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University Freshmen's Career Decision-Making and Psychological Capital: A Comparative Study Between the Pre-ODI and Post-ODI at ABC University, China

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Abstract

This study explores using an Organization Development Intervention (ODI), incorporating Appreciative Inquiry (A.I.) and SMART goal-setting to change the Psychological Capital (PsyCap) of Chinese first-year university students in enhancing their Career Decision-Making (CDM) abilities. A mixed-methods approach was employed with 60 first-year student volunteers. Surveys and focus group interviews were conducted before and after the intervention for quantitative and qualitative data collection. Reflection reports during the ODI process were gathered to provide further evidence to support the qualitative research. After six weeks of intervention, mixed results were produced. In the quantitative analysis, significant improvements were observed in the PsyCap components of self-efficacy and resilience, while hope and optimism showed moderate change. In contrast, qualitative findings indicated notable positive changes in students' attitudes, behaviors, and clarity regarding career planning, demonstrating that the ODI contributes meaningfully to their PsyCap and CDM development. These findings suggest that universities should embed structured interventions into first-year early-stage courses to strengthen students' psychological resources and prepare them for the evolving labor market.

Keywords: Psychological Capital, Career Decision-Making, Appreciative inquiry, Goal setting, Organizational Development Intervention, University Freshmen Students

Introduction

Employment is a key indicator of global social and economic stability and a fundamental factor in determining an individual's life path. Youth unemployment rates are an early indicator of overall economic health and reflect challenges in the labor market (Göçer & Erdal, 2015). In China, the youth unemployment rate reached a record 15.7% in 2024, reflecting the intense challenges faced by fresh graduates (NBSC, 2024). This figure exceeded the global youth unemployment rate of 12.6% in 2024 (ILO, 2024). Although the expansion of

higher education has increased the number of graduates, employment demand has not grown accordingly, leading to fierce competition for jobs. University students from highly structured academic environments often face uncertainty, anxiety, and confusion about their future career paths (Zou et al., 2022). These challenges are amplified by rapid technological changes driven by artificial intelligence-driven automation and a highly competitive environment, which reduces job opportunities, while an education system overly focused on academic performance may exacerbate mental pressures (B. Mulvey & Wright, 2022; G. Yu et al., 2020). In this context, students' ability to make wise and confident career decisions depends not only on external opportunities but also on their internal resources.

However, most university interventions aimed at enhancing Career Decision-Making (CDM) skills are targeted at senior students, neglecting freshmen in the early stages of psychological and career development. This gap highlights the need for structured interventions that equip first-year students with the mindset and skills to cope with an increasingly complex and competitive labor market from the beginning of their university journey.

Research Problem

ABC University freshmen face significant challenges in CDM due to internal and external pressures. These pressures lead to uncertainty, anxiety, and a lack of clarity in career goals, diminishing their psychological capital, including self-efficacy, hope, optimism, and resilience. As a result, students often feel fear, helplessness, and a lack of motivation, which hinders informed career decisions.

Thus, this study examines the relationship between ABC first-year students' psychological capital (hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy) and their CDM using ODI. It then tests the difference between the students' PsyCap and their CDM before and after ODI. The benefits of using ODI are expected to improve the students' capability to determine their future careers.

Research Objectives

1. To identify the extent to which Chinese first-year students' PsyCap relate to their Career Decision-Making (CDM).
2. To examine if Organization Development Intervention (ODI) is able to induce changes of the Chinese first-year students' perception of PsyCap and on their CDM.
3. To gather insights from Chinese first-year students' feedback on their PsyCap during the ODI process.

Research Questions

RQ1: To what extent is Chinese first-year students' PsyCap relate to their Career Decision-Making (CDM)?

RQ2: Is Organization Development Intervention (ODI) capable of inducing changes of the Chinese first-year students' perception on PsyCap and on their CDM?

RQ3 : What insights can be gathered from Chinese first-year students' feedback on their PsyCap during the ODI process?

Literature Review

Most scholars believe Career Decision-Making (CDM) is closely related to accomplishing developmental tasks and life transitions (Xu, 2023). CDM refers to the comprehensive process of gathering information, evaluating alternatives, and committing to vocational choices that align with personal values, interests, and goals (Gati & Levin, 2014). University students face unique challenges in this process, including identity formation pressures, limited work experience, and competing external influences (Belle et al., 2022). In the Chinese context, family expectations, exam-oriented schooling, and limited career education often lead to low career expectations in freshmen (Li & Li, 2017). They exhibit significant CDM difficulties, including lack of readiness, information deficits, and inconsistent decision patterns (Zou et al., 2022). Psychological capital (PsyCap) has emerged as a critical personal resource enabling individuals to navigate these career-related challenges effectively (Zhou et al., 2024).

