

Study on the Empowering Effect of Psychological Resources on College Students' Career Planning

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of global economic volatility, this study aims to address the dilemmas faced by college students in career planning—such as lack of internal motivation, cognitive limitations, stagnant action, and weak adaptability—and explore how psychological resources empower college students' career planning from a theoretical perspective. The paper first defines the connotations of psychological resources and empowerment-oriented career planning, then systematically constructs a theoretical model of psychological resources empowering career planning based on the Conservation of Resources Theory and the Social Cognitive Career Theory. Finally, drawing on this model, it provides theoretical support and practical suggestions for colleges and universities to develop empowerment-based career education. This study offers internal support for college students' career development, helping them cope with employment uncertainty and achieve the sustainable integration of personal value and career development.

Keywords

Psychological Resources; Career Planning; Empowerment; College Students; Theoretical Model.

1. Introduction: The Paradigm Shift from "Guidance" to "Empowerment"

1.1. Background

As the multipolar world pattern takes shape gradually, the global economy has developed in a volatile environment in recent years. The number of new college graduates in China keeps rising, putting great pressure on the job market. More and more college students have realized the importance of career planning, yet they face multiple challenges in this process: they often lack internal motivation, passively accept guidance, and tend to give up when encountering setbacks. The root cause of this vicious cycle lies in the lack of psychological resources.

First, this lack shows up as insufficient self-awareness—students rarely analyze their career directions from the perspective of personal traits or interests. Second, the gap between their internal needs and external social expectations further drains their psychological energy. Information from society, families, and peers also undermines their ability to make independent choices. Additionally, their weak ability to cope with setbacks makes them likely to give up when facing difficulties, leading to negative states like "blind trial and error" or "delayed employment". These problems show that insufficient psychological resources weaken students' core self-evaluation, career adaptability, and proactive personality, leaving them struggling to maintain internal motivation and resilience.

1.2. Theoretical Trends

The field of career education is shifting from traditional "externally directive" guidance to "internally empowering" cultivation. Traditional career education, centered on person-job fit theories[1](e.g., Parsons' Trait-Factor Theory), emphasizes using standardized assessment

tools to assign career paths to students. Although these theories analyze job roles, evaluate job seekers, and try to match individuals with jobs, they are essentially "directive" frameworks.

In contrast, the Career Construction Theory, proposed by American psychologist Mark L. Savickas in the early 21st century, argues that an individual's career is not a static outcome "determined by the external environment" or "matched with internal traits". Instead, it is a dynamic process where individuals actively integrate past experiences, tackle current challenges, and shape their future directions through "narrative storytelling", "adaptive behavior", and "meaning construction".[2]

From a domestic perspective, this trend is equally clear. China's Outline for Building a Powerful Education Country (2024-2035) further combines the education digitalization strategy with career education, requiring the development of a "data-driven, personalized service" ecosystem.[3] This policy shift reflects the transition from "tool-oriented" to "empowerment-oriented" values in career education.

1.3. Core Issues and Value

How Do Psychological Resources Empower College Students' Career Planning?The essence of college students' career planning is a dynamic process of "seeking a suitable direction amid uncertainty". This uncertainty stems not only from the volatility of the external employment environment—such as the contraction of demand in some industries due to adjustments in the global economic structure, and information asymmetry caused by the rapid emergence of emerging occupational fields like AI trainers and carbon managers—but also from the complexity of individuals' internal development, including the mismatch between professional knowledge systems and occupational competence requirements, and conflicts between personal interests and social expectations. This is highly consistent with the "contradiction between the dynamic changes in the job market and students' insufficient career adaptability" mentioned in the Outline for Building a Powerful Education Country (2024-2035). In this process, psychological resources of different dimensions do not exert a generalized effect; instead, they exhibit differentiated supporting functions at key nodes such as "goal anchoring", "information integration", "action implementation", and "path adjustment", and have become core internal elements for addressing career planning dilemmas.

