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## Original Research

# Improving job satisfaction of Chinese doctors: the positive effects of perceived organizational support and psychological capital



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## SUMMARY

**Objectives:** The huge population basic and the transformational changes to healthcare system in China have gained wide public attention in recent years. Along with these issues is a growing literature about doctor's job satisfaction; however, more is known about its negative related factors. Thus, this study was an attempt to assess the level of job satisfaction among Chinese doctors and to explore factors that enhance their job satisfaction. **Study design:** Cross-sectional questionnaire-based survey.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted during the period of September/October 2010. A questionnaire containing job satisfaction assessed by Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ), demographic characteristics, work conditions, psychological capital (PsyCap) and perceived organizational support (POS) was distributed to 1300 registered doctors in Liaoning province. A total of 984 respondents became our subjects (effective response rate 75.7%). Hierarchical regression was performed to explore the factors associated with satisfaction.

**Results:** The average MSQ score was 65.86 (level ranking for MSQ, 20–100) in our study population. Hierarchical regression analysis showed that POS ( $\beta = 0.412$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), PsyCap ( $\beta = 0.255$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ), incentive system ( $\beta = 0.119$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ) and educational background ( $\beta = 0.056$ ,  $P = 0.042$ ) were positively associated with job satisfaction.

**Conclusions:** The job satisfaction of Chinese doctors was at a moderate level. POS and PsyCap seemed to be the most crucial factors in relation to job satisfaction. Therefore, efficient measures such as building a supportive work environment and developing doctors' PsyCap should be considered by health administrators in order to promote job satisfaction among Chinese doctors.

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## Introduction

Job satisfaction can be defined as a global feeling that an individual has about his/her job,<sup>1</sup> which has been studied in various professional fields.<sup>2</sup> The job satisfaction of doctors, who are a particular occupational population, has gained increasing attention in recent years as it is not only associated with doctors' burnout,<sup>3,4</sup> mental health,<sup>3,5</sup> and turnover intention,<sup>6–8</sup> but also with the health outcomes of patients<sup>9</sup> and the quality of health care in general.

Although there are a number of research studies about job satisfaction, most have concentrated on the effects of demographic characteristics, work conditions and negative feelings<sup>10–12</sup> on job satisfaction. However, the more positive aspects of psychological capital (PsyCap) and perceived organizational support (POS) have now become a growing research topic aimed at improving the level of job satisfaction.

Based on both conceptual and empirical evidence, Luthans put forward the core construct of PsyCap and defined it as 'an individual's positive psychological state of development that is characterized by self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resiliency'.<sup>13</sup> Although it has not been long since the composite higher-order concept of PsyCap was described there is evidence that PsyCap is positively related to job satisfaction.<sup>14,15</sup>

According to organizational support theorists, POS refers to employees' general belief concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being.<sup>16</sup> As an organizational-based resource, it also can be seen as 'assurance that aid will be available from the organization when it is needed to carry out one's job effectively and to deal with stressful situations'.<sup>17</sup> Although there were relatively few studies on POS until the mid 1990's, research on POS has grown rapidly in the last few years. A meta-analysis of the relationship between POS and job outcomes indicated that POS has a strong, positive effect on employees' work attitude, such as job satisfaction.<sup>18</sup>

With the huge population in China, the ratio of doctors to the general population is 1:735, which is lower than that in western countries (1:280–1:640).<sup>19</sup> Thus, Chinese doctors have to deal with many more patients and take greater responsibility for critical decisions and therapeutic outcomes on a daily basis. It is reported that Chinese doctors experience extra shifts quite often<sup>20</sup> and 57.5% of them work more than 40 h per week. A nationwide investigation by the Chinese Medical Doctor Association in 2009 indicated that 39.5% of Chinese doctors are not satisfied with their work environment.<sup>21</sup> What is more, as China's health care used to be described as too difficult to access, too expensive, and too variable in quality,<sup>22</sup> China has started a major reform of health care to change the situation. Alongside the continuing health care reform and increasing health consciousness, the work life-style of Chinese doctors has changed immensely in recent years. All these mean that Chinese doctors are exposed to both heavy physical and psychological burdens which may lead them to be easily dissatisfied.

Overall, we hypothesized that Chinese doctors would enjoy a low level of job satisfaction. However, few studies of job satisfaction were directed towards Chinese doctors. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to assess the level of job

satisfaction among Chinese doctors, and to explore positive effects of PsyCap and POS in improving their job satisfaction.

## Methods

### Sampling and data collection

A cross-sectional survey was conducted during September/October 2010 in Liaoning province, northeast of China. As a heavy industrial base in China, the average income in Liaoning province is close to the national average. Furthermore, according to the statistics provided by China Yearbook, the proportion of doctors in the health workforce (34.5%) in Liaoning province is almost in the same level as the whole country's (35.4%). For each of geographic regions of Liaoning province (eastern, western, southern, northern and central), we randomly selected one city. One large general hospital (>500 beds) was randomly selected in each sampled city, and one more large general hospital was randomly selected if the sampled city was a megalopolis ( $\geq 1,000,000$  population). As the central city is a megalopolis, a total of six large general hospitals were finally sampled from the selected cities, and half of the doctors were randomly sampled from each selected hospital. After obtaining consent, a self-administered anonymous questionnaire was distributed to 1300 eligible doctors. Finally, we received effective responses from 984 doctors (effective response rate: 75.7%). These doctors formed the final study sample.

### Measurement of job satisfaction

Job satisfaction was measured with the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ),<sup>23</sup> which has been widely used in the Chinese population.<sup>24,25</sup> The 20-item short form MSQ used a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). The short form of the MSQ can be seen as a composite of a number of job facets. Scores are created by summing items so as to show each participant's satisfaction level ranging from 20 to 100. A score of 60 would indicate moderate, a score ranging from 61 to 79 would indicate 'moderate to not fully satisfied' and a score of 80 and above would indicate satisfied.<sup>26</sup> The Cronbach's alpha was 0.95 in this study.

### Demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics included gender, age (<30, 30–40, >40), marital status and educational background. 'Marital status' was categorized as 'married/cohabitation' and 'single/divorced/separated/widowed'. There are three levels of Chinese medical colleges: junior college course, undergraduate course, and graduate course. Therefore, 'education' was divided into 'junior college course' group, 'undergraduate course' group, and 'graduate course' group.<sup>19</sup>

### Work conditions

Work situations were assessed by three items: (1) job rank; (2) doctor–patient relationship and (3) incentive system. 'Job

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