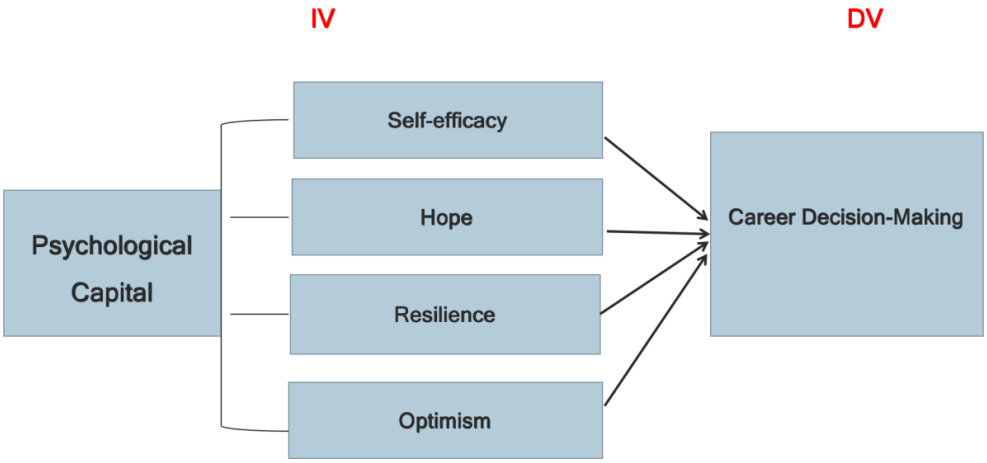
Psychological capital theory was first proposed by Luthans et al. (2007) and defined as the positive psychological states exhibited by individuals during their growth and development, serving as a key psychological resource driving personal performance and well-being. The theory comprises four core dimensions: self-efficacy (confidence in one's ability to complete specific tasks successfully), resilience (the ability to recover and adapt in the face of adversity), hope (the willpower and path-oriented thinking required to achieve goals), and optimism (positive attributions regarding future success) (Youssef-Morgan & Luthans, 2015). Empirical studies indicate that college students with higher psychological capital exhibit stronger career exploration behavior, clearer career goals, and lower employment stress (Saleem et al., 2022). Self-efficacy strengthens task execution confidence (Rodinda & Nur, 2023), hope provides pathways for goal pursuit (Arslan, 2022), resilience enables adaptation to setbacks (Chen et al., 2023), and optimism sustains motivation during transitions (Grigor & Turda, 2022).

However, existing research has primarily focused on senior students, with relatively limited attention given to the psychological capital development and CDM abilities of university freshmen, a unique population (Chen & Vinitwatanakhun, 2020). Despite growing recognition of PsyCap's importance for freshmen in Chinese higher education, limited research has systematically examined structured intervention studies targeting first-year students to enhance their psychological resources to support their career development trajectory.

This study addresses the gap by proposing a conceptual framework using an Organization Development Intervention (ODI) to enhance freshmen's PsyCap (self-efficacy, hope, resilience, optimism), subsequently improving their CDM competencies. This study's conceptual framework positions PsyCap as the independent variable, CDM as the dependent variable, and the ODI-based program as the intervention linking the two, thereby contributing empirical evidence and practical strategies for early-stage career development in higher education (See Figure 1).

Figure1

Conceptual framework by the Researcher



Research Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1

$H1_0$: There is no significant difference in Chinese first-year students' self-efficacy between pre-ODI and post-ODI.

$H1_a$: There is a significant difference in Chinese first-year students' self-efficacy between pre-ODI and post-ODI.

Hypothesis 2

$H2_0$: There is no significant difference in Chinese first-year students' hope between pre-ODI and post-ODI.

$H2_a$: There is a significant difference Chinese first-year students' hope between pre-ODI and post-ODI.

Hypothesis 3

$H3_0$: There is no significant difference in Chinese first-year students' resilience between pre-ODI and post-ODI.

$H3_a$: There is a significant difference in Chinese first-year students' resilience between pre-ODI and post-ODI.

Hypothesis 4

$H4_0$: There is no significant difference in Chinese first-year students' optimism between pre-ODI and post-ODI.

$H4_a$: There is a significant difference in Chinese first-year students' optimism between pre-ODI and post-ODI.