As shown in the "person-behavior-environment" interaction model constructed by the Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT)[4], an individual's career development is not unilaterally determined by a single personality trait or external environment. Instead, it takes "self-efficacy", "outcome expectations", and "personal goals" as core mediating variables to realize a cyclic evolution of "personal cognitive processing → behavior selection and investment → environmental feedback → cognitive iteration". As an important "input variable" in this model, different dimensions of psychological resources act on the mediating variables respectively: cognitive psychological resources optimize the efficiency of individuals' processing and integration of occupational information, providing a rational basis for outcome expectations; self-efficacy directly strengthens the belief judgment of "the possibility of achieving personal goals" and drives behavioral investment; emotional regulation and resilience resources maintain the stability of cognition and behavior when facing negative environmental feedback (such as job search failures and blocked planning), preventing the cycle from breaking.

2. Core Concepts and Theoretical Foundations: The Internal Foundation of Empowerment

As the core internal support for college students' career planning, the definition and theoretical origin of psychological resources serve as the logical premise for the subsequent path analysis. The proposal of "empowerment-oriented career planning," on the other hand, responds to the

paradigm shift in career education from "external instruction" to "internal activation." Together, these two elements form the theoretical foundation for psychological resources to empower career planning, and their connotations and boundaries must be clarified from an academic perspective.

2.1. Connotation and Core Elements of Psychological Resources

To explore how psychological resources influence college students' career planning, it is first necessary to clarify their definition and connotation. The core viewpoint of the Conservation of Resources Theory proposed by psychologist Hobfoll in 1989 provides a key framework for defining psychological resources.[5]The theory states that the core motivation of individuals is to acquire, maintain, and supplement their own resources. When the rate of resource consumption exceeds the rate of replenishment, individuals will fall into psychological stress and adaptation difficulties. Among these "resources," there are not only external explicit resources such as money and social support, but also internal psychological resources—namely, individuals' inherent psychological traits, abilities, and beliefs. This constitutes the most direct interpretation of psychological resources.

Based on this, and combined with the practical scenario of college students' career planning, psychological resources can be further defined as "a general term for various psychological elements owned by individuals that can be used to cope with career pressure, complete decision-making tasks, regulate physical and mental states, and promote professional self-development." In terms of structure, psychological resources present dual dimensions of "static traits-dynamic abilities": the static trait dimension refers to relatively stable psychological foundations (e.g., cognitive style, personality tendency), while the dynamic ability dimension focuses on psychological skills that can be improved through acquired development (e.g., emotion regulation strategies, stress response techniques). When psychological resources act on career planning, they function like an "individual internal resource bank" and can support the planning process through the following four core dimensions:

1. Cognitive Psychological Resources

Cognitive psychological resources form the rational basis for college students to make career decisions.[6]They mainly include information processing ability, cognitive flexibility, logical judgment ability, and social role cognitive ability. Their core function is to help individuals integrate professional information, break through thinking limitations, and formulate scientific strategies. For example, when a student majoring in Chinese Language and Literature intends to take the postgraduate entrance exam in the direction of "Cultural Industry Management," their information processing ability enables them to systematically screen universities offering this major and compare curriculum designs, admission data, and student background; their cognitive flexibility helps them break the rigid perception that "majoring in literature can only lead to a career in education" and identify the cross-domain adaptation value of "literary literacy + industrial management knowledge"; their social role cognitive ability allows them to understand the ability requirements of "project planning" and "policy interpretation" for positions in cultural industry management, thereby supplementing relevant knowledge reserves in a targeted manner. Without such resources, individuals tend to fall into "information overload" or "narrow thinking" in career decision-making, resulting in a disconnect between their plans and their own traits or industry needs.

2. Self-efficacy

Derived from Bandura's Social Learning Theory, self-efficacy manifests in the context of career planning as an individual's belief in "whether they can complete specific career tasks and achieve professional goals." [7]It is the core driving force for career exploration. Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to build confidence based on past successful experiences and proactively initiate planning actions when facing challenging decisions such as cross-major

postgraduate exams or attempts at emerging occupations. Conversely, low self-efficacy tends to lead individuals to exhibit avoidant behaviors in the face of career challenges, missing out on development opportunities.

