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The relationship among college students' psychological capital, learning empowerment, and engagement

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ABSTRACT

Psychological capital refers to one's positive psychological resources, which consist of self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience, and psychological capital has been recognized as an important resource for organizational behavior and effectiveness. This study aimed to test the impact of psychological capital on students' learning in an academic context, and structural models were proposed to test the relationship among students' psychological capital, learning empowerment, and engagement. Data were collected from 490 college students, and structural equation modeling analysis was employed. The results indicated that college students' psychological capital had a significant positive relationship with learning empowerment, and learning empowerment fully mediated the relationship between psychological capital and engagement. In summary, the benefits of psychological capital in the academic domain were identified, and the implications for promoting psychological capital and engagement were discussed based on the findings.

1. Introduction

As the business environment becomes increasingly global and competitive, organizations strive to recruit and develop good human resources to pursue global competencies. In today's environment, capital for competitive advantage has been expanded from human capital to social capital to positive psychological capital (Luthans, Luthans, & Luthans, 2004). Social capital refers to the resource of relationships and the network of contacts, and psychological capital (hereafter referred to as PsyCap) refers to an individual's positive psychological state, which consists of efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience (Youssef & Luthans, 2007). The literature claims that PsyCap has positive impacts on employee attitudes (Larson & Luthans, 2006), behaviors, and performance (Avey, Luthans, & Youssef, 2010; Avey, Reichard, Luthans, & Mhatre, 2011; Luthans, Avolio, Avey, & Norman, 2007). Thus, researchers and practitioners are interested in examining the role of PsyCap and managing the PsyCap of employees.

As higher education is responsible for educating students to meet social and organizational demands, attention should be paid to student PsyCap. College students often report that they face many challenges and stressors, such as keeping up with their classwork, earning degrees (Rioli, Savicki, & Richards, 2012), preparing for jobs and confronting high unemployment rates and low job security (Cho, 2013; Luthans, Luthans, & Avey, 2014). Luthans et al. (2014) suggested that the proactive approach of developing psychological resources for students could foster the psychological strengths that promote learning and overcome the barriers to academic success. In this context, the present study looks into student PsyCap, a resource that empowers learning, overcomes uncertainty, and facilitates future goal attainment.

The concept of PsyCap initially evolved from the positive psychology movement, and the four individual components of PsyCap were borrowed from the fields of education and psychology (Luthans, 2012). In the academic domain, a number of prior studies investigated the impact of cognitive factors and negative psychological factors on learning, but the more recent studies have shown an interest in the role of positive psychology and positive emotions in the learning process (e.g. Rand, Martin, & Shea, 2011; You & Kang, 2014). Research has found that positive emotions foster student motivation and encourage the use of learning strategies (Artino & Jones, 2012; Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002; You & Kang, 2014). Nevertheless, there has been little attempt in the academic context to examine the effects of selective positive psychological factors as a composite learning resource or asset on academic performance. Therefore, this study aimed to test the impact of PsyCap as a high-order core construct in the field of education.

Among the many indicators of learning, engagement, which reflects students' cognitive, behavioral and emotional learning experiences, was selected as the subject for this study. Academic achievement, such as grades and achievement scores, are the most immediate learning outcomes in the educational field, but such variables are limited in their ability to reflect students' affective learning experiences. Because high achievement does not ensure that a student enjoys learning or is intrinsically motivated in learning (Jeon, 2007; OECD, 2004), engagement was the specific focus as it reflects multifaceted aspects of learning. In addition, this study investigated the role of learning empowerment in learning as empowerment enhances and promotes learning,

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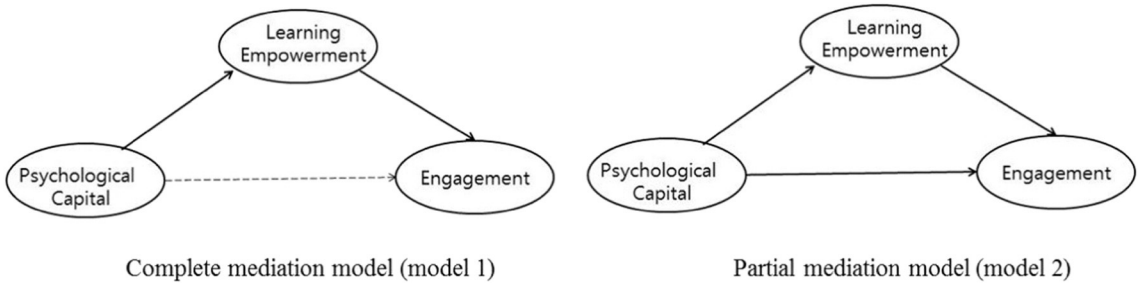

Fig. 1. The hypothesized models.

innovation, and work engagement in an organizational context (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996; Zhang & Bartol, 2010).