Hypothesis 5

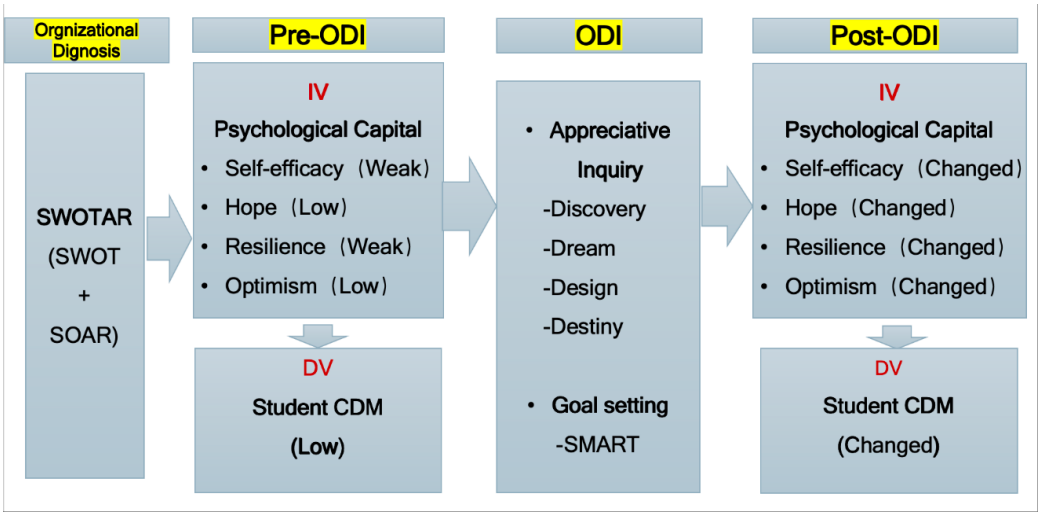
$H5_0$: There is no significant difference in Chinese first-year students' CDM between pre-ODI and post-ODI.

$H5_a$: There is a significant difference in Chinese first-year students' CDM between pre-ODI and post-ODI.

Action research framework

Figure 2

Action research framework by the Researcher



Based on the organizational diagnosis of the SWOTAR model, the action research framework of this study is divided into three phases: pre-ODI phase, ODI phase, and post-ODI phase. A mixed research method (combining qualitative and quantitative techniques) was used in the pre-ODI phase to conduct preliminary investigations. Through focus group interviews and questionnaire surveys based on SOAR and SWOT diagnoses, the psychological capital and CDM abilities of freshmen at ABC University were thoroughly examined. Based on this investigation, the challenges currently faced by these students were identified, leading to the development of research questions and hypotheses.

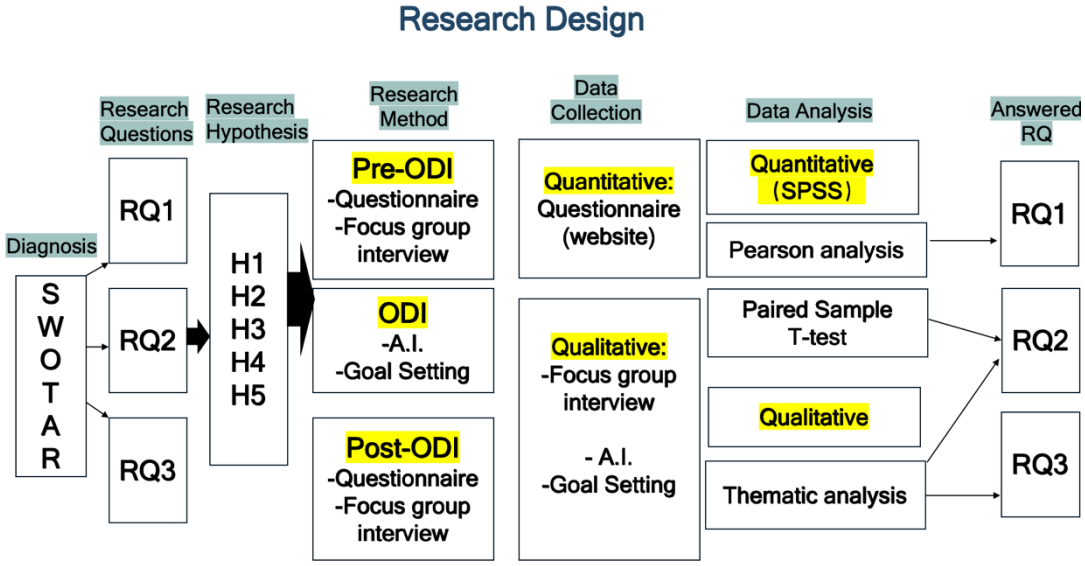
An ODI project incorporating Appreciative Inquiry and SMART goal-setting was implemented in the ODI phase. Each project focused on enhancing each research variable: self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism. In the post-ODI phase, researchers collected and analyzed new data after the intervention measures were completed. This analysis provided the basis for the research conclusions and recommendations.

Research Methodology

Research Design

Figure 3

Research design by the Researcher



Research Population and Sample

The sample comprised sixty freshmen from four schools and six majors on ABC University's campus who volunteered to participate throughout the research. The participants had different major backgrounds, whereas some belonged to STEM, Business, Language, and Art. All 60 participants were full-time undergraduate students aged 18 to 20, with no differentiation in ethnicity or gender. All were invited to take the surveys for the quantitative data collection, and 10 were randomly selected to conduct the pre- and post-ODI focus group interviews for the qualitative data collection.

