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Teachers' Psychological Capital: Conceptualisation, Theoretical Foundation, Dimensions, and Empirical Evidence

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Abstract

Teachers' psychological capital has attracted increasing attention as a positive psychological resource that may support teachers' professional development, work engagement, and well-being. This paper reviews the conceptualisation, theoretical foundation, dimensions, and empirical evidence of psychological capital, with particular attention to its relevance to higher education. Drawing on positive psychology and positive organisational behaviour, the paper examines the development of the psychological capital concept and its distinction from human and social capital. It discusses the four core dimensions of psychological capital: *confidence (self-efficacy)*, *hope*, *resilience*, and *optimism*, explaining their theoretical significance in the context of teaching. The review also synthesises international and Chinese research on the relationships between psychological capital and work-related outcomes, including job satisfaction, organisational commitment, well-being, and teaching practices. Existing studies suggest that psychological capital is a potentially developable psychological resource associated with positive work outcomes. However, further research is needed to understand how institutional conditions and organisational culture influence teachers' psychological capital, particularly in public universities in ethnic minority regions of China. This review provides a conceptual foundation for future empirical studies and the development of strategies to support university teachers' psychological resources and professional well-being.

Keywords: Psychological Capital, University Teachers, Positive Psychology, Psychological Resources, Positive Organisational Behaviour

Introduction

Psychological capital (PsyCap) has attracted increasing attention in organisational behaviour and positive psychology because of its potential to promote individual development and positive work outcomes. Unlike human capital, which focuses on knowledge and skills, and social capital, which emphasises relationships and networks, psychological capital refers to positive psychological resources that can be developed and applied when facing challenges (Luthans et al., 2007). It comprises four dimensions: *confidence (self-efficacy)*, *hope*, *resilience*, and *optimism*. Previous studies have linked psychological capital to employee performance, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment (Avey et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2014).

In higher education, psychological capital is particularly relevant to teachers' professional development and well-being. University teachers face various work-related challenges, including teaching responsibilities, research expectations, and professional development demands. Their psychological resources may help them cope with these challenges and maintain positive work attitudes. Although previous studies have examined teachers' psychological capital and its relationship with work engagement, well-being, and job burnout (Liu et al., 2021; Bertieaux et al., 2024; Kačmár, 2024), research remains limited in examining the influence of institutional and cultural contexts. In particular, studies focusing on university teachers in China, especially those in ethnic minority regions such as Inner Mongolia, require further attention.

Therefore, this paper reviews the conceptualisation, theoretical foundation, four dimensions, and empirical research on teachers' psychological capital. By comparing international and Chinese studies, it identifies major research developments and existing gaps. The novelty of this review lies in integrating theoretical and empirical findings from the perspective of university teachers while highlighting the importance of institutional and cultural contexts. It contributes to the social sciences by connecting positive psychology, organisational behaviour, and higher education research, while providing directions for future research on teachers' psychological resources and professional well-being.

The Definition of Psychological Capital

Psychological capital, as one of the core concepts in positive organisational behaviour, has gradually become a significant topic in organisational behaviour and human resource management research since it was proposed in the early 21st century. Compared with human capital (knowledge, skills) and social capital (interpersonal networks), psychological capital places greater emphasis on the positive psychological states and inherent potential that individuals possess. It is a key resource that drives employee growth and stimulates organisational vitality (Luthans, 2002). Its research background stems from the rise of positive psychology. This field advocates focusing on the positive qualities and potential of individuals, emphasising growth and happiness through leveraging psychological strengths rather than merely correcting deficiencies. Therefore, psychological capital is not only regarded as an important variable for explaining employees' positive behaviours but also becomes a new approach for organisations to enhance their performance and competitiveness.

