

The Relationship between Positive Psychological Capital and Parenting Stress among Parents

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of concurrent low fertility and rapid population ageing in China, mounting parenting stress has become an urgent issue affecting family well-being and child development. Positive Psychological Capital (PsyCap)-a malleable set of positive psychological resources-is theorised to buffer external stressors, yet its role in mitigating parenting stress remains under-examined. This cross-sectional study investigated the association between PsyCap and parenting stress among Chinese parents, and tested whether PsyCap predicts parenting stress after controlling for sociodemographic factors. An online survey was administered to 461 parents (74 fathers, 387 mothers) from multiple provinces. Measures included the Chinese adaptation of the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (Zhang et al., 2010; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.93$) and the short form of the Parenting Stress Index (Yeh et al., 2001; Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$). Sociodemographic data were also collected. Pearson correlations and hierarchical regression analyses were performed in SPSS 26.0. PsyCap was negatively correlated with parenting stress ($r = -0.428$, $p < 0.001$). After controlling for child gender, parent gender, parity, and socioeconomic status (SES), PsyCap still significantly predicted lower parenting stress ($\beta = -0.441$, $t = -9.80$, $p < 0.001$). Parent gender and SES were also related to parenting stress, but the effect of SES became non-significant once PsyCap was entered into the model. These findings identify PsyCap as a key buffering resource that diminishes parenting stress beyond sociodemographic and gender differences. Interventions that cultivate hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism-especially for mothers and families with lower SES-may effectively alleviate parenting stress, enhance family well-being, and indirectly support reproductive intentions in contemporary China.

1. Introduction

Since 2010, China has entered a new era in which persistently low fertility co-exists with rapid population ageing, and the waning of the demographic dividend has become essentially irreversible. To address this severe demographic challenge, the government has enacted sweeping reforms to its birth-control policies in order to stimulate families' fertility intentions [1]. The overall response, however, has been lukewarm: public uptake remains limited and the anticipated surge in births has

not materialised [2]. One likely reason is the intense external pressures families currently face, particularly the high level of parenting stress borne by mothers and fathers [3]. Parenting stress refers to the psychological strain that arises when parents perceive their personal resources or abilities as inadequate to meet their children's needs [4]. This stress not only exerts substantial negative effects on parental mental health-manifesting as anxiety, depression, and fatigue-but also seriously diminishes parents' effectiveness in educating, caring for, and guiding their children, thereby undermining children's psychological well-being and social adjustment [5]. Accordingly, developing effective means of mitigating and managing parenting stress has become a central concern in psychology, education, and social-work research.

The rise of positive psychology offers new perspectives and methods for alleviating and coping with various forms of psychological stress. Within this field, Positive Psychological Capital (PsyCap) has attracted growing scholarly attention in recent years. PsyCap comprises four core components-self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism-and highlights the positive psychological resources and capacities individuals marshal when confronting adversity and stress [6]. Empirical evidence shows that people with higher levels of PsyCap cope more effectively with stressful situations, display greater psychological resilience, and report higher subjective well-being and life satisfaction [7]. Focusing specifically on parents, Pareek and Jain found that among caregivers of children with special needs, greater PsyCap was associated with lower perceived parenting stress [8]. Likewise, Choi (2021) demonstrated that improvements in parent-adolescent communication and PsyCap reliably predicted family members' psychological well-being [9]. Collectively, these findings suggest that PsyCap may serve as a key psychological buffer against parenting stress. Parents endowed with robust hope, efficacy, optimism, and resilience are better equipped to regulate their emotions and to adopt adaptive appraisals of stressful events, thereby diminishing the negative impact of role conflicts, time pressure, or child behaviour problems. In short, a high level of PsyCap enables mothers and fathers to view difficulties more constructively and to cope with stressors more effectively, ultimately mitigating the burden of parenting stress.