Research Instrument

This study employed two data collection tools: a questionnaire and focus group interviews. The survey and focus group interviews were conducted in both the pre-ODI and post-ODI phases. The interview consisted of five questions related to the five viables, and the questionnaire included 30 items designed to measure various aspects of the variables under study. The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale, with response options ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Respondents were instructed to rate their responses based on their most immediate and authentic feelings, with scores ranging from 1 to 5. Before formal implementation, the researcher conducted reliability and validity tests on the questionnaire. The Item-Objective Consistency (IOC) method was used to validate the questionnaire's validity. Based on IOC experts 'evaluations, eight items in the Questionnaire

of Psychological Capital and CDM were removed due to an IOC average score below 0.4, and the other six items were revised with an average score from 0.6 to 0.8. The revised version with 22 items' Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the collected data was 0.900, exceeding the threshold of 0.8, indicating that the data had high reliability and was suitable for further analysis.

Research Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the pre-ODI and post-ODI questionnaire surveys were analyzed using SPSS 26. The questionnaire data were processed and subjected to various statistical analyses, including standard deviation, mean, paired-sample t-test, and Pearson correlation analysis. For qualitative data, thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview content (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involved analyzing a dataset that may include focus group interviews, student feedback on appreciative inquiry, and SMART goal-setting.

Design the OD Interventions

The ODI phase of the study covered the entire ODI period. During this phase, Interventions and processes involving appreciative inquiry and goal setting were conducted with 60 first-year students from different academic backgrounds who voluntarily participated. The aim was to enhance four dimensions of their psychological capital, including self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism, ultimately influencing their CDM abilities. The following sections reviewed and summarized the arrangements for each activity. During the ODI process, six weeks of intervention activities were arranged from October 17th, 2024, to November 21st, 2024, every Thursday from 4:00 to 5:00 p.m. (See Table 1).

Table1

Summary of ODI Activities

Intervention Activity	Date and Duration	Main Content	Supporting or Improving Variables
Introduction	1st Week 16:10 - 16:50	Ice-breaking and introduction	
A.I.workshop - Discovery	2nd Week 16:10 - 16:50	Answer questions (What is your ideal career? Can you tell us about a peak time of yourself?) and share with others.	Self-efficacy
A.I.workshop - Dream	3rd Week 16:10 - 16:50	Drew pictures of the scenario when the participants have achieved their career goals and shared.	Hope
A.I.workshop - Design	4th Week 16:10 - 16:50	Developed the action plans to achieve the ideal career goals and shared.	Resilience
A.I.workshop - Destiny	5th Week 16:10 - 16:50	Share the achievement of A.I.	Optimism
Goal setting workshop	6th Week 16:10 - 17:00	Made a plan "To Become a Marathon Runner for Shenzhen Run Marathon 2025." and share the feedback of Goal-setting.	PsyCap

The Appreciative Inquiry workshop demonstrated substantial positive impacts across all four measured variables of psychological capital. The Discovery phase had students revisit past achievements and peak experiences, helping them recognize strengths and boost self-efficacy. In the Dream phase, they visualized ideal careers through creative drawings, fostering hope and autonomy. The Design phase involved group discussions to develop concrete steps, anticipate obstacles, and practice active coping, enhancing resilience. Finally, the Destiny phase encouraged reflection on progress and commitment to future goals, consolidating optimism into a lasting psychological resource.

While the A.I. workshop helped students envision their ideal futures and recognize their strengths, the SMART goal-setting provided them with concrete tools to translate these aspirations into achievable objectives. The workshop's goal was training for the Shenzhen Marathon 2025, which allowed students to practice the SMART framework in a context that was both challenging and achievable, facilitating better understanding and application of the intervention.

Result and Discussion

RQ1: To what extent is Chinese first-year students' PsyCap relate to their Career Decision Making (CDM)?

A Pearson correlation analysis was conducted to address the first research question, presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Correlation between PsyCap and CDM (n=60)

	Self-efficacy	Hope	Resilience	Optimism
CDM	0.680**	0.695**	0.698**	0.321*

* $p<0.05$ ** $p<0.01$

As shown in Table 2, all four PsyCap dimensions, including self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism, were significantly and positively correlated with CDM.

Specifically, the correlation between self-efficacy and CDM was $r = 0.680$ ($p < .01$), suggesting that students developed a stronger belief in their competence to make career-related choices. The link between hope and CDM also strengthened notably, with $r = 0.695$ ($p < .01$). This implied that students gained more clarity and motivation regarding their future goals and strategies to achieve them. Similarly, resilience's correlation with CDM was $r = 0.698$ ($p < .01$), indicating a more substantial capacity among students to overcome difficulties and persist in their career planning. Although optimism's correlation with CDM was modest, $r = 0.321$ ($p < .05$), the continued significance suggested that students maintained a positive outlook on their future, which supported their decision-making (Abdullah, 2019; Guan et al., 2015; Zhou et al., 2024).

The strengthened correlations across all PsyCap dimensions indicate that students' psychological resources became more closely connected to their career decision-making abilities, which aligned with the previous studies (Saleem et al., 2022). This finding directly addressed and answered RQ1, leading to Finding 1: All four components of PsyCap were significantly and positively correlated with CDM among first-year university students.

RQ2: Is Organization Development Intervention (ODI) capable of inducing changes of the Chinese first-year students' perception on PsyCap and on their CDM?

