



## Negative life events and school adjustment among Chinese nursing students: The mediating role of psychological capital



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### SUMMARY

**Background:** Adjustment difficulties of college students are common and their school adjustment has gained wide concern in recent years. Negative life events and psychological capital (PsyCap) have been associated with school adjustment. However, the potential impact of negative life events on PsyCap, and whether PsyCap mediates the relationship between negative life events and school adjustment among nursing students have not been studied.

**Objectives:** To investigate the relationship among negative life events, PsyCap, and school adjustment among five-year vocational high school nursing students in China and the mediating role of PsyCap between negative life events and school adjustment.

**Design:** A cross-sectional survey design was conducted.

**Participants and settings:** 643 five-year vocational high school nursing students were recruited from three public high vocational colleges in Shandong of China.

**Methods:** Adolescent Self-Rating Life Event Checklist (ASLEC), the Psychological Capital Questionnaire for Adolescent Students scale (PCQAS), and the Chinese College Student Adjustment Scale (CCSAS) were used in this study. Hierarchical linear regression analyses were performed to explore the mediating role of PsyCap.

**Results:** Negative life events were negatively associated with the dimensions of school adjustment (interpersonal relationship adaptation, learning adaptation, campus life adaptation, career adaptation, emotional adaptation, self-adaptation, and degree of satisfaction). PsyCap was positively associated with the dimensions of school adjustment and negatively associated with negative life events. PsyCap partially mediated the relationship between negative life events and school adjustment.

**Conclusions:** Negative life events may increase the risk of school maladjustment in individuals with low PsyCap. Interventions designed to increase nursing students' PsyCap might buffer the stress of adverse life events, and thereby, enhance students' positive adjustment to school.

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### Introduction

Currently, adjustment difficulties of college students have become an emerging issue (Lee et al., 2009). School adjustment among college students has also gained a wide concern of researchers. School adjustment is a broad and multidimensional concept that is not limited to students' school performance and academic success; it also includes their affect, attitude, relationships, and involvement or engagement with the school environment (Birch and Ladd, 1997). Several studies examining school adjustment have proved that internal factors, such as individual characteristics (e.g., intelligence and emotional quotients, personality) (Ahmed et al., 2011; Warbah et al., 2007), and external factors, such as perceived stress (e.g., academic stress) (Akgun and Ciarrochi, 2003), relationships (e.g., peers) (Iwata et al., 2014) and home environment (family income and parental conflicts) (Lucas-Thompson and Hostinar,

2013; Nelson et al., 1993) have contributed to the adjustment of college students. A meta-analysis by Mattanah et al. (2011) indicated that parental attachment was associated with adjustment outcomes. And these lines of evidence strongly imply that internal and external environments are important factors influencing school adjustment.

Negative life events (external factors) have also been associated with an increased risk of problems in school adjustment (Margaret et al., 2003; Sterling et al., 1985). Negative life events are events that "can lead to maladjustment and disturbances that most likely to result in readjustment—requiring changes in one's daily life" (Holmes and Rahe, 1967). Anders et al. (2012) investigated 1084 undergraduate and community college students and found that students who experienced more life events reported poorer outcomes in a range areas of school adjustment, including lower grade point average, more distress and lower life satisfaction. A survey conducted by Reyes-Rodríguez et al. (2013) found that negative life events increased the prevalence of depression symptoms and its severity among freshmen college students, which were regarded as one of important emotional maladjustment

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during school life. In addition, there is much evidence showing that negative life events could lead to suicidal behavior and other adverse outcomes across campus life (Rowe et al., 2013; Eisenberg et al., 2007). Consequently, finding ways to weaken the adverse effects of negative life events on school adjustment has become a major concern of researchers and educators.

Interestingly, more recently scholars have begun to assess psychosocial factors such as psychological empowerment, resilience and self-efficacy as a way to promote better school outcomes (Bemak, 2005; Deb, 2012; Young, 2009). As a popular topic of positive psychology, however, psychological capital (PsyCap) has been attached limited attention to enhance adjustment in school. PsyCap is defined as a higher-order core psychological construct and includes four state-like psychological resources of self-efficacy, optimism, hope and resiliency, which can be measured and developed (Luthans et al., 2007). And it is fully embodied in the process of individual growth and development. To date, most studies of PsyCap focus on organizational staff in organizational situations (Luthans et al., 2008), and few have explored adolescent students' PsyCap in school situations. Employee's PsyCap has significant positive effects on job performance (Luthans et al., 2007; Sun et al., 2012), organizational commitment (Larson and Luthans, 2006), and well-being (Avey et al., 2010), but it is negatively associated with work–family conflict (Wang et al., 2012), job stress (Avey et al., 2009) and depression (Liu et al., 2012). In addition, PsyCap has been reported as having a mediating role between work–family conflict and job burnout among nurses (Wang et al., 2012), and between occupational stressors and symptoms of depression among physicians (Liu et al., 2012). Among the few studies about students' PsyCap, PsyCap also has been proved to be a protective factor for school adjustment. One of them found that hope (one component of PsyCap) had a positive relationship to school adjustment (Cedeno et al., 2010), and another study reported that optimism predicted better adjustment among college students (Pritchard et al., 2007).

