions of high uncertainty such as organizations in crisis or mobile careers, basically when disruption is in play. Which is certainly true in the case of dual career couples where there is a dance of disruption as by turns each partner upends the other. She writes about this in *Couples At Work*, an inspirational and yet practical read and about which Publishers Weekly described an illuminating debut.

WHITNEY: Jennifer, welcome.

JENNIFER: Thanks. It's great to be here.

WHITNEY: You have lived on three continents. You are currently living in France. Tell us where you grew up? And what you wanted to be when you grow up?

JENNIFER: So, I grew up in rural Shropshire, which is a County in England on the border with Wales. So, lots of sheep, lots of farms. And when I grew up, I remember three things I wanted to be, the first was an astronaut, but I got terribly travel sick. So, my parents said that was probably not a good idea. So, the next thing was a stuntwoman, which I wanted to be for a while and then I wanted to own a zoo and I've done none of those three things.

WHITNEY: Oh, okay. So, the one that caught my attention in particular was stuntwoman. Were you a gymnast? So, I can kind of get the zoo, there are lots of sheep in Shropshire, astronaut kind of can get that. But stuntwoman, where did that one come from?

JENNIFER: I have no idea. So, I've always been into adventure sports, you know, kind of high adrenaline things. So, I guess it came from there, but I have no idea.

WHITNEY: So, what's one of your favorite high adventure sports that you do today?

JENNIFER: Well, at the moment we do a lot of skiing off piece skiing and back country skiing, which is my passion.

My early years can be described as exploration. I went from one thing to the next and I think like most people just sort of went to college. I studied Biology, my mum had done that, so it was kind of an obvious thing and then came out and had absolutely no idea what to do. And went into just one of these general management training programs. And I kind of enjoyed business. But I was a little bored if I'm honest. And so, I did my MBA as a way of testing the waters to back into academia because I was really fascinated with understanding how other people's lives tick and how things work in the working world and sociologically and organizationally.

And that was really the transition back for me in my early thirties, transitioned back into academia, researched a lot of career transitions, leadership transitions. And then kept hearing people say to me, "Well, you know, if you really want to understand my leadership transitions, you need to talk to my partner." And that was the spark of insight for me to make me really seriously look at this question of dual career couples and how can we make two careers and a relationship work together.

WHITNEY: Did you work before you went into academia, briefly?

JENNIFER: Yeah, I did. So, I worked for seven years in organizational consulting. I did a lot of post-merger integrations, a lot of organizational development work, some management training, very much in the organizational development space.

WHITNEY: Got it, okay. So, this is interesting. So, you're doing this management consulting and organizational consulting. You wend your way back to academia because you need something that's a bit more robust in terms of intellectually rigorous for you. Asking these questions, it sounds like you were going down one path. And then there was this question that kept coming up that pulled you in a slightly different direction. Were you surprised when these conversations of, "Oh, you really need to talk to my partner?"

JENNIFER: Yes and no. And yet it's from the perspective of my academic training. So, when we think about careers and you know, if you read practically any career book out there, that it's all about the individual, right?

WHITNEY: Mm-hmm.

JENNIFER: It's all solo, no strings attached. What's the best thing to do? How can you make transitions, etc. So academically and in all the literature we just see this singular thing. But I knew from my own life that it wasn't that simple.

WHITNEY: Mm-hmm.

JENNIFER: But I knew that my career decisions were intimately tied to my husband Gianpero's career decisions. And I knew that was true for other people around me. And I guess I just hadn't quite seen the disconnect so starkly until other people pointed out to me, you know, my research participants when they said that, you know, "You really need to talk to my partner." That brought me to the awareness of a huge gap in our understanding.

WHITNEY: Tell us about this book and I would love it as we're going through the process of the book you highlight these three distinct yet predictable transitions that all couples go through when you've got dual career couples. Would love for you to start talking us through those transitions and tell us stories and most definitely tell us some of your story. Because it is a very fascinating story and I

think it will come alive for people if they can not only hear about the research participants but also your story as well.