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings presented in Table 3 demonstrated the multifaceted impact of the ODI intervention on students' psychological capital dimensions and their CDM. While the statistical analyses revealed the rank and significance of changes across all four PsyCap components, the qualitative data provided crucial insights that facilitated these transformations.

Table 3

Juxtaposition of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Variables	Quantitative findings			Qualitative findings		Result
	Pre-ODI	Post-ODI	Hypothesis Testing	Pre-ODI	Post-ODI	
SE	2.73±0.66	3.18±0.68	Significant Change, $H5_0$ was rejected	Lack of Confidence in Challenges, Negative Self-Belief, and Limited Mastery Experience	Perceived Capability for Challenges, Positive Self-Belief, and Growth through Mastery.	Significant Improvement
Hope	3.13±0.84	3.25±0.79	Moderate Change, $H6_0$ was failed to be rejected	Lack of Goal Clarity, Low Agency Thinking, and Emotional Confusion	Goal-Oriented Thinking, Active Agency, and Positive Emotional State	Significant Improvement
Resilience	2.70±1.04	3.22±0.63	Significant Change, $H7_0$ was rejected	Emotional Vulnerability, Passive Coping, and Lack of Support System	Positive Emotional Regulation, Proactive Coping Strategies, and Utilizing External Resources.	Significant Improvement
Optimism	3.11±0.91	3.37±0.70	Moderate Change, $H8_0$ was failed to be rejected	Negative Expectations, Pessimistic Attribution Style, and Sense of Helplessness	Hopeful Thinking, Growth Mindset, Confidence in Future	Significant Improvement

Variables	Quantitative findings			Qualitative findings		Result
	Pre-ODI	Post-ODI	Hypothesis Testing	Pre-ODI	Post-ODI	
CDM	3.01±0.82	3.53±0.77	Significant Change, $H9_0$ was rejected	Vague Career Goals, Poor Career Information Gathering and Unclear Career Pathways	Clarity of career goals, Depth and breadth of information gathering, and Practicality of career pathways	Significant Improvement

As presented in Table 3, the ODI produced significant improvements across several variables. Resilience demonstrated the largest mean difference (0.52), followed by self-efficacy, both of which showed statistically significant gains. CDM also improved significantly after the intervention. By contrast, changes in hope and optimism were modest and did not reach statistical significance, although their post-ODI means indicated a slight upward trend.

Qualitative findings further complemented these results. Students described greater emotional stability, increased confidence, and more future-oriented thinking after the workshops. For instance, results from the juxtaposition of the quantitative and qualitative analyses showed that, although quantitative changes in hope and optimism were modest, qualitative data revealed meaningful perceptual shifts. For hope, one student who aimed to lose weight initially stated pre-ODI: "*I plan to exercise every day.*" After the ODI, this intention became more concrete and actionable: "*I track my sessions with the KEEP app and post updates online to let friends and family hold me accountable.*" This progression illustrates a shift from vague aspirations to specific, goal-oriented planning. For optimism, another student reported pre-ODI: "*I worry about what's coming next, afraid that situations will become more complicated and beyond my control.*" Post-ODI, the same student reflected: "*I no longer just blame myself. I think about how to improve and make a plan. I believe many things can change as long as we actively look for a breakthrough*." This change demonstrates a movement from fear and self-blame toward constructive reflection, future planning, and reframing challenges as opportunities. After the intervention, students were encouraged to revisit past challenges, identify solutions that had worked, and recognize when and how to seek help in qualitative findings, which indicated perceptual changes that may not have been fully captured through quantitative scales.

These findings indicated that the ODI significantly enhanced students' psychological resources, with resilience and self-efficacy showing the most pronounced improvements. Therefore, the null hypotheses ($H1_0$, $H3_0$, $H5_0$) for self-efficacy, resilience, and CDM were rejected. For hope and optimism, the null hypotheses ($H2_0$, $H4_0$) were failed to be rejected. Collectively, the evidence addressed RQ2 and supported Finding 2: The ODI significantly enhanced PsyCap among first-year university students, thereby fostering improvements in their CDM.

RQ3：What insights can be gathered from Chinese first-year students' feedback on their Psy Cap during the ODI process?

The six-week ODI comprised two workshops: Appreciative Inquiry and SMART Goal-setting. The intervention started with an introduction session, followed by the four phases of Appreciative Inquiry: Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny. It ended with the SMART Goal-setting workshop. Each phase was designed to match the research variables to enhance engagement and encourage active student participation. At the end of each workshop, students provided feedback on the content learned and their experience with the activities. Keywords extracted from student feedback reveal how A.I. and the SMART goal-setting method fostered comprehensive development across all four dimensions of psychological capital: self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism (see Table 4).