Although the associations between negative life events and school adjustment, and PsyCap and school adjustment have been investigated, the potential impact of negative life events on PsyCap, and whether PsyCap mediates the relationship between negative life events and school adjustment have not been examined in the context of Chinese nursing students, specially five-year vocational high school nursing students. This population, a special college student group, graduating from middle school and directly transitioning to college, will complete a five-year junior nursing college program and finally take the NCLEX-RN exam, which is equivalent to an associate degree in the United States.

In light of the above concerns, the present study aims to: (1) examine the relationship among negative life events, psychological capital, and school adjustment, and (2) investigate whether the association between negative life events and school adjustment among five-year vocational high school nursing students in China is mediated by PsyCap. Our hypotheses are that nursing students who suffer more negative life events will have lower PsyCap scores and poorer school adjustment, and that PsyCap mediates the relationship between life events and school adjustment.

The present study will assist school officials and nurse educators in developing programs designed to increase the PsyCap of nursing students to promote their physical and mental health and to enhance their capacity for school adjustment.

## Methods

### Design

A quantitative cross-sectional survey was designed to explore the relationship among life events, PsyCap and school adjustment and the mediating role of PsyCap of Chinese nursing students.

### Participants and Procedures

A convenience sample of 643 five-year vocational nursing students from 3 public high vocational schools in Shandong province of China was recruited to participate in the study. Nursing students enrolled in the first four years (Grades 1–4) of the program were recruited after class. Students in Grade 5 were not included because of their unavailability (they worked as interns in hospitals). Those interested in participating in the study were provided with a brief explanation of it, as well as verbal and written instructions delineating the procedures and time commitment involved. All participants completed the questionnaires in a classroom environment with the help of well-trained interviewers. The entire assessment took approximately 35 min for the participants to complete. The final sample consisted of 90 males and 553 females, with a mean age of 17.14 (ranging from 14 to 22 years).

### Ethics Issues

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of School of Nursing in Shandong University. Written informed consent was provided by all study participants. Parental consent was also obtained for those aged 14–17 years.

### Instrument

#### Adolescent Self-Rating Life Event Checklist (ASLEC)

ASLEC (Liu et al., 1997) was used to assess the severity of recent negative life events during the past 6 months. It incorporates 26 items, including 6 dimensions: interpersonal relationships, study pressure, being punished, bereavement, change for adaptation, and others. The respondents rated the impact of each negative life event on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = extremely severe). The scale has been found to be reliable and valid among Chinese adolescents (Liu et al., 1997). The Cronbach's alpha in the current study was 0.89 at 6 months.

#### Psychological Capital Questionnaire for Adolescent Students (PCQAS)

PCQAS is based on the psychological capital theory of Luthans et al. (2006) and developed by Fang (2012). The instrument is a 22-item self-report scale that includes four dimensions: hope, optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience. The reliability and validity of PCQAS have been found to be adequate in the Chinese adolescent student population (Fang, 2012). All items are rated from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The responses to the 22 questions were summed and averaged to obtain a mean score as an indicator of the total PsyCap, with higher scores indicating higher levels of PsyCap. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was 0.78.

#### Chinese College Student Adjustment Scale (CCSAS)

The scale has 60 items (Fang et al., 2005), with each item rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (disagree) to 5 (agree). There are seven subscales: interpersonal relationship adaptation, learning adaptation, campus life adaptation, career adaptation, emotional adaptation, self-adaptation, and degree of satisfaction. The students' overall adaptation also was calculated. Higher scores reflect higher levels of adaptation. In this study, the Cronbach's alpha of the scale was 0.77.

#### The Demographic Characteristics Form

The demographic characteristics were assessed including gender, age, grade, birthplace, whether the student was from a single child family (yes or no), and household composition. Birthplace was classified into urban and rural areas. Household composition was categorized as dual-parents and other (single parent or orphan).

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