



# An empirical investigation of psychological capital among flight attendants



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 17 February 2015

Received in revised form

1 June 2016

Accepted 1 June 2016

### Keywords:

Iran

Life satisfaction

Psychological capital

Servant leadership

Service recovery performance

Work engagement

## ABSTRACT

Our paper develops and tests a research model that examines whether psychological capital (PsyCap) mediates the relationship between servant leadership and work engagement (WE) and whether WE mediates the effect of PsyCap on service recovery performance and life satisfaction. Data were collected from flight attendants with a two-week time lag in three waves and their pursers in the private airline companies in Iran. The results suggest that servant leadership influences WE indirectly only through PsyCap. The results also suggest that WE is a partial mediator between PsyCap and the aforesaid attitudinal and behavioral outcomes. Our study discusses theoretical implications and provides recommendations for managers in the airline industry.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the key challenges facing airline companies in today's competitive market environment is the management and retention of flight attendants. Flight attendants are expected to perform effectively and contribute to the delivery of a consistent brand promise (Hvass and Torfadóttir, 2014; Yeh, 2014). Flight attendants working for leading companies such as Southwest Airlines and Singapore Airlines play an important role in the delivery of such brand promise (Erkmen and Hancer, 2015). Therefore, airline companies should create a resourceful environment where they can acquire and retain talented flight attendants who are engaged in their work and display positive attitudinal and behavioral outcomes.

As an emerging personality variable or a personal resource, PsyCap refers to "an individual's positive psychological state of development and is characterized by: (1) having confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) making a positive attribution (optimism) about succeeding now and in the future; (3) persevering towards goals and, when necessary, redirecting paths to goals (hope) in

order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resiliency) to attain success" (Luthans et al., 2007, p. 3). In a supportive work environment where there is servant leadership, management encourages, motivates, and enables its frontline employees to accomplish organizational objectives (Ashill et al., 2008; Koyuncu et al., 2014). Servant leadership which "... focuses on developing employees to their fullest potential in the areas of task effectiveness, community stewardship, self-motivation, and future leadership capabilities ..." (Liden et al., 2008, p. 162) can boost personal resources such as PsyCap resulting in WE. WE refers to "a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption" (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74). Employees who are vigorous, dedicated, and absorbed can exhibit desirable outcomes such as job satisfaction and in-role and extra-role performances (e.g., Bakker and Demerouti, 2008; Karatepe, 2014).

### 1.1. Purpose and contribution to existing knowledge

With the preceding in mind, the purpose of our study is to propose and test a research model that investigates PsyCap among flight attendants. Specifically, the model tests: (1) the mediating role of PsyCap in the association between servant leadership and WE and (2) WE as a mediator of the impact of PsyCap on service

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recovery performance and life satisfaction.

Our study endeavors to investigate the aforementioned relationships and contribute to current knowledge in the following ways. First, PsyCap is a personality variable or a personal resource that has received little empirical attention in frontline service jobs (Jung and Yoon, 2015; Karatepe and Karadas, 2014). It is a concept which is not "... yet widely accepted or utilized in practice" (Mills et al., 2013, p. 160). Realizing this void in the current literature, we obtain data from flight attendants two weeks apart in three waves and their pursers to gauge the selected antecedents and consequences of PsyCap.

Second, empirical research pertaining to the factors influencing PsyCap in current knowledge is sparse (Avey, 2014; Newman et al., 2014). Having a full understanding of the relationship between the two constructs is critical because servant leaders establish and maintain a work environment where they are actively involved in assisting and meeting the needs of their employees and motivate them to accomplish organizational objectives (Ashill et al., 2008; Koyuncu et al., 2014). Therefore, we gauge the association between servant leadership and PsyCap.

Third, little research has been conducted on the effect of PsyCap on WE (De Waal and Pienaar, 2013). More importantly, Mäkikangas et al. (2013) cogently discuss that extant research has examined the effects of single dispositional variables (e.g., trait competitiveness, positive affectivity) on WE. However, the current literature lacks empirical studies relating new second-order personality variables such as PsyCap to WE (Mäkikangas et al., 2013). As stated earlier, self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism are the four components of PsyCap. Therefore, we test their *simultaneous* effects on WE. Gauging this relationship is significant since WE is considered as "... currently a hot topic among consulting organizations and clients" (Mills et al., 2013, p. 157).