3. Emotional Regulation and Stability

Emotional regulation and stability ability is a psychological protective mechanism that helps college students maintain rationality in stressful career planning scenarios (e.g., failure in postgraduate entrance exams, rejection in job applications). It is mainly reflected in the abilities of emotion recognition, emotion alleviation, and positive attribution. Individuals with such resources can avoid being dominated by negative emotions such as anxiety and frustration when facing uncertainty, and maintain positive expectations for career development. Without emotional regulation ability, individuals tend to fall into a vicious cycle of "emotional internal friction - planning stagnation," and may even make impulsive decisions.

4. Resilience and Adaptability-related Psychological Resources

Resilience and adaptability-related psychological resources serve as flexible support for individuals to cope with dynamic changes in career planning. They include psychological resilience, stress resistance, and career adaptability. Their core value lies in helping individuals recover quickly and adjust flexibly when their plans are hindered. Against the backdrop of increasing fluctuations in the job market, such resources are particularly important for college students. For instance, a student majoring in Software Engineering who missed the opportunity for postgraduate recommendation due to a quota limitation relied on their stress resistance to cope with the dual pressure of "preparing for postgraduate exams while undertaking an internship," and ultimately achieved the dual goals of being admitted to postgraduate studies and accumulating internship experience. Without such resources, individuals tend to fall into long-term confusion when their plans change, and may even adopt negative coping strategies such as "delayed employment."

2.2. Definition of "Empowerment-oriented" Career Planning

With the evolution of career education theories, the traditional "externally directive" model can no longer adapt to the dynamics of the job market and the personalized needs of college students. Against this background, "empowerment-oriented career planning" has emerged. Its theoretical basis can be traced back to Empowerment Theory—originating from sociology and psychology, the core proposition of this theory is "to activate individuals' power and ability to independently control their lives through environmental support and ability cultivation." This logic is highly consistent with the goal of career education to "endow students with autonomy in career decision-making."

Combined with the career development needs of college students, "empowerment-oriented career planning" can be defined as "a planning model that takes cultivating students' career subjectivity as the core, aims to break inherent employment concepts and establish scientific professional cognition, breaks through the limitations of traditional 'knowledge-lecture-based' employment guidance, and activates students' internal psychological resources through systematic strategies to achieve the transformation from 'passively accepting guidance' to 'proactively constructing careers'." [8] Compared with the traditional model, its core characteristics are reflected in three aspects: first, prominent subjectivity—emphasizing students' dominant position in planning rather than passively receiving external instructions; second, resource orientation—taking the cultivation of psychological resources as the core of planning rather than only focusing on the transmission of professional information; third, dynamic adaptation—focusing on guiding students to adjust their plans in response to environmental changes rather than formulating static career paths. It is evident that "empowerment-oriented" career education emphasizes students' subjectivity and helps them

awaken internal motivation through systematic strategies, transforming from passively accepting guidance to proactively mastering career exploration and development.

3. Analysis of the Empowering Paths of Psychological Resources on Career Planning

Career planning is a process where individuals explore directions and achieve person-job fit in a dynamic environment. As an internal psychological reserve, psychological resources provide core support for this process through multiple paths. From cognitive abilities to self-efficacy, and from emotional regulation to psychological resilience, different types of psychological resources help individuals move from "career confusion" to "independent planning", and from "passive adaptation" to "active construction"—via four key paths: motivation supply, cognitive expansion, action enhancement, and adjustment promotion. Ultimately, this leads to sustainable career development.

3.1. Motivation Supply Path: Activating Internal Drive with Self-Efficacy and Self-Awareness as the Core

Motivation is the starting point of career planning. Through "self-efficacy-driven motivation + cognitive anchoring", psychological resources provide sustained energy for career exploration. The core of this path lies in self-efficacy and self-awareness.[9]From the perspective of the Social Cognitive Career Theory, self-efficacy acts as the "internal engine of action", directly determining whether individuals dare to start exploring careers and can stick to their goals.