Table 4

Integration feedback of the ODI process

Variables	A.I. Workshop	SMART goal-setting Workshop	Outcome
Self-efficacy	Rediscovering personal strengths, Building confidence through past successes, Empowerment from peer support and affirmation, Proactive action and initiative	Goal achievement confidence, Capability recognition, Sense of control	Students gained stronger confidence and initiative, recognizing their abilities and taking ownership of tasks.
Hope	Clarifying goals and aspirations, Pathway thinking and concrete planning, Motivation through shared dreams	Goal clarification, Pathway thinking, Agency thinking	Students developed clearer career goals and actionable pathways, fostering determination toward the future.
Resilience	Positive reframing of setbacks, Sustainable coping strategies, Learning from failure and reflection, Support systems and collective strength	Positive coping Bouncing back Adaptability	Students learned to reframe challenges, cope constructively, and bounce back with greater adaptability.
Optimism	Positive attribution, Emotional regulation, Seeing opportunities in challenges, Maintaining enthusiasm and growth mindset	Positive attribution Future expectancy Positive emotions	Students adopted a more positive outlook, improved emotional regulation, and strengthened belief in future possibilities.

The above table summarizes how ODI can change the students' perception of PsyCap, leading to their CDM. Apparently, the results show a favorable outcome which school administrators should consider in their preparation for students' career planning since their early undergraduate years. ODI's methods, including Appreciative Inquiry and SMART, are implemented to support the study's outcome. These findings complement quantitative research

outcomes, deepening our understanding of psychological resource enhancement mechanisms and illuminating how Chinese first-year students experience psychological capital growth through ODI. In this way, RQ3 is answered by showing that student feedback highlights how ODI fosters PsyCap development, thereby supporting Finding 3: ODI integrating Appreciative Inquiry and SMART goal-setting can be effectively designed, implemented, and evaluated to improve students' psychological capital, and facilitate students' proactive engagement with career exploration, planning, and decision-making.

Discussion

Finding 1: All four components of PsyCap were significantly and positively correlated with CDM in the case of university first-year students.

Among all four attributes under Psychology Capital (PsyCap) measured on the 60 ABC university students had strong correlationship with CDM. The result indicated students with stronger self-efficacy were better positioned to explore career paths, set realistic goals, and persist in the face of difficulty (Lee et al., 2022). Those who developed greater hope were more capable of reducing career stress and avoiding decision regret by sustaining motivation and constructing actionable career pathways (Bilgiz-Öztürk & Karabacak-Çelik, 2023). Similarly, resilience was fostered through activities that reframed past setbacks as opportunities for growth, enabling students to rebuild confidence and re-engage in future planning (Pang et al., 2021; Shin & Kelly, 2015). Although optimism remained relatively stable, its consistent relevance suggests that students retained a general sense of positive future expectation, which has been linked to lower career indecisiveness and higher self-directedness (Grigor & Turda, 2022).

These findings highlight that PsyCap is closely linked to career decision-making, with stronger PsyCap resources corresponding to more effective CDM. This result is consistent with prior studies and extends evidence to the underexplored population of Chinese first-year university students.

Finding 2: The ODI significantly enhanced PsyCap among first-year university students, thereby fostering improvements in their CDM.

This finding demonstrates the effectiveness of ODI in strengthening psychological resources during a formative stage of higher education. By integrating Appreciative Inquiry, the intervention encouraged students to adopt more constructive mindsets and to reframe personal and academic challenges, consistent with prior evidence that A.I. facilitates sustainable psychological growth (Cho & Ardichvili, 2024).

Among the four PsyCap dimensions, resilience showed the most substantial gains. This result could be attributed to students' previously low awareness of managing stress or seeking help effectively, particularly within high-pressure, exam-oriented educational environments in China (Cui et al., 2024). Through structured reflection and peer support, students learned to reframe setbacks, resulting in stronger emotional stability and persistence, which aligns with

prior research linking resilience-building to intentional reflection and social reinforcement (Brewer et al., 2019). Self-efficacy also improved significantly, as students recognized personal strengths and achievements, breaking away from external definitions of success (Meng & Zhang, 2023).

However, hope and optimism showed moderate change. Two reasons were explained. One reason was that the baseline scores of both hope and optimism were already relatively higher compared with self-efficacy and resilience before ODI, and although their post-ODI means increased slightly, the magnitude of change did not reach statistical significance. Another reason was that hope and optimism often change slowly and are harder to capture with scales in a short intervention (Blumberg, 2015).

Qualitative data, on the other hand, were more sensitive to subtle shifts in students' thinking and emotions. After the intervention, students were encouraged to revisit past challenges, identify solutions that had worked, and recognize when and how to seek help. The thematic analysis of five variables showed that negative themes dominated students' reflections before the ODI. However, positive themes emerged after the intervention across all five variables, indicating clear improvements in their thinking and behavior.

Findings from the study show that participants' PsyCap increased significantly on completion of the ODI, they are consistent with the previous literature that structured intervention can enhance participants' self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism (Blumberg, 2015; Cho & Ardichvili, 2024; O'Reilly & Milner, 2016). For first-year students navigating the "psychological weaning period," a stage of transition from parental dependence to self-regulation (Muca et al., 2024), the ODI not only bolstered internal resources but also eased anxieties surrounding academic and career development. These results affirm the potential of integrated ODIs to cultivate students' PsyCap and equip them with the psychological strengths needed for complex career decision-making in uncertain environments.