In summary, this study, positing that PsyCap is an antecedent for learning empowerment and engagement, investigated the relationships among PsyCap, learning empowerment, and engagement. Because extant research on testing the effect of PsyCap in the educational field is limited, this study contributes to the research as it validates and extends the understanding of PsyCap in learning and draws implications for successful learning. Furthermore, the effects of PsyCap were tested in a different cultural setting, as the study was conducted with Korean college students.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Psychological capital

According to Seligman (1998), a positive psychological state strengthens an individual's physical and mental health and contributes to the improvement of personal and organizational performance. More recently, Luthans (2002) continued to advance positive psychology theory and conceptualized PsyCap as a higher-order construct consisting of efficacy, hope, optimism and resilience. Luthans, Youssef, and Avolio (2007) defined PsyCap as follows.

> "An individual's positive psychological state of development characterized by: (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering toward goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success. (p. 3)"

To appreciate PsyCap, the four elements of PsyCap must first be understood. First, self-efficacy refers to a personal belief that one can accomplish a specific task successfully (Bandura, 1997). The perception of one's own efficacy influences how events are interpreted and, in turn, shapes responses. A person with low efficacy tends to put in less effort and give up on difficult tasks, whereas a person with high efficacy exhibits higher interest and motivation, which leads to better performance (Diseth, 2011; Sungur & Güngören, 2009). In an academic context, self-efficacy has been recognized as a strong predictor of student academic performance (e.g. Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Valentine, DuBois, & Cooper, 2004).

The second element is optimism. According to Scheirer and Carver (1985), optimism provides the energy for motivation in that having the expectation of future success results in more devoted effort in the present. Unlike efficacious people, who expect desirable outcomes based on their ability, optimistic people expect positive outcomes regardless of their ability. Accordingly, when optimistic people experience failure, they tend to believe the failure is not due to something innate; therefore, they are able to maintain motivation and continue to face challenges (Seligman, 1998). Hence, as optimistic people move forward with positive expectations, they are able to perform well. Several studies have shown that students who are more optimistic demonstrate greater academic achievement than do students who are pessimistic (e.g., Ruthig, Perry, Hall, & Hladkyj, 2004; Valentine et al., 2004).

Third, hope, which is similar to optimism, is distinguished by agency and pathways thinking. Hopeful persons tend to think independently, and they not only strive to achieve goals but also consider multiple paths when they confront barriers (Snyder, 2002). Hope has been revealed as a significant predictor of academic performance (Snyder et al., 2002) as well as organizational performance (Peterson & Luthans, 2003).

The fourth element is resilience. The core characteristic of resilience is the ability to 'bounce back' from failures or major changes. Research shows that a person with strong resilience tends to perceive problems and difficulties more positively (Bonanno, 2005) because he or she finds value and meaning in resolving such problems (Luthans, 2002). Research also illustrates that resilience is positively related to academic performance (Martin & Marsh, 2006), organizational performance (Luthans, Avolio, Walumbwa, & Li, 2005), and job satisfaction (Larson & Luthans, 2006).

Multiple studies have examined the relationship between PsyCap as a whole and individual performance or organizational effectiveness. PsyCap is significantly associated with higher performance (Avey et al., 2010; Luthans, Avolio, et al., 2007; Luthans et al., 2005), strong organizational commitment (Larson & Luthans, 2006; Luthans, Avolio, et al., 2007), and resistance to work stress and turnover (Avey, Luthans, & Jensen, 2009). Furthermore, research has shown that PsyCap can be developed through training (Luthans, Avey, Avolio, & Peterson, 2010; Luthans, Avey, & Patera, 2008). Several studies reveal the positive effects of PsyCap on learning (e.g. Luthans, Luthans, & Jensen, 2012; You, Kim, & Kang, 2014), but more empirical research on PsyCap is needed in the academic context.

Table 1
Demographic details of the participants.

		Frequency	%
Gender	Men	244	49.8
	Women	246	50.2
Grade	Freshmen	31	6.3
	Sophomores	103	21.0
	Juniors	87	17.8
	Seniors	178	52.4
	Not responded	12	2.4
Total		490	100

2.2. Learning empowerment

The construct of empowerment has different conceptualizations because it has been used in various fields such as management, politics, education, etc. Some researchers have categorized empowerment literature into two perspectives (Bartunek, Bradbury, & Boreth, 1997; Liden, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2000), one of which focuses on socio-structural aspects of empowerment and another that focuses on psychological factors