

The Influence of Psychological Capital on Internship Satisfaction: A Systematic Study from the Perspective of Cultural Adaptation

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Abstract: This study examines the relationship between psychological capital (PsyCap) and internship satisfaction through a systematic literature review. Building on Luthans' foundational PsyCap framework and its Chinese cultural adaptation by Ke et al., this article analyzes how self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism influence internship experiences. Findings reveal that PsyCap significantly enhances internship satisfaction through multiple pathways, with interpersonal PsyCap dimensions (e.g., respect, gratitude) playing a particularly important role in Chinese contexts. The study identifies four key dimensions of internship satisfaction (working conditions, gains, relationships, and career development) that interact with PsyCap components. Results suggest that developing psychological resources can substantially improve internship outcomes, with important implications for educational institutions and employers designing experiential learning programs. The article concludes with practical recommendations for PsyCap development in internship settings and directions for future cross-cultural research.

1. Introduction

Psychological capital (PsyCap) and internship satisfaction represent two critical constructs in career development research. Originating from positive organizational behavior, PsyCap encompasses self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism [1], with later adaptations incorporating Chinese cultural dimensions like interpersonal harmony [2]. Concurrently, internship satisfaction has emerged as a key indicator of experiential learning success, reflecting evaluations of work conditions, skill development, and career growth [3,4]. While existing studies demonstrate PsyCap's positive influence on job satisfaction, its specific impact on internship experiences — particularly in non-Western contexts — remains underexplored. This study reveals the link between PsyCap and internship satisfaction through comprehensive literature analysis. The findings aim to inform tailored interventions for optimizing internship programs through PsyCap development.

2. Psychological capital (PsyCap)

Psychological capital (PsyCap) refers to an individual's core positive psychological resources, encompassing self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism. Initially conceptualized by Frederic Luthans and colleagues in the late 1990s, PsyCap was defined as “a positive psychological state of development” that enhances confidence, perseverance, and adaptability in achieving goals [1].

2.1. Self-Efficacy (Confidence)

Self-efficacy reflects an individual's belief in their ability to successfully execute tasks and overcome challenges [5]. In the Chinese context, this concept is often simplified as “self-confidence” due to cultural familiarity. Self-confidence strengthens job satisfaction, performance, and resilience in demanding work environments.

2.2. Hope

Hope represents an individual's capacity to set meaningful goals, develop pathways to achieve them, and sustain motivation despite obstacles. Studies (e.g., Avey et al.) confirm that hope correlates positively with job satisfaction and persistence, enabling individuals to navigate setbacks effectively [6].

2.3. Resilience

Resilience denotes the ability to recover from adversity and maintain psychological well-being. Empirical evidence (e.g., Beal et al.) indicates that resilient individuals exhibit better mental health and higher stress tolerance, making them more adaptable in dynamic workplaces [7].

2.4. Optimism

Optimism involves a generalized expectation of positive outcomes and the capacity to reframe challenges constructively. Research (e.g., Avey et al.) highlights that optimistic individuals experience greater job satisfaction, performance, and problem-solving agility [8].

Luthans et al. collectively referred to the four dimensions of Hope, Efficiency, Resilience, and Optimism as the “Hero Within” framework, emphasizing their synergistic role in fostering personal and professional growth [9].

In 2009, Ke, Sun & Li expanded Luthans' model by developing a culturally adapted PsyCap scale, integrating China's collectivist values [2]. This theory covers both transactional and interpersonal PsyCap. Transactional PsyCap is very similar to Luthans' model and has the same dimensions. Interpersonal PsyCap refers to the positive mindset or mental ability that an individual possesses during interpersonal interactions in the Chinese cultural context. The dimensions of interpersonal PsyCap have local Chinese cultural characteristics, including Tolerance and Forgiveness, Modesty and Composure, Gratitude and Devotion, and Respect and Courtesy. This dual-structure model underscores how cultural norms shape psychological resources, offering a nuanced lens for studying workplace behavior in China.

3. Internship satisfaction

The concept of internship satisfaction has its theoretical roots in the broader construct of job satisfaction, representing an important extension of satisfaction theory into the educational domain. The foundational work on job satisfaction was pioneered by Hoppock, who conceptualized it as

employees' comprehensive affective and cognitive evaluation of various workplace elements, including working conditions, compensation, working hours, and management systems [10]. This seminal work established the basis for understanding individuals' subjective responses to their work environments.