JENNIFER: Gianpiero and I, our children were quite small at that time, sort of two, three years old, something like this. And as any parents of very small children will tell you, life was absolutely crazy. So, I was just transitioning out of my PhD into a postdoctoral fellowship, Gianpiero was establishing himself as a professor. We were hanging on by the skin of our teeth. And we were spending the year at Harvard Business School and one of my colleagues came rushing into my office one day and said, “You know, Jen, you really need to come and listen to the graduation speaker.” Now anyone who’s been to a graduation speech will tell you they’re very often not the most exciting of things, right?

And I was like, “Are you kidding? I need to pick the kids up. I’ve got so much work to do, there’s no way.” And my colleagues said “No, you don’t understand. You know, it’s a woman giving the speech and she’s just become a billionaire.” And of course, it was Sheryl Sandberg and it was two days after the Facebook IPO.

So, I sort of fumbled along and then you know, expecting something rather boring. And Cheryl said something that of course she said many times since, as other people have, which is the most important career decision you make is who you marry. Now I’m the one had I sat there and thought, you know, nodding. I agree with that. And I also sat there and felt, “Is that it?” Right? I just picked Prince Charming, you know, we go forward ever since, you know, and live happily ever after.

That just was not my experience. It was not a selection problem. Right? It was a what happens next problem. And I think in that moment I felt like complete identification and also extreme disappointment. That’s not solving my life, telling me I need to pick well. I’ve picked well and I’m still having problems.

And I think when I first went into the research, I went in with this mindset, “Tell me the solution. I’m going to do this research and it’s going to tell me the thing I should do.” And initially I was extremely disappointed because what I learned was that there were all sorts of arrangements that could work. You know, couples who were real 50/50 couples, couples in which one person had a big career and someone else had a slightly less big, smaller career. Couples who were really mobile, no social connections. Other couples super embedded in there, you know, in their community.

And all of these could work really well, and all could be an unmitigated disaster. And I have to say it was pretty depressing. Given what my personal motivation for going into the research. But then I took a step back and really realized it was not about the choices we make, it’s about the way in which we go about making these choices. These choices tend to really cluster around three hotspots or three transitions as I talk about in the book. And the first transition is a really interesting one because it’s what I think covers this is the moment we become a couple. Right? And it’s the moment we become a couple because if you, if you think back from an it to the early days of your relationship, the honeymoon period, it’s wonderful. You know, the angels are singing, and the birds are tweeting. And it’s wonderful because essentially, we’re living on parallel tracks.

We have our career going, we have our set of friends, our hobbies, etc. And we’ve laid on top of this lovely relationship. So, what’s not to like? But then at some point we all face a hurdle. So, let me tell you a story of one couple I worked with who faced this hurdle. They were a lovely couple, you know, early thirties. They were from they’re from Ontario and they were about to get married two or three months away from marriage. And they’d always have stable jobs in the city where they lived. They’d never really talked about moving anywhere else. And suddenly she was offered a

really good job and it was a kind of career changing job. Right? And it was in Vancouver, which is not at all commutable. Right?

This six- or seven-hour plane ride away. And they were faced with this decision, you know, “What do we do?” This was not something they considered before, but the choices looked quite black and white then. Either she goes and he follows her, or she forgoes the opportunity and they both stay home. And splitting up was not an option, you know, for them. And this is a classic decision that sparks a first transition, a big career opportunity. But it forces us not to live on parallel tracks or maybe a first child comes along. And for those of us who have children, we know that children are the end of parallel living.

Maybe for some other couples it might be we've got together later in life and how do we blend, you know, families from previous relationship that's quite consequential decision. And of course, what happened to this couple and what happens to all of us if we suddenly become anxious and we suddenly have conflicts we've never had before.

How do we make this decision? Who wins? Who loses? Who trades off? Who compromises? All of these questions come to the fore. And the mistake so many couples make at this point, and the mistake this couple made was to look at this as a practical issue. So, for them it was a question, came down to job opportunities and money. Right? If, if he could get a job in Vancouver for roughly the same pay with decent opportunities, then they'd move. And that sounds really rational. But of course, that's not what this decision is about. This decision is about power. It's about who leads and who follows. It's about whose career takes priority. It's about how do we figure out a deal and structure our lives in a way that both of us get most of what we want. Right? None of us can get everything we want, but most of us get most of what we want so we can thrive.