Within this research framework, Luthans and Youssef (2004) first systematically proposed the concept of psychological capital and defined it as "*an individual's positive psychological*

development state, which specifically includes four dimensions: confidence (self-efficacy), optimism, hope, and resilience" (p. 152). This "four-dimensional model" has laid the theoretical foundation for the research on psychological capital. Specifically, *Confidence (Self-efficacy)* refers to the confidence and sense of ability that individuals demonstrate when facing difficult tasks; *Optimism* reflects the tendency of individuals to maintain a positive expectation for the present and the future; *Hope* not only involves goal orientation but also includes finding multiple ways to achieve the goals and taking actions to implement them; *Resilience* is manifested as the ability of individuals to quickly recover and even surpass themselves in the face of setbacks and adversity. Through this comprehensive framework, psychological capital is defined as a highly malleable and positive psychological resource that can be stimulated and developed within the organisational context.

Based on this, Luthans et al. (2007) further expanded the connotation of psychological capital. They emphasised that psychological capital is not only different from human capital i.e., "*what you know*" and social capital i.e., "*who you know*", but more importantly, it reflects "*who you are and what you might become*" (p. 3). This statement highlights the unique value of psychological capital, emphasising that it is a positive psychological force that can be developed and enhanced rather than a fixed personality trait. This distinction makes psychological capital a key point for organisational intervention and human resource development, providing a theoretical basis for exploring how to enhance employees' psychological capital through training and counseling methods.

In addition, during the further theoretical refinement process, Luthans and Youssef (2017) provided a more concise summary of the essence of psychological capital. They stated that psychological capital is mainly manifested as "*individuals' positive cognitive evaluation of the environment and situations as well as the efforts and perseverance demonstrated under such evaluations*" (p. 2). This perspective highlights the cognitive-motivational mechanism of psychological capital, that is, psychological capital is not merely a description of a psychological state but also can inspire individuals to take positive actions and continuously pursue their goals. Meanwhile, Avey et al. (2011) provided a systematic interpretation of psychological capital from the perspectives of empirical research and methodology. They explicitly stated that "*Psychological capital is a high-order latent variable composed of hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism (HERO), emphasising its measurability, developability, and manageability*" (p. 145). This research has promoted the widespread application of quantitative assessment tools for psychological capital such as the PCQ scale and has also provided an operational approach in practice for organisations to enhance employees' psychological capital through intervention measures.

Besides, Newman et al. (2014) further expanded the definition of psychological capital. They emphasised that "*the four dimensions of psychological capital do not exist independently but rather interact with each other to jointly influence an individual's attitudes, behaviours, and performance*" (p. 123). In other words, psychological capital is a comprehensive and integrated resource. The interaction and integration among its various dimensions can bring about more significant positive effects. This viewpoint not only offers a new perspective for understanding the mechanism of psychological capital but also highlights the dual value of psychological capital in terms of organisational performance and employee well-being. In organisational contexts, psychological capital has been demonstrated to be closely related to

variables such as employee engagement, organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and innovative behaviour, thus becoming an indispensable and important factor in management practices (Avey et al., 2011; Newman et al., 2014).

In general, the research on psychological capital has undergone a progressive process from proposing the framework (Luthans & Youssef, 2004), emphasising its distinctiveness and plasticity (Luthans et al., 2007), deepening its cognitive-motivational mechanism (Luthans & Youssef, 2017), highlighting its measurement and application value (Avey et al., 2011), and finally emphasising the synergy effect among its dimensions (Newman et al., 2014). From a theoretical perspective, psychological capital enriches the research perspectives of positive psychology and organisational behaviour; from a practical standpoint, it provides practical tools for organisations to enhance employees' potential, optimise management strategies, and strengthen competitive advantages. It can be said that psychological capital has become an important bridge connecting individual psychological development and organisational performance improvement.