Finding 3: ODI integrating Appreciative Inquiry and SMART goal-setting can be effectively designed, implemented, and evaluated to improve students' psychological capital, and facilitate students' proactive engagement with career exploration, planning, and decision-making.

The A.I. intervention significantly enhanced students' self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism (Verleysen et al., 2015). Appreciative Inquiry with 4Ds (Discovery, Dream, Design, Destiny) under this study required the participants to use artistic drawing instead of verbal brainstorming. Such a creative-induced approach allows the young participants to express more freedom of choice and unleash their shyness of expression. Unlike when they are with their parents and asked to express through writing, young people are confined by their parents' influence and demand, which makes it difficult for the young students to demonstrate their true courage in making decisions. Even though such an approach as A.I. may not happen often in their daily life, one would gradually learn to adopt the A.I. practice in their work life in the future.

The SMART created reinforcing cycles where enhanced self-efficacy supported clearer pathway thinking, strengthening adaptive coping strategies and positive future expectations. The structured goal-setting intervention played a key role in transforming participants' career aspirations into concrete, actionable steps. By breaking large, abstract dreams into specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound objectives, students could better articulate what they hoped to become and the path they would follow to get there.

The keywords from student reflections illustrate how A.I. and SMART goal-setting fostered growth across self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism, complementing the quantitative results and clarifying the processes of psychological resource enhancement.

Self-efficacy

Students reported stronger confidence and initiative, recognizing their abilities and taking ownership of tasks. This finding resonates with prior studies showing that A.I. can promote confidence and engagement through peer affirmation (Dewar & MacBride, 2017; MacLeod, 2013). SMART further transformed these insights into concrete achievements, reinforcing mastery experiences (Sahu, 2022). For Chinese freshmen—often accustomed to externally imposed goals—this structured approach provided a rare chance to develop autonomy and ownership.

Hope

Through the A.I. Dream phase, students clarified intrinsic career goals and expressed aspirations with creativity, such as drawing their visions. Unlike when writing under parental expectations, these creative tasks allowed students to articulate personal desires more freely, consistent with Snyder's (2000) pathways and agency model. SMART planning then helped operationalize these aspirations into specific, time-bound goals (Habicht & Gulati, 2017). This combination helped sustain motivation and future determination.

Resilience

Students learned to reframe setbacks and identify solutions during the A.I. Design phase, reflecting Masten's (2001) notion of "ordinary magic." The intervention normalized failure as part of learning (Conklin & Hartman, 2014), while SMART provided strategies for breaking challenges into manageable steps, reducing overwhelm and fostering adaptive coping (Cunningham et al., 2021). This was particularly relevant in the Chinese context, where exam-oriented pressures can otherwise discourage persistence.

Optimism

Students adopted more positive outlooks and strengthened belief in future possibilities through peer affirmation and reflection. A.I. fostered positive attribution and growth mindsets (Dweck, 2006), while SMART reinforced future expectancy through structured progress and feedback (O'Reilly & Milner, 2016). Sustained reinforcement may therefore be required to consolidate optimism in high-pressure academic settings.

The ODI generated a synergistic effect: A.I. primarily nurtured motivation ("why"), while SMART offered structured pathways ("how"), Through A.I., students articulated meaningful career aspirations and motivational drives (Bronson & Stern, 2011), while SMART offered practical tools and frameworks that helped them move from passive, externally

imposed choices toward proactive, self-directed planning (Sahu, 2022). These insights illustrate how the ODI nurtured PsyCap growth across its four dimensions and highlight students' lived experiences of psychological development during the intervention.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study examined the effects of an ODI integrating Appreciative Inquiry (A.I.) and SMART goal-setting on PsyCap and CDM among first-year university students in China. A mixed-methods approach was employed with 60 first-year student volunteers. Surveys and focus group interviews were conducted before and after the intervention for quantitative and qualitative data collection. Reflection reports during the ODI process were gathered to provide further evidence to support the qualitative research. After six weeks of intervention, mixed results were produced. Quantitative results showed significant improvements in self-efficacy and resilience, while hope and optimism changed moderate. In contrast, qualitative findings revealed substantial positive shifts in self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism, indicating that the ODI contributed meaningfully to improve PsyCap of first-year university students. These results suggest that enhanced PsyCap can strengthen students' CDM abilities.

Theoretically, this research demonstrates how A.I. activates motivational resources while SMART goal-setting provides structured strategies, synergistically promoting psychological growth and practical career planning. Practically, the findings confirm that early-year structured ODI workshops can address freshmen's "high anxiety- low action" dilemma, enhancing their adaptability and long-term development potential in increasingly competitive and uncertain environments. The proposed ODI model offers a valuable framework for higher education, suggesting a paradigm shift from problem repair to potential activation and from externally imposed paths to autonomous growth, particularly relevant for addressing mounting employment pressures and mental health challenges among university students.