And most of the time couples don't get to that level. They make a decision like, you know, “If I get something of equal pay in Vancouver, we'll go.” And then it comes back to bite. And of course, it did for this couple, you know, after six months they had the nice wedding, a nice honeymoon after the wedding. But once they settled into Vancouver, the conflicts began again. And he, there was a sense of resentment, offensive guilt on her side for dragging him there. And it's not because the decision itself was wrong, but it was really the way they got to that decision without talking through these deeper issues of who leads, who follows career prioritization. So that's really what couples are wrestling with in the first transition

WHITNEY: You talk, Jen about a defining question for each of these transitions. So, in this particular instance, what's that defining question?

JENNIFER: The defining question is how are we going to make this work? How are we going to combine our lives in a way that we can both thrive in our careers and in our relationship? And again, there's two levels we can think of that question. We can think of it practically. Childcare, location, geography, money. And we can also think of it psychologically, you know, who gets priorities, where does the power lie, how are we going to support each other? And what I heard was that couples who do well in this transition are those who really look at this question from that psychological perspective and once they've thought through it in that sense, then of course we look at the practicalities after that. But if you like these principles need to come before the practicalities.

WHITNEY: I remember, you know, reading through your book and having a conversation with you about this idea of there is a power dynamic between the couple and I think I, maybe I'm being bold in saying this, but I think before your book came out, this power dynamic was something that was unwritten. It was there, but no one knew or was really talking about the fact that it was there. And I think it's so fascinating. Are you finding that a lot of people were like, “Oh yes, right?”

JENNIFER: Absolutely. And it's so interesting because power it is a dirty word in relationships. You know, if I talk about power, people are like slightly shocked.

WHITNEY: Mm-hmm.

JENNIFER: And of course, this is about power dynamics and power is not necessarily a bad thing. If we think for a minute about desire. Right? When do we most desire our partners? It's often when we're feeling empowered and we see them in a powerful position. Right? We see them thriving, we see them excelling at something they're great at, we see them popular at the party. All these things when they're in a powerful position. So power is an aphrodisiac. It's a good thing in relationships. The bad thing is when power becomes unbalanced. So, this is not about getting rid of power dynamics. It's about making sure both of you are more powerful rather than one of you tipping that balance in favor of one versus the other.

WHITNEY: Oh, I love that. Okay, so transition number one. Can you give us one or two suggestions for navigating this successfully? As people are listening, they're like, "Yes, yes, I'm in, I'm in, uh, transition number one." What are one or two suggestions for people?

JENNIFER: So, number one is we really take time to sit down and talk through what is it that is important to you? What is it that matters to you? Now you make call this different things. You might call it ambition. You might call it value. You might say, what matters to me, my goals. However you want to frame it. It's very important we sit down and really take time to understand what is it our partner wants. And to make sure they understand that about us. So, let me give you some examples. They might be clear ambitions, so let's say, you know, I really wanted to write a book. That's the one thing.

It was about getting a qualification. It's probably also some life ambitions. Maybe there's some way we really want to live or some experience we want to have. Maybe it's a goal about our couple. I want us to be an adventurous couple who go ski mountaineering all the time in my case. This is really important because you would be amazed how many couples don't really understand what is important to the other person.

They think they understand, but they don't. And time and time again, when I looked at couples who didn't work out, it was not because they weren't supporting each other, it was because they didn't understand what it was they were supporting. Right? And so having this baseline of information, if you'd like, is really important. So just taking that time to sit down and it doesn't need to be an Excel spreadsheet, it's not a five-year plan. It's what are the yardsticks by which I'm going to measure my life. And if I know your yardsticks and you know mine, we're much more able to make decisions around those.

So, assuming you've had that conversation and I also would say I don't just see this as a one-off conversation I don't know in front of a log fire with a nice mug of hot chocolate. It can happen anywhere, but it's more an ongoing conversation, can we keep this conversation alive? That's really important because that is the, if you like your decision-making criteria.

The second thing couples really need to address at this stage, which links to the power dynamic, is the question of career prioritization. Whose career, if anybody's will the most importance be placed on, and when I say that I'm talking about they might be the geographic mover, if there's moves involved, if there's, you know, work, travel, etc. Those will probably take a little bit more prominence and they would dedicate that bit more time and energy to that career and the other person would take that bit more time and energy, take the slack up at home.