Theoretical Foundation of Psychological Capital

Positive Psychology Theory was first proposed by Seligman in 1998. Its aim is to rectify the long-standing problem in psychology, which has been centred on the "disease model" and focused on deficiencies and pathologies and instead to focus on "what enables individuals and organisations to function well". In traditional psychology, researchers mostly focused on negative phenomena such as depression, anxiety, stress, and functional disorders (Fredrickson, 2001). However, positive psychology attempts to answer the question "What makes human life more valuable and meaningful?" This theory emphasises the following points: firstly, it studies positive subjective experiences such as positive emotions, satisfaction, happiness, and flow experiences, arguing that these experiences not only enhance the current level of happiness but also expand the individual's future adaptive resources; secondly, it studies positive individual traits such as virtues, strengths, abilities, and character strengths, advocating for the identification and cultivation of these traits, helping individuals to realise their potential rather than merely correcting their deficiencies; thirdly, it creates positive institutions and contexts that support the prosperity of individuals such as schools, organisations, communities, and social systems, emphasising that institutional factors can either amplify or weaken an individual's psychological resources (Seligman, 1998).

Positive Psychology Theory (Seligman, 1998) is not merely an academic trend but also a scientific paradigm. It advocates identifying, cultivating, and consolidating human strengths through rigorous empirical methods, enabling people not only to be "free from illness" but also to "live towards the good". Therefore, it is not only a value orientation regarding human potential but also a set of operational research and intervention frameworks, emphasising the plasticity and continuous development of individual psychological states as well as the supportive role of the environment and institutions.

Alignment of Psychological Capital Dimensions with Psychological Capital

Notably, the concept of psychological capital in this paper is grounded in the core principles of Seligman's (1998) Positive Psychology Theory. A close examination of the four dimensions of the Psychological Capital Scale (Luthans et al., 2007) adopted in the present research--namely *Confidence (Self-efficacy)*, *Hope*, *Resilience*, and *Optimism*--reveals a strong

correspondence with the foundational components of Seligman's (1998) Positive Psychology Theory. Positive Psychology Theory (Seligman, 1998) provides a unified theoretical foundation for these four dimensions: it holds that positive traits can be shaped through systematic goal setting, cognitive processing, emotion regulation, and social support and can be continuously consolidated through positive institutions such as empowering leadership, supportive culture, and fair incentives.

Firstly, in terms of *Confidence (Self-efficacy)*, positive psychology not only regards *Confidence (Self-efficacy)* as an inherent positive trait of an individual but also emphasises its developmental nature and plasticity. Bandura's (1997) theory of self-efficacy is highly consistent with Positive Psychology Theory (Seligman, 1998). It states that an individual's confidence stems from four main sources: mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and regulation of emotional states. Seligman (2011) further proposed that the expansion effect of positive emotions can broaden the scope of cognition and behaviour, thereby enhancing an individual's confidence and options when facing challenges. This means that *Confidence (Self-efficacy)* is not a fixed personality trait but rather a psychological resource that can be cultivated through systematic training and positive situations. At the organisational level, positive systems such as "growth-oriented feedback" and "delegation and empowerment" not only provide individuals with practical experience but also stimulate their sense of self-worth through a fair evaluation mechanism. In this way, the positive cycle advocated by Positive Psychology Theory-exercising strengths-achieving success-reinforcing again-directly provides theoretical and practical support for the enhancement of *Confidence (Self-efficacy)* in psychological capital.

Secondly, concerning *Hope*, Snyder (2002) defined *Hope* as an integrated system consisting of goals, pathways, and agency. This is highly consistent with the goal-oriented perspective of Positive Psychology Theory (Seligman, 1998). Positive Psychology Theory (Seligman, 1998) holds that *Hope* is not merely an emotion but rather a cognitive-motivational complex. It enables individuals to build up sustained psychological energy during the process of setting and pursuing goals. Seligman's (1998) research indicates that proactive interventions such as optimism training, goal decomposition, and feedback mechanisms can effectively enhance an individual's hope level. Especially in high-pressure or uncertain situations, individuals with hope are more likely to engage in multi-path thinking, thereby being able to flexibly adjust their plans when encountering obstacles rather than getting stuck in helplessness or stagnation. The goal management, task decomposition, resource support, and positive feedback system in the organisational system precisely represent the specific manifestation of the third pillar of positive psychology-positive institutions. These situational factors not only provide external structural support for individuals to maintain *Hope* but also reduce the uncertainty in the pursuit of goals through institutional arrangements, thereby strengthening the stability and persistence of the *Hope* dimension in psychological capital.