Limitations

This study had several limitations.

First, the sample characteristics restricted the generalizability of the findings. The participants were exclusively first-year students, which means that the conclusions may not fully represent students at later stages of university life. Freshmen are in a unique transition period, often facing adjustment challenges that differ from those of sophomores, juniors, or seniors. Future research should therefore include students from multiple year levels to explore whether the effects of PsyCap interventions vary across different stages of academic and career development.

Second, while mixed methods were applied, the quantitative data did not show significant improvements in hope and optimism, even though qualitative findings suggested meaningful perceptual changes. This indicates that surveys may not be sensitive enough to

capture slower-evolving PsyCap dimensions. Future studies could employ richer qualitative methods such as longitudinal interviews and reflective journals, or adopt mixed-methods designs with extended intervention periods, to better assess nuanced psychological changes.

Finally, the study was conducted within China's higher education system, which is shaped by performance-driven and highly competitive cultural norms. It is uncertain whether the same intervention would work equally well in other cultural contexts with less intense academic pressure. To address this, future research should conduct cross-cultural or comparative studies, investigating how cultural values and educational systems shape the effectiveness of PsyCap-based interventions in supporting CDM.

Recommendations

Based on the analysis and discussion of the juxtaposed data, the following five recommendations are proposed:

1. Using A.I. can help students change mindsets, especially evoke their motivation and confidence (McQuain, 2015). Therefore, educators should integrate A.I. and SMART goal-setting activities into teaching content to engage students. This approach addresses the challenges faced by students experiencing high levels of negative psychological distress. By fostering positive psychological states through classroom activities or group counseling interventions, and utilizing random grouping to enhance peer identification can boost student confidence and autonomy. Structured intervention activities help students develop robust self-efficacy, thereby supporting their academic learning and adaptive new context.

2. Visualization exercises (A.I. Dream Stage) and structured planning (SMART Goal-setting) within the intervention were most popular by students. To cultivate hope, educators and counselors should guide students to break down long-term visions (e.g., "becoming a secondary school teacher" or "pursuing graduate studies") into concrete goals. Through visualization exercises and peer discussions, students should focus on actionable goals and be encouraged to document and review their progress regularly. Such practices will motivate students to maintain steadily determination and confidence when confronting an uncertain future.

3. Students reported more effectively reframing challenges, persisting through adversity, and bouncing back with greater adaptability. Therefore, universities should foster safe, inclusive environments for experience-sharing (Appreciative Inquiry) and normalize failure as part of the learning process. Establish safe spaces (such as peer support groups, reflection sessions, and mentoring programs) where students can openly share their struggles. Integrate resilience workshops into extracurricular activities with corresponding credits, teaching practical coping skills (e.g., stress management, problem-solving, cognitive restructuring techniques).

4. First-year college students with higher levels of optimism made the transition to college more effectively, as noted by lower levels of psychological distress at the end of the first semester (Aspinwall & Taylor ,1992). Participants' reflections revealed significant

cognitive shifts, including positive reframing of setbacks and stronger belief in future possibilities. Therefore, educators should integrate regular positive reinforcement activities such as gratitude journals, peer appreciation sessions, and constructive feedback, emphasizing progress rather than solely focusing on outcomes. Since cultivating optimism under academic pressure requires time, universities should offer long-term positive psychology elective courses, enabling students to receive sustained optimism-enhancing interventions. These measures ensure first-year students gradually develop sustainable optimism in new environments to better cope with the pressures of university life.

5. This study's findings indicate that enhanced psychological capital can directly contribute to students' clearer career goals, more proactive career planning, and greater decision-making autonomy. First-year students entering university from high school face new academic pressures and haven't yet formed a clear understanding of their future career decisions. Therefore, implementing positive psychological interventions during this early stage of their lives is more effective than providing career counseling in boosting their self-confidence, resilience, goal clarity, and optimism. Hence, universities should design institutionalized programs for younger students that integrate psychological capital workshops with career guidance services. Student-run career service clubs can offer structured career pathways (such as mentorship from senior students, alumni lectures, and career experience opportunities). By integrating psychological capital development with career decision-making support, students can make informed, confident, and independent career choices throughout their four years of university.

Suggestions for Future Research

Firstly, future research should extend this work through longitudinal designs that track whether improvements in PsyCap sustain and continue to shape CDM across all four university years, thereby providing evidence of long-term developmental effects.

Secondly, richer qualitative data, such as in-depth interviews and reflective journals, should be collected and expanded to every participant to capture subtle shifts that may not be fully reflected in quantitative surveys.

Lastly, future studies should broaden the sample to include students from different majors, year levels, and institutions to increase the generalizability of findings and identify potential disciplinary or institutional variations. Cross-cultural applications of ODI also warrant further exploration by including international students, allowing for comparative analysis of PsyCap and CDM development across diverse cultural contexts.

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