Now that's not to say, you know, we still assuming both people have careers and there's really three models here. There's the classic model, which is primary/secondary. Probably most of our

parents who were working parents have this. And probably for most of us it was our fathers who were in the primary position. So, we can think of this as the classic model.

The second model is a turn taking model. Which means that at any one point you look primary/secondary, but you swap between those worlds. So, both of you get a shot at some point in time to invest heavily in your career. And also, you've got a shot to invest at home. Which increasingly both men and women are ambitious about. Right? Like a home, a home ambition. And the third model, which is a newer model is what I call double primary. Which might be okay, neither of us are ever going to move outside of Philadelphia, for example. But within that, so we take away some of those choices that can create issues. But within that we'll both, you know, push our careers forward equally and try to be 50/50 at home.

Now, what I found when I looked at this is no one model is objectively better than the other. And this is back to my original figure. Tell me the model that works? All the models can work. But models only work when they are very explicitly agreed.

And so, all of these three models can be exceptional, and they can all be a disaster. Now the difference between the models is in that last model, the double primary model, couples tend to be better at explicitly negotiating it just because it's very hard to keep going. So, it forces you into those conversations.

WHITNEY: Right.

JENNIFER: Two model, the first two models can trap you a little bit because you think you've agreed on something, but maybe you haven't. So those two things very explicitly talking about what do we really want? How do we support each other? And then very explicitly negotiating your career prioritization model and what that, that principle behind how you're going to organize work versus home is absolutely critical. And also remembering it's not that you talk about them once at 33 years old and then that carries through for the rest of your life. Right? This is the start of a conversation. I often think of marriage as I just a long conversation over lifetime. And how can we talk about the right things?

WHITNEY: You know what's interesting about that, Jennifer is as I think about the third model, which you said is the newer, where neither both careers are primary.

JENNIFER: Right.

WHITNEY: And both careers are secondary. As I think about our framework of, of per channel disruption and, and accelerant number three is the ability to embrace constraints and what's interesting about this dual career is that you have these constraints that have to be embraced, and the other two models you can kind of pretend like the constraints aren't there. You eventually discover that they are. But this force, like you said, that conversation early on and that ability to negotiate around it. Which is really valuable for a relationship of figuring out the rules of engagement which is really interesting.

JENNIFER: Mm-hmm. Hugely valuable. And as you well know, it also aligns with the research we know on decision making. So, we know that when we limit our decisions, it's easier for us to make decisions and we're more likely to be comfortable with them. When we have a big open playing field of decisions, it takes us longer to make decisions and we're more likely to experience regret. So, it's a little bit counterintuitive, but having those boundaries of restricting our choice choices is actually very psychologically healthy for us.

WHITNEY: All right. So that's transition number one. Let's talk about transition number two. What it is? The defining question, maybe a quick story and some suggestions for what we do.

JENNIFER: Yeah, so I'm going to start this one with a story. And this is a story of what I think of as a real textbook picture postcard transition to couple. So, you know, on the surface very happy two good careers, not hugely high flyers, you know, two good careers, two kids doing well at school, they're in middle school. Everything's looking good, fairly stable relationship. And then she just starts to feel a bit uncomfortable in her career. She starts to question, you know, "Is this really the job I want? I'm not sure. I'm very happy." And of course, this is questioning that comes to many of us when we reached that mid-point in our careers. And initially her husband is extremely supportive. "That's okay, you know, you've been in this career for a while. Take some time, do some exploration, go networking," all this sort of thing.

And she does, you know, she buys the career books. She's a good girl, she goes to networking events, she talks to new people, she explores new things. And then things start going awry in their relationship.

And her husband starts to get defensive. He's not so happy with her meeting all these new people. She feels he's not that interested. She starts to withdraw and withhold information. And the vicious spiral goes on until one night she comes back from a networking event and he accuses her of having an affair. Okay? Really serious point in their relationship. And this is a very, very classic start to the second transition. Because what's happening at this point in our lives is a very normal natural universal transition point, which is if we think about our twenties and thirties vis-a-vis our careers, we tend to get on a train track and continue on. We're building our careers, we're in the acceleration phase, we're building a relationship. Some of us are also building a family, and it's sort of heads down and plow on.