Against China's distinctive sociocultural backdrop-where parents shoulder heavy societal expectations and extensive familial responsibilities-parenting stress is both pervasive and multifaceted, exacerbated by still-developing social-support systems. Examining internal psychological resources such as Positive Psychological Capital (PsyCap) and their predictive effect on parenting stress therefore carries substantial theoretical significance and practical value for intervention design. Yet empirical evidence on the PsyCap-parenting-stress nexus remains sparse at home and abroad, and systematic investigations into its underlying mechanisms are lacking. The present study seeks to address this gap by delineating the relationship between PsyCap and parenting stress and clarifying how parents' positive psychological resources shape their perceived stress in the course of child-rearing.

2. Methods

2.1 Subject

This study employed an online, randomly sampled survey of parents from multiple provinces across China. A total of 465 questionnaires were collected; after excluding responses with unusually short completion times or uniform answer patterns, 461 valid cases remained, yielding a valid response rate of 99.13 %. Among these respondents, 74 were fathers (16.1 %) and 387 were mothers (83.9 %). In terms of educational attainment, 17 participants (3.6 %) had completed junior secondary school or below, 38 (8.2 %) had finished senior secondary school, 353 (76.5 %) held a bachelor's degree, and 53 (11.4 %) possessed a master's degree or higher.

2.2 Research Tools

2.2.1 Demographic Information

The first section of the questionnaire gathered sociodemographic data, including the child's gender, the parent's gender, parity (birth order), monthly household income, socioeconomic status, and educational attainment.

2.2.2 Positive Psychological Capital Scale

Positive psychological capital was assessed with the Chinese adaptation of the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ) revised by Zhang et al. (2010). The instrument comprises 26 items covering four dimensions-self-efficacy, resilience, hope, and optimism. Each item is rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"); higher scores indicate a higher level of psychological capital. In the present sample, the scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$) [10].

2.2.3 Parenting Stress Scale

Parenting stress was measured with the short form of the Parenting Stress Scale revised by Yeh et al. (2001). The scale contains 15 items across three dimensions-parental distress, dysfunctional parent-child interaction, and difficult child characteristics. Each item is scored on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"); higher scores indicate greater parenting stress. In the current study, the scale exhibited good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .89$) [11].

2.3 Data Analysis

All statistical analyses were conducted in SPSS 26.0. Pearson correlation coefficients were first computed to examine bivariate associations, followed by hierarchical multiple regression analyses to test the predictive effect of Positive Psychological Capital on parenting stress while controlling for relevant sociodemographic variables.

3. Results

Table 1: Pearson Correlations Between Positive Psychological Capital and Parenting Stress (N = 461)

	1) Child Gender	2) Parent Gender	3) Birth Order	4) Socio-economic Status	5
5) Positive Psychological Capital	0.004	-0.256***	0.024	0.263***	--
6) Parenting Stress	-0.017	0.029	-0.025	-0.140**	-0.428***

Note:*** $P < 0.001$,** $P < 0.01$,* $P < 0.05$.

As shown in Table 1, Pearson correlations revealed a significant negative association between Positive Psychological Capital and parenting stress ($r = -0.428$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher PsyCap is linked to lower levels of perceived parenting stress. Parent gender was also significantly related to PsyCap ($r = -0.256$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that mothers reported lower PsyCap than fathers. Socioeconomic status (SES) showed a positive correlation with PsyCap ($r = 0.263$, $p < 0.001$) and a negative correlation with parenting stress ($r = -0.140$, $p < 0.01$), implying that parents with higher SES tend to possess greater psychological capital and experience less parenting stress.

Table 2: Hierarchical Multiple Regression Predicting Parenting Stress from Positive Psychological Capital (N = 461)

	Parenting Stress					
	Model1			Model2		
	β	t	p	β	t	p
1) Child Gender	-0.021	-0.448	0.654	-0.017	-0.403	0.687
Parent Gender	0.011	0.244	0.807	-0.088	-2.025	0.043
Birth Order	-0.036	-0.775	0.438	-0.016	-0.388	0.698
Socio-economic Status	-0.142	-3.031	0.003	-0.037	-0.839	0.402
2) Positive Psychological Capital				-0.441	-9.801	0.000
R2	0.021			0.192		
F	2.500*			21.629***		

Note:***P<0.001,**P<0.01,*P<0.05.