Fourth, the current literature reveals that the influences of the components of PsyCap on employee outcomes have been studied independently (e.g., Sweetman et al., 2011). It appears that there is a need to examine their *simultaneous* effects on employee attitudes and behaviors (Chen and Lim, 2012; Karatepe and Karadas, 2014). Informed by this, our study gauges the *joint* effects of the components of PsyCap on service recovery performance that refers to "... frontline service employees' perceptions of their own abilities and actions to resolve a service failure to the satisfaction of the customer" (Babakus et al., 2003, p. 274). The other performance-related outcomes can also be equally important. However, service recovery performance is a critical outcome that requires service employees' discretionary behaviors and can be considered as part of their in-role and extra-role performances (Karatepe, 2012). Although it appears that PsyCap engenders desirable performance outcomes, extant research is still devoid of evidence appertaining to the joint effects of the components of PsyCap on service recovery performance (cf. Newman et al., 2014). As a matter of fact, there is a lack of empirical research about the factors that motivate flight attendants as internal customers to display good performance in the workplace (Fu, 2013).

Fifth, life satisfaction is defined as "an affective state resulting from one's evaluation of his or her life in general" (Karatepe and Baddar, 2006, p. 1018). It seems that there is a lack of empirical research regarding the association between PsyCap and nonwork-related outcomes (Choi and Lee, 2014; Nguyen and Nguyen, 2012). This gap also appears to be valid for the relationship between WE and nonwork-related outcomes (Mache et al., 2014). Informed by this void in existing knowledge, our study tests the influences of PsyCap and WE on life satisfaction. Lastly, the preponderance of empirical research on PsyCap has been conducted with samples in the United States (e.g., Choi and Lee, 2014). Therefore, our study obtains data from flight attendants in Iran,

which is an underrepresented country in this research stream. Thus far, to the best of our knowledge, there is no empirical study that has examined the previously mentioned relationships simultaneously using data gathered from flight attendants.

## 2. Theoretical underpinnings and research hypotheses

### 2.1. Conservation of resources (COR) theory and the job demands-resources (JD-R) model

Our study uses COR theory and the JD-R model to develop the relationships among the study variables. Specifically, COR theory posits that objects, personal characteristics, conditions, and energies are the four types of resources individuals seek to acquire and protect (Hobfoll, 1989). These resources refer to "... those entities that either are centrally valued in their own right, or act as means to obtain centrally valued ends" (Hobfoll, 2002, p. 307). One of the assumptions of COR theory is that individuals seek to protect and accumulate these resources. PsyCap is a personal resource (Karatepe and Karadas, 2014) and WE results from an accumulation of individual resources (Halbesleben and Wheeler, 2008). When resources tend to come in bundles, they create resource caravans (Hobfoll, 2002). These resource caravans lead to positive outcomes.

According to the motivational process of the JD-R model, job resources (e.g., training, career opportunities, supervisor support) mitigate job demands, stimulate goal accomplishment and personal growth, which results in WE and positive outcomes (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008; Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). The JD-R model also proposes that job resources influence WE independently or indirectly through personal resources (Bakker and Demerouti, 2008).

When the aforementioned assumption of COR theory is considered with the JD-R model, it would be expected that a resourceful work environment or job resources result in an accumulation of resources that will give rise to desirable outcomes (Xanthopoulou et al., 2007). Specifically, the existence of a work environment where servant leadership is promoted activates employees' personal resources such as PsyCap, which in turn results in WE, service recovery performance, and life satisfaction. Employees with high WE also display better performance in the workplace and are more satisfied with life in general.

### 2.2. Hypotheses

In his book, Greenleaf (1977) states, "The servant leader is servant first. It begins with a natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead" (p. 27). Servant leadership focuses on serving employees for the good of employees (Graham, 1991). Servant leaders serve as role models, inspire trust and confidence, provide resources, and form relationships with their followers or employees (Koyuncu et al., 2014; Liden et al., 2008). Under these circumstances, servant leaders try to create a resourceful environment where they are "... forming relationships with subordinates, empowering subordinates, helping subordinates grow and succeed, behaving ethically, having conceptual skills, putting subordinates first, and creating value for those outside of the organization" (Ehrhart, 2004, p. 73).

There are empirical studies regarding the association between several types of leadership and PsyCap in the current literature. For example, McMurray et al. (2010) found that leadership behavior (transactional and transformational) was a significant predictor of PsyCap among employees in a large non-profit organization. Rego et al. (2012) reported that authentic leadership boosted PsyCap among employees in different commerce organizations in Portugal. However, what is known about the effect of servant leadership on

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