And then we get to a point often in our, often in our forties, although it's not quite age related. Where we start to question, is this really my train track? You know, is this really where I want to be? What do I really want from my life? What do I really want for my career? And for people who are invested in their career that often starts with our careers. But it very quickly spreads out to more existential questions about our life, our direction. And these are incredibly normal, but they're also incredibly destabilizing for couples because if we're a couple and I witness you questioning your life, it's so easy for me to think, "My goodness is this my fault?", "Is this about the relationship?", "Maybe you're not happy with me."

So, it's a very destabilizing time for couples. Even though it's a very important developmental transition point where we essentially, we orient if we do it well onto path that's more of our own. And I'm sure you know many people, probably you yourself and I myself as well have gone through this stage of feeling, you know this, it's time for reinvention, it's time for a reset and a re-path. And this is really the purpose of the second transition. But it is a very, very stressful time for couples, especially when two of us are in it together. You know if we're questioning our direction, our power, it's incredibly destabilizing. At this point for couples, the real secret sauce is we thinking how we support each other.

So, when we tend to think of support, we tend to think, and I'm going to use a very British analogy now, we tend to think of the good old British tea and sympathy. So, my job as a wife or a husband or a partner is to sort of plump up your self-esteem and make you feel good about yourself. And if you hit a roadblock, kind of say, "It's going to be fine, everything's going to be okay." And this support feels wonderful. You know, who doesn't like this? I like this just in case my husband is listening.

This is lovely, it's very unhelpful when we're at these transition points. And the reason is this support keeps us in our comfort zone. And of course, when we're facing this transition, we need

to get out of our comfort zone. Right? We need to go out and explore new pastures and figure out which is the way forward for us. And so very often, when I spoke to this couple, she said, you know, “I just feel suffocated by him and feeling suffocated by the relationship.” And that comes back to this, you know, he was trying to support her, but what he was, the kind of support he was providing was this real, kind of comfort zone, you know, quite close support and she needed a very different type of support, which is the support we all need, which is what I call a secure base.

Now what does that mean in practice? It means, yes, this, that lovely, cozy base, but from it, we're pushing our partners to move away rather than holding them close. So instead of a kind of loving cuddle, it's a little bit of a loving kick. Right?

That we're trying to kick our partners away into action mode to explore, experiment, and figure out that direction. Now this can be quite counter-intuitive because if we're feeling a little bit wobbly or a little bit uncertain about our relationship, our natural tendency is to pull our partner close. That has the absolute opposite effect of what we want at this transition. It's really important we switch our mindset to encouraging our partner to move away from that comfort zone and trusting that they'll, you know, find a new path and they come back and we'll figure it out.

WHITNEY: Okay. I love that. The metaphor that comes to my mind, even though I've never climbed a mountain, is this idea of base camp. Right?

You'll go to base camp or go to the ski lodge since you like to ski, but then you're going to go up the mountain and you're going to ski down the mountain. You're going to go into the back country, but then we'll come home here and when you want to have the cuddle and the hot chocolate in the fireplace, we can, but you need to go explore. And so that's, that's what I hear you saying in this particular phase. So, is the defining question then is what do I want and what does that look like? Or what, what is the actual defining question would you say?

JENNIFER: Yeah, the defining question here is what do we really want? And I think the “we” is very important. The transition begins as an I question. What do I really want? But very often, of course our lives are intertwined. Right? They're not independent. And very often the questions we're asking are kind of complimentary. Right? So, let me give you another example. This can be a time where couples reverse gender roles.

WHITNEY: So, Jennifer, what are some suggestions that you have for people who are in phase two and want to successfully navigate it?

JENNIFER: Yeah, very concrete suggestions. The first is in the couple to re-negotiate the kind of support you give each other. So, to really try and move away from this very close support and move away to this support. Which essentially means rather than holding your partner close, encouraging them out there, giving them that loving kick but not interfering. This is not about like, “Have you called up Chris and did go to that event?” “It's much more the push away and the push to independence. So that was as a couple. Then each person individually at the couple needs to become an explorer. Now what does that mean? It means looking actively for opportunities. Both parties in a couple also need to become explorers and what that means is it's really a contact sport. It's getting out there, it's networking, it's reading the books, it's experimenting with new things. We cannot answer these questions of direction by sitting in a cave and meditating.