Thirdly, regarding *Resilience*, Positive Psychology Theory (Seligman, 1998) emphasises the possibility of "post-traumatic growth", suggesting that adversity does not necessarily lead to loss but can also serve as an opportunity for individuals to accumulate psychological resources and develop higher levels of adaptability (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Fredrickson (2001)'s "expansion-construction theory" of positive emotions states that positive emotions can expand an individual's mental-action repertoire in difficult situations, helping them discover

new solutions and social support, thereby gradually constructing lasting psychological and social resources. Seligman (2011) also emphasised that *Resilience* is not merely "recovery" but rather "transcendence". It involves the process of identifying positive meanings, cultivating resilience, and creativity within the context of stress. In an organisational context, if a psychologically safe atmosphere can be established, a team support mechanism can be implemented, and fair institutional guarantees are provided, individuals will be able to achieve a "soft landing" when facing failures or challenges, thereby recovering more quickly and enhancing their adaptability. This "growth through setbacks" process is a typical case where Positive Psychology Theory (Seligman, 1998) are applied to psychological capital. *Resilience* not only a defensive mechanism but also a driving force for positive development. Finally, as for *Optimism*, Positive Psychology Theory (Seligman, 1998) places significant emphasis on its "cognitive style" aspect, highlighting its trainability. Seligman (1998) proposed in the theory of learned optimism that *Optimism* is not a blind positive fantasy but rather a positive attribution method based on rational evidence. Compared to pessimists who tend to interpret failure as "permanent, universal, and due to personal flaws", optimists are more inclined to view failure as "temporary, specific, and controllable". Therefore, they are better able to maintain their energy for action and future commitment. This explanatory style directly influences an individual's motivation level and stress coping patterns. The intervention based on Positive Psychology Theory (Seligman, 1998), through cognitive restructuring and emotion regulation training, can effectively help individuals correct negative attributions, thereby stabilising their optimistic tendencies. In an organisation, if an optimistic atmosphere can be strengthened through performance recognition, progress rewards, and positive feedback, then the spread of learned helplessness at the team level can be prevented. This will enable *Optimism* to no longer be merely an individual psychological trait but a shared cultural belief within the organisation. This not only supports the development of *Optimism* in psychological capital but also enhances the overall cohesion and creativity of the organisation.

In general, Positive Psychology Theory (Seligman, 1998) provides a comprehensive explanation for the four dimensions of psychological capital, covering aspects such as value orientation, mechanism pathways, and contextual support: it explains why these psychological resources need to be developed, how these resources can be effectively shaped, and how organisations can transform individual resources into stable performance and well-being. From this perspective, *Confidence (Self-efficacy)* enables individuals to bravely face challenges, *Hope* provides direction and motivation for actions, *Resilience* ensures growth and surpassing in adversity and turbulence, and *Optimism* maintains a positive expectation for the future and trust in one's own plasticity. The four dimensions do not exist independently but are interwoven and mutually reinforcing: *Confidence (Self-efficacy)* enhances the determination to pursue goals, *Hope* sustains the persistent motivation to overcome obstacles, *Resilience* ensures that individuals do not become dispirited in the face of setbacks, and *Optimism* helps individuals remain actively engaged in the face of uncertainty. They jointly form a psychological capital system that is capable of development, measurement, and intervention. This enables individuals not only to withstand negative impacts but also to achieve proactive adaptation and continuous growth in the complex and ever-changing reality. For an organisation, this means that in the process of cultivating the psychological capital of its members, not only can it enhance the performance, commitment, and happiness of the employees but also it can shape a more cohesive, creative, and adaptable

organisational culture, thereby gaining a long-term competitive advantage in the rapidly changing social environment.