Individuals with high self-efficacy proactively set goals based on their confidence in their own abilities when facing challenging choices—such as "applying for postgraduate programs in a different discipline" or "trying emerging occupations". For example, a computer science student who believes they can master marketing skills through a minor program will choose "Internet Product Manager" as their career direction, instead of passively following a single career path. At the same time, self-awareness (a type of cognitive ability) provides an "anchoring effect" for motivation by clarifying interests, values, and strengths. When individuals clearly know they "value creativity and are good at communication", they will more firmly pursue careers in design or planning—avoiding the loss of motivation caused by vague goals. This forms a positive cycle: "self-awareness → clear goals → stronger self-efficacy → increased motivation".

3.2. Cognitive Expansion Path: Developing Cognitive Abilities to Break Through Planning Limitations

The essence of career planning is a cognitive decision-making process. By expanding cognitive boundaries and optimizing decision-making logic, cognitive abilities remove "thinking barriers" for planning—and this is the core logic of the cognitive expansion path.

Cognitive flexibility, a key aspect of cognitive abilities, can break the rigid mindset that "major equals career". It helps individuals discover the cross-field value of their abilities. For instance, a history major can explore diverse career directions (such as museum curation or cultural heritage management) using their document analysis skills, instead of being limited to the single option of "teacher".

Information processing ability improves the scientificity of planning by efficiently screening and integrating information. For example, when planning to apply for postgraduate programs, college students can quickly identify admission data of target universities and key points of professional courses—avoiding interference from unnecessary information.

Social role cognition helps individuals understand job requirements. For example, they may realize that "product managers need to have user thinking" and then improve relevant skills accordingly. This path aligns with the dual-process theory in cognitive psychology: by

activating "analytical cognition", it turns career decision-making from "relying on intuition" to "making rational judgments", significantly reducing the blindness of planning.

3.3. Action Enhancement Path: Promoting Goal Implementation with Self-Efficacy and Psychological Resilience

The key to career planning lies in turning plans into action. Through "self-efficacy promoting action initiation + resilience ensuring persistence", psychological resources help turn planning "ideas" into "practice"—this is the action enhancement path.

Self-efficacy not only stimulates goal-setting but also directly encourages action. In the career exploration stage, individuals with high self-efficacy are more willing to proactively submit internship applications or participate in industry interviews, because they believe "action will bring useful feedback".

On the other hand, psychological resilience plays a "risk-resistant role" when setbacks occur. It helps individuals avoid losing motivation due to setbacks.[10] For example, a student who is rejected in a job interview will not fall into self-doubt (such as thinking "I am not capable enough") if they have strong psychological resilience. Instead, they will review their experience, adjust their strategy, and continue applying for jobs—avoiding stopping their exploration due to one failure.

At the same time, emotional stability reduces emotional friction during action. For example, a student preparing for exams can relieve anxiety through emotional regulation, maintain an efficient learning state, avoid delaying progress due to mood swings, and ensure their study plan stays on track.

3.4. Adjustment Promotion Path: Helping Students Cope with Dynamic Changes with Stress Resistance and Cognitive Flexibility

Through "resilience coping with stress + flexible direction adjustment", psychological resources support the adjustment of career plans—this is the adjustment promotion path.

Individual stress resistance acts as a "resilience buffer", helping individuals recover quickly when facing major career stress or setbacks. For example, a student who strongly hopes to be recommended for postgraduate study may narrowly miss the opportunity. If they have strong stress resistance and flexible cognitive abilities, they will quickly get over the anxiety of "failed planning", evaluate their transferable skills, and try applying for postgraduate programs or looking for jobs instead.

Emotional regulation provides a "psychological space" for adjustments by relieving negative emotions—preventing impulsive decisions caused by emotional outbursts.[11] In addition, cognitive flexibility supports scientific adjustments to career directions: individuals can break rigid mindsets, such as shifting from "needing to work in large enterprises" to "choosing small and medium-sized enterprises with growth potential", or from "pursuing stable jobs" to "exploring flexible employment models". This ensures that career planning always aligns with environmental changes and personal needs, which is consistent with the core idea of "dynamically constructing career meaning" in the Career Construction Theory.