It's really about getting out there and getting data. Right. Talking to someone in a different field. Is it a reorientation? Is it a complete reinvention? And for many people at this stage, it's not a complete reinvention like, “I don't know, I'm going to set up a cupcake shop.” Not that there's anything wrong with cupcakes, but for many people it's a reorientation, but it still involves that exploration. So, it's really getting out there and doing something about it and I think many people at the stage of life can fall into this. Well I can't really afford to, I've got too many responsibilities,

I've got this, this and this to do. If you don't do this exploration of this phase together, it will come back and bite you. And there's so many couples I've seen that then propelled themselves onto a path of resentment of regret. Do not let that be you.

WHITNEY: Let's go to transition number three. Tell us about that, the defining question and some suggestions that you have.

JENNIFER: Yeah, the defining question of transition three is who are we now? It's really an identity transition. And it's an identity transition because it comes at a time when our social roles are changing. So, we're no longer in that real steep acceleration phase of our career. We're sort of plateauing out and, and one guy said to me, "I knew I was in this transition when I went for a promotion and I realized my competitor, my main competitor was my protege who was 10 years younger than me."

So, there's a change in our career roles. There's also, for those of us who've been parents, there's a change in our parental roles. You know, our kids are flying the last, next, we're no longer the hands-on parents. We're no longer the bright young things, and who am I now I'm not those things I was. So, it's a real identity transition and it can begin with a sense of loss as this guy had when he realized, "My goodness, you know, I'm up against someone who I thought it was his mentor."

It's a time of enormous opportunities for the first time for many couples in maybe even 20 years we have freedom. Right? We have freedom to take holidays where we, when we want. We have freedom to reorient.

Our children are having children later, so we've not got those grandparents in GT. So, we're free and we have experience and we have our careers. And this is a time of huge reinvention. And so, it's really a time these two have, yes, the sense of loss on the one hand but also the sense of opportunity. And the trick in this, the transition for couples is how do I work through that baggage we may be carrying from earlier in our relationship, the things we swept under the carpet. The dynamics that haven't gone well.

How do we work through that while also grasping the new opportunities and especially with the way the world of work is changing? We think about the gig economy, independent work portfolio careers. These are all things that disproportionately benefit older workers. Which is really exciting because most of the time when we think of career trends, they tend to disproportionately benefit younger workers. And this is the first time a career trend has really disproportionately benefited those in the, you know, in the second half of their careers.

WHITNEY: Mm-hmm.

JENNIFER: So, it's also, you know, a really exciting time and it's about how do we balance those two sides of the pole.

WHITNEY: So, what's one suggestion that you would give for people who are in this third transition?

JENNIFER: Yeah, one suggestion and a really strong commonality I saw among the couples who did well is they had developed some kind of shared passion.

WHITNEY: Mm-hmm.

JENNIFER: Which neither about work nor about the children. And it was about something that like who are we as a couple is expressed to the shared passion. So, I had one, I loved this couple, one really cute couple who sang opera duets together.

If you do anything, you don't only have to take opera or volunteering together, you know, all sorts of different, it didn't matter what it was, but it mattered that it was just about them as a couple.

WHITNEY: Mm-hmm.

JENNIFER: It wasn't, "Oh well, you know, we go skiing with the family." No, no, no. That's not a shared passion. It's about something that's just about the two of you. Because at this stage, what happens is our ambitions broaden. And so, I'm mid-forties and at my stage of life, if I can get through a day and I've held in mind my career and my kids and my husband, it's a total success.

Then I pull into bed at the end of the day and repeat. You know, I would love to have space to think about volunteering, to think about legacy, to think about portfolio careers. That's just not going to happen at my stage of life.

WHITNEY: Mm-hmm.

JENNIFER: But in, in 10 years' time I will have the bandwidth to expand these ambitions. And what these shared projects can be, these shared passions, is really a platform for that expansion. Now that's not suggesting couples should do everything together, but just broadening up the, on those three things of career, family relationship is incredibly helpful and build that platform for that widening of our horizons.

WHITNEY: So good. All right. So, it's been said that there's the book you wrote, the book you tell people you wrote, and the book people think you wrote.