Research on Psychological Capital

Psychological capital, as the core concept of positive organisational behaviour, has received extensive attention both internationally and in the Chinese academic community in recent years. It is mainly composed of four dimensions: *Confidence (Self-efficacy)*, *Hope*, *Optimism*, and *Resilience*, emphasising the developability and plasticity of these positive psychological resources (Luthans et al., 2007). Compared with traditional human capital and social capital, psychological capital focuses more on the psychological state and coping ability that individuals exhibit when facing challenges and uncertainties (Avey et al., 2011). Higher levels of psychological capital can effectively enhance an individual's work engagement, academic persistence, happiness, and overall performance and can also reduce stress and negative emotions. It holds significant value for organisational management and educational practices (Avey et al., 2011).

The existing research on psychological capital can be broadly categorised into three main directions. The first direction concerns definition and measurement, focusing on clarifying the conceptual connotations, verifying its four-dimensional structure, and examining its cross-cultural applicability. The second direction is empirical validation, which investigates the relationships between psychological capital and outcome variables such as performance, organisational commitment, well-being, and creativity. The third direction involves intervention and development, which examines whether and how psychological capital can be enhanced through training, online learning, or psychological counseling as well as its effectiveness across different groups and contexts. This threefold classification not only outlines the main research threads but also provides a basis for the subsequent comparison between international and domestic studies.

In the field of international research, early scholars have systematically defined the concept of psychological capital and verified its positive effects through cross-industry and cross-national samples (Luthans et al., 2005; Luthans et al., 2007). Subsequently, a large number of empirical studies further demonstrated a significant positive correlation between psychological capital and employees' work performance, job satisfaction, and organisational commitment (Avey et al., 2011). Newman et al. (2014)'s review indicates that psychological capital not only has a significant predictive effect on individual outcome variables but also can promote creativity and adaptability at the organisational level. In recent years, meta-analyses and pre-registered systematic reviews have further emphasised the plasticity of psychological capital, indicating that psychological capital enhancement programmes based on training, online learning, or hybrid interventions can produce small to moderate positive effects in improving individual mental health and work attitudes (Lupșa et al., 2020; Finch et al., 2023). In the context of higher education, research has found that the psychological capital of college students significantly predicts academic performance, learning engagement, and subjective well-being and plays a buffering role in crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Carmona et al., 2019; Prasath, 2021; Guerrero et al., 2022). Regarding university teachers, the latest empirical and review studies have found that teachers' psychological capital is closely related to job well-being, teaching creativity, and lower levels of job burnout (Bertieaux et al., 2024; Kačmár, 2024). Furthermore, psychological resources such as

mindfulness and emotion regulation may play a mediating or moderating role between psychological capital and teachers' well-being (Finch et al., 2023). Cross-cultural research indicates that although psychological capital is generally applicable across different cultural contexts, the importance of each dimension varies. This implies that further examination is needed to test its measurement invariance and local adaptation (Newman et al., 2014; Kačmár, 2024).

On the other hand, in the field of Chinese studies, the research on psychological capital has developed rapidly in recent years and has gradually expanded from the enterprise sector to the students and faculty groups in universities. Among university teachers, numerous empirical studies have found that psychological capital significantly predicts teachers' work engagement, career resilience, and organisational commitment and is closely associated with lower levels of job burnout and higher levels of career happiness (Liu et al., 2021; Zhou, 2022). The systematic review also further confirmed the positive effects of psychological capital on teachers' work engagement and mental health, emphasising its application value in teachers' career development and psychological support (Yang, 2022).

Among university students, psychological capital is significantly positively correlated with academic self-efficacy, perseverance, mental health, and job readiness (Li, 2023). Local studies have shown that in ethnic minority areas such as Inner Mongolia, the level of psychological capital has a significant predictive effect on entrepreneurial intentions among university students (Xu, 2019). Besides, the research on college students' employment anxiety and adaptability has found that high levels of psychological capital can effectively alleviate employment pressure and enhance career preparation by improving self-management (Shi et al., 2022; Lv, 2016). Domestic scholars have also gradually explored the application of psychological capital intervention in the field of education, proposing localised solutions based on training and counseling to enhance the positive psychological resources of university teachers and students (Liu et al., 2024).