In contemporary higher education, internships have gained increasing prominence as both a pedagogical tool and a critical transition mechanism for students entering professional careers [3]. Internship satisfaction, in this context, refers to the degree of enjoyment, fulfillment, and positive experience that interns derive from their internship programs. This construct captures both the immediate experiential aspects and the long-term professional value of internship experiences.

Empirical research has consistently demonstrated the significant outcomes associated with internship satisfaction. As Mensah revealed, higher levels of internship satisfaction are positively correlated with enhanced motivation, stronger career commitment, and improved subsequent job satisfaction [4]. These findings are supported by Sanahuja and Ribes, who found that satisfied interns are more likely to acquire valuable skills and gain meaningful experiences that positively influence their future career trajectories [11].

A critical factor influencing internship satisfaction is the quality of supervisory support and guidance. Research has shown that interns who receive adequate support from their supervisors tend to report higher satisfaction levels, along with increased confidence and motivation in their professional development. This underscores the importance of mentorship in shaping positive internship experiences.

Through a systematic analysis of 15 studies in the service sector, Ruslan et al. identified five key determinants of internship satisfaction: individual factors, job characteristics, organizational environment, contextual factors, and career potential [12]. Building on this research, internship satisfaction can be understood through four primary dimensions:

3.1. Working conditions

Working conditions encompass the physical and logistical aspects of the internship experience, including accommodation, meals, work environment, workload, and scheduling. Working conditions serve as the fundamental prerequisite for internship satisfaction, with superior conditions proving more attractive to potential interns.

3.2. Internship gains

This dimension captures the tangible and intangible benefits of internships, including financial compensation, knowledge acquisition, skill development, and competency enhancement. Liu and Zhong's research highlights that internship gains exert the most significant influence on students' professional internship satisfaction [13].

3.3. Interpersonal relationships

Interpersonal relationships refer to the psychological connections formed through workplace interactions. Wang's findings indicate that these relationships directly impact individuals' mental states and emotions, working in conjunction with compensation and achievements to shape overall internship satisfaction [14].

3.4. Career development

Career development involves structured plans to help interns acquire job-specific skills and

clarify future career paths. Research has demonstrated that effective career development components can significantly enhance both career satisfaction and psychological well-being among interns [13].

This multidimensional framework provides a comprehensive understanding of internship satisfaction, emphasizing its complex nature as both an immediate experiential evaluation and a long-term professional development indicator. The interplay of these dimensions suggests that a holistic approach is necessary when assessing and enhancing internship satisfaction.

4. The influence of psychological capital on internship satisfaction

Luthans et al. studied the relationship between PsyCap and job performance in three Chinese companies with 422 Chinese workers and found that three dimensions of PsyCap, namely hope, optimism, and resilience, individually and in combination, significantly and positively affected job satisfaction [5].

PsyCap represents an individual's positive psychological energy, which enhances job performance and satisfaction [15]. Research indicates that individuals with higher PsyCap tend to achieve better work outcomes, including increased job satisfaction and work engagement [16].

In the context of indigenous PsyCap theory, interpersonal PsyCap has been identified as a key factor influencing job satisfaction [17]. This relationship extends to internship settings, where PsyCap positively influences internship satisfaction, mediated through the psychological contract [18]. Additionally, internship satisfaction is shaped by individual factors, with higher PsyCap further enhancing satisfaction levels [19]. Beyond satisfaction, PsyCap also directly strengthens professional identity [20].

5. Conclusion and discussion

This study systematically examines the relationship between PsyCap and internship satisfaction, highlighting their combined impact on career development. The findings demonstrate that PsyCap — particularly its culturally adapted dimensions in China — significantly enhances internship satisfaction through multiple pathways, including improved resilience, motivation, and professional identity formation. Notably, interpersonal PsyCap components like respect and gratitude uniquely contribute to satisfaction in collectivist work environments. The research underscores the importance of developing both universal and culturally specific psychological resources to optimize internship experiences. Future studies could explore longitudinal effects and cross-cultural comparisons to further validate these findings. Practically, organizations should incorporate PsyCap training into internship programs to foster intern well-being and career readiness.

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