The one's you have finished and you've been out, this book has been out in the world now for about a year. What book do people think you've written that has sometimes surprised you?

JENNIFER: So, I think the book's been out four or five months. So, it's still a baby. But I think my frustration is when people think this is about power couples. In fact, I hate that term: power couples. But couples who have everything sorted and who are extremely wealthy and have amazing jobs.

WHITNEY: Mm-hmm.

JENNIFER: I think the book is very much about working couples. But they're working couples from all walks of life and they're also working couples who have the same problems as you and I and working couples across the world. So that's sort of one of my frustrations. And I guess the thing that heartens me to hear is when people have read the book and they say to me, "You know what? This has shifted the conversations I'm having both with my partner, but also with my colleagues, with my friends and with people I manage."

And that was really my ambition for the book. I think people, it's a bit trite, people say a relationship is all about conversation. I could not disagree more, you know, there are so many couples who talk to each other all the time and say absolutely nothing.

My ambition with the book is to really change the kind of things we talk about and the way we talk about how our careers and our relationship combined. And also just the fact that we talk about it. You know, as you said right at the beginning, that just really is nothing else on this topic. And we tend to talk about our careers as if they are these independent things and our relationships as these things that we have to manage alongside. But actually, one of the most heartwarming things I found in my research was what an incredible resource relationship can be for our careers and vice versa.

WHITNEY: Mm-hmm.

JENNIFER: You know, when we are thriving in our careers, it's much more likely we're thriving in our relationships. So instead of thinking of them as this thing we need to trade-off and it's tough and it is tough sometimes and it is a trade-off. But it can also be a real self-reinforcing cycle.

WHITNEY: Jennifer where can people find you?

JENNIFER: So, the easiest place to find me is at my website, which is www.jpetriglieri.com. And on your podcast. And they can also find the book on [Amazon](#) and Barnes & Noble and all the other big booksellers.

WHITNEY: All right. So last question for you. So, you started out this research, you had heard the Sheryl Sandberg speech and you had this question that you wanted to find the answer to. So, what is the answer to the question for you?

JENNIFER: The answer to the question is anything can work as long as it's explicitly negotiated, agreed and fully and wholeheartedly supported by both partners in the couple.

WHITNEY: Jennifer Petriglieri, thank you for being with us.

JENNIFER: Thank you so much.

We disrupt within an ecosystem, not a vacuum. Whether that be the companies we work for, the world we live in or our families, our choices that we make when it comes to disrupting ourselves affect those around us too.

Within my coaching practice, when someone is getting ready to jump from the top of their curve to the launch point of a new curve, so many conversations revolve around the phases and transitions that Jennifer spoke about. But as we have those conversations, I'm now going to more explicitly encourage clients to ask their partners. What matters to YOU?

I know for my husband and me this conversation, this framing, would have made a difference. When our children were young—I was an equity analyst commuting back and forth to New York. My husband was a professor at UMass Medical School. Our youngest child wasn't sleeping. My husband wasn't sleeping. It was painful. Without role models, without a way to zoom out and think long-term, he off-ramped. This had unintended consequences. And its own kind of pain. We did figure it out. After ten years, he on-ramped, he's now a division chair at Southern Virginia University (I'll actually include a [piece we wrote about this in the show notes](#)). But I love knowing that in the future when I come across people doing this dance of disruption I can point them to Jennifer's groundbreaking work.

I also loved hearing that the only thing that matters in a relationship is that both people agree on what they do. Sounds simple, but culture, family upbringing and so many other things can push their way into conversations like this.

If you feel you need to, and even if you don't, check in with your partner this week. Ask those questions, what is it that matters to you? What's important? In a time where so much has shifted, these conversations matter more than ever.

Finally, I loved when Jennifer said, "Power isn't a bad thing. It's an aphrodisiac. We have these explicit conversations about power so that both people feel powerful."

If you're looking for more guidance around how to grow through disruption, sign up for our weekly email that goes out to 10s of thousands of readers across the globe. Visit whitneyjohnson.com/newsletter to sign up where you can also access our archive of prior newsletters.

Thank you again to Jennifer Petriglieri for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Melissa Ruddy, project manager Sarah Duran, editor Macy Robison, content contributor Nancy Wilson, and art director Brandon Jameson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.