By comparing the research conducted abroad with that conducted domestically, several differences and complementary aspects can be identified. Firstly, in terms of research methods and types of evidence, foreign countries have accumulated systematic evidence through randomised controlled trials, pre-registered meta-analyses, and cross-national samples (Lupşa et al., 2020; Finch et al., 2023) and have conducted longitudinal and contextualised studies in crisis situations such as COVID-19 (Prasath et al., 2021); while domestic research has rapidly enriched local descriptive and predictive evidence, particularly focusing on application issues such as university teachers' professional happiness and professional burnout (Liu et al., 2021; Li, 2023) but still lacks cross-regional comparisons, large-scale interventions, and long-term longitudinal tracking.

In addition, in terms of cultural and contextual fit, foreign research emphasises the cross-cultural measurement invariance and dimension differences of psychological capital (Newman et al., 2014), while domestic scholars pay more attention to how to apply the psychological capital theory in the context of Chinese institutions and policies and utilise it for teacher development and student support (Liu et al., 2021; Zhou, 2022). Besides, in terms of coverage at the regional and organisational levels, foreign research often employs samples from multiple countries and industries to test its universality. However, in China, systematic

empirical studies on universities in ethnic minority regions such as Inner Mongolia are still in their infancy.

Although previous studies have yielded valuable insights, there are still notable gaps that require further investigation. Firstly, most studies focus on the individual-level psychological capital and its relationship with outcome variables, while rarely incorporating macro-level factors such as university organisational culture, governance mechanisms, and ethnic policies into the models. As a result, they are unable to fully reveal how institutions and cultures shape or regulate the formation and effects of psychological capital. Secondly, the existing local studies mainly focus on students or are based on provincial samples. Systematic sampling studies specifically targeting teachers in undergraduate universities in Inner Mongolia including their psychological capital levels, formation mechanisms, and the relationship with organisational commitment are still rare. This limits the evidence base for teacher support policies in this region.

Thirdly, although there are an increasing number of intervention trials and meta-analyses conducted internationally, in the Chinese context, especially in universities in ethnic minority areas, randomised controlled or longitudinal interventions are relatively rare. The feasibility, implementation pathways, and long-term maintenance mechanisms of these interventions need to be verified through localisation. Fourthly, since most of the psychological capital scales are derived from Western contexts, it is necessary to test their structural validity and measurement invariance in the multi-ethnic Chinese university environment and to confirm the adaptability of the four-dimensional model in different ethnic and language groups. Finally, future research should adopt cross-level designs, mixed-methods studies, and multi-site comparisons to identify how psychological capital influences the attitudes, behaviors, and performance of teachers in specific organisational culture and policy contexts through which pathways.

Conclusion

This review has examined the conceptualisation, theoretical foundation, dimensions, and empirical evidence of teachers' psychological capital. Existing literature identifies confidence (self-efficacy), hope, resilience, and optimism as four complementary psychological resources that may support teachers in pursuing professional goals, managing challenges, and maintaining positive expectations. Previous studies have also associated psychological capital with employee performance, job satisfaction, and other positive work outcomes (Luthans et al., 2007; Newman et al., 2014). These findings highlight the relevance of psychological capital to understanding teachers' professional development and well-being.

Despite these contributions, further research is needed to examine how organisational culture, leadership, and institutional support shape teachers' psychological capital and its relationship with work-related outcomes. Longitudinal and intervention-based studies could provide stronger evidence of its development over time. In particular, more context-specific research on teachers in Chinese public universities, including those in ethnic minority regions such as Inner Mongolia, would help clarify the role of institutional and cultural conditions. Such research could provide a stronger evidence base for developing strategies to support teachers' psychological resources and professional well-being.

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