In summary, the empowerment of psychological resources on career planning is not a one-dimensional effect, but the result of the four paths working together: the motivation supply path solves the problem of "willingness to act", the cognitive expansion path solves "clarity of thinking", the action enhancement path solves "ability to implement", and the adjustment promotion path solves "ability to adapt to changes". These four paths are interconnected, with psychological resources as the link, forming a complete empowerment system of "goal-cognition-action-adjustment". This system not only helps individuals clarify their career directions now but also cultivates their lifelong career management abilities—providing long-term support for coping with future career challenges.

4. Construction of an Empowerment-Oriented Career Education System

4.1. Theoretical Summary

Through analysis, this study clarifies that the empowerment of psychological resources on college students' career planning is not a scattered effect. Instead, it forms a closed-loop system of "goal anchoring-rational decision-making-practice implementation-dynamic adaptation", with the four paths ("motivation supply-cognitive expansion-action enhancement-adjustment promotion") as its framework.

This conclusion not only draws on classic theories such as the Social Cognitive Career Theory and the Career Construction Theory but also further refines how psychological resources work—clarifying the different roles of key resources like self-efficacy, cognitive abilities, and psychological resilience. It verifies the theoretical model of "how psychological resources are transformed into career planning abilities", and builds a theoretical framework for the empowerment-oriented career education system that "takes psychological resource development as the core". This also addresses the limitation of traditional career education, which "emphasizes information transmission but ignores internal support".

4.2. Implications for College Career Education

Current college career education mostly focuses on explaining professional information and teaching resume skills, and pays far too little attention to psychological resources as the "internal foundation". Based on the study's conclusions, colleges and universities can build a three-dimensional empowerment system:

In curriculum design: Add a module on "self-awareness and self-efficacy training". Strengthen the motivation supply path through career interest assessments and workshops for exploring personal strengths.

In practice: Build interdisciplinary practice platforms and establish a database for integrating professional information. This helps implement the cognitive expansion path and break the rigid mindset that "major equals career".

In counseling services: Set up a support team for "setback coping and emotional regulation". Provide psychological resilience training for scenarios like job rejection or plan changes, and offer personalized adjustment guidance to help students deal with unexpected situations (such as failing to get recommended for postgraduate study or industry changes). This improves the action enhancement and adjustment promotion paths, and ultimately forms a "curriculum-practice-counseling" trinity career education model that focuses on developing psychological resources.

4.3. Research Prospects

This study mainly discusses the overall theoretical model of how psychological resources influence college students' career planning (including its mechanisms and paths), and there is much room for future research. For example:

Expand the research sample: The current study mainly focuses on students from comprehensive universities. Future studies can include students from different types of institutions (such as vocational colleges and private universities), analyze differences in psychological resources and their empowerment effects among students with different educational backgrounds and majors, and improve the generalizability of the conclusions.

Enrich research methods: Combine qualitative research (such as case studies) to explore the specific process of developing psychological resources and its key influencing factors in depth.

Shift research perspectives: From angles like teaching practices, use experiments to quantitatively verify the effectiveness of "psychological resource development courses", and develop teaching plans that can be promoted widely.

5. Conclusion

Against the backdrop of global economic volatility and college students' employment pressure, this study targets the dilemmas of college students' career planning (lack of motivation, cognitive limitations, stagnant action, and weak adaptability) and takes "psychological resource empowerment" as the core to explore the internal connection between psychological resources and college students' career planning.

Based on the Conservation of Resources Theory, this study defines psychological resources. Through path analysis, it finds that psychological resources form a closed-loop empowerment system through the four paths ("motivation supply-cognitive expansion-action enhancement-adjustment promotion"). These paths solve the problems of internal motivation, cognitive limitations, action transformation, and adaptation challenges respectively, and break the "passive adaptation" dilemma of traditional career planning.

This study refines the practical application of relevant theories, clarifies the different empowerment mechanisms of psychological resources, breaks the static framework of "person-job fit", and builds a dynamic model of "psychological resources-path collaboration-career autonomy"—providing theoretical support for the paradigm shift of career education. At the same time, it provides a practical plan for college career education: integrating psychological resource development into the entire process through the "curriculum-practice-counseling" trinity, and addressing the shortage of "emphasizing information but ignoring support" in traditional education.

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