As shown in Table 2, linear regression revealed that neither the child's gender nor parity significantly predicted parenting stress ($ps > 0.05$). In contrast, parent gender and socio-economic status (SES) each made significant contributions ($ps < 0.05$). Most notably, Positive Psychological Capital exerted a robust negative effect on parenting stress ($\beta = -0.441$, $t = -9.801$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that higher levels of PsyCap are associated with markedly lower levels of perceived parenting stress, even after controlling for demographic covariates.

4. Discussion

The present findings demonstrate a significant negative correlation between Positive Psychological Capital (PsyCap) and parenting stress ($r = -0.428$, $p < 0.001$). Even after controlling for sociodemographic covariates, PsyCap remained a strong inverse predictor of parenting stress ($\beta = -0.441$, $t = -9.801$, $p < 0.001$). These results echo evidence from studies of parents of children with special needs (Zoromba et al., 2024) and general parent samples (Yue et al., 2022), thereby extending the buffering role of PsyCap to a Chinese cultural context [5, 12]. From the dual perspectives of positive psychology and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, PsyCap constitutes an accumulable psychological resource. When confronted with the demands of child-rearing and role conflict, higher levels of self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism enhance parents' subjective sense of resource sufficiency and mitigate perceptions of "resource threat" or "resource loss," thereby reducing experienced stress [6]. Moreover, PsyCap fosters the adoption of more constructive emotion-regulation strategies [13], providing an additional psychological buffer against stress. In this way, the study not only broadens the empirical boundaries of PsyCap's protective effects but also offers a novel theoretical lens for understanding individual differences in parenting stress.

The regression analysis further showed that parent gender remained a significant predictor of parenting stress after PsyCap was entered into the model, with a negative standardized coefficient. In other words, fathers reported lower levels of perceived parenting stress than mothers. This disparity may stem from traditional cultural expectations that assign mothers a larger share of child-rearing and household responsibilities, or from mothers' typically higher standards for the quality of caregiving-both of which can heighten their stress levels. Socio-economic status (SES) was a significant negative predictor of parenting stress in Model 1, but its effect became non-significant once PsyCap was included. This pattern suggests that SES may exert its influence partly by fostering higher levels of PsyCap. Accordingly, strengthening PsyCap could represent a viable pathway for offsetting the disadvantages associated with lower SES and, in turn, alleviating parenting stress.

5. Limitations and Future Directions

This study employed a cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inference. Longitudinal tracking or experimental interventions are needed to clarify the directionality and durability of PsyCap's effect on parenting stress. Because all variables were assessed via self-report questionnaires, common-method bias cannot be ruled out. Future work should integrate multisource data-including physiological indicators (e.g., cortisol), behavioural observations, and partner or teacher ratings-to bolster measurement validity. The sample was recruited online and contained a disproportionately large share of highly educated respondents, potentially leading to an underestimation of parenting stress in the general population. Subsequent studies should broaden geographic and socioeconomic representation, with particular attention to rural areas and low-SES families. Finally, although the present investigation confirmed a direct effect of PsyCap, the underlying pathways remain unexplored. Future research should examine mediators and moderators such as emotion-regulation strategies, parental role identity, and social support, thereby constructing a more comprehensive, multilevel model of how PsyCap alleviates parenting stress.

6. Conclusion

This study is the first to systematically demonstrate, within a Chinese parent sample, that Positive Psychological Capital (PsyCap) serves as a robust buffer against parenting stress. The findings extend PsyCap theory into the family domain and offer concrete avenues for intervention. Enhancing parents' hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism can fortify their psychological resources for coping with child-rearing challenges, while also mitigating stress disparities associated with lower socioeconomic status and gender-based role expectations. Future work should employ longitudinal and multimethod designs to clarify the causal pathways through which PsyCap operates and to evaluate the effectiveness of PsyCap-focused interventions. Such evidence will be essential for developing targeted, empirically grounded strategies to alleviate the persistently high levels of parenting stress observed amid China's declining fertility context.

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