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# A multi-system psychological capital model for higher education academics: meta-ethnographic research

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**Introduction:** Academics in higher education face immense, systemic stressors that challenge their well-being. Current research on Psychological Capital (PsyCap) often treats it as a static, individual trait, overlooking the profound influence of the academic environment.

**Methods:** This study addresses this gap by conducting a meta-ethnography of 19 qualitative and mixed-methods studies (2020–2024) from diverse international contexts. It explores how academic PsyCap (hope, efficacy, optimism, resilience) is developed and eroded, utilizing the Multi-System Resilience Model (MSMR) and the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) framework.

**Results:** The analysis reveals that PsyCap is not a static trait but a dynamic ecological process. While resources such as mastery experience and collegial support (microsystem) build PsyCap, it is actively depleted by institutional pressures, often manifesting as ‘cruel optimism.’ This creates a paradox in which individuals are forced to be ‘resilient by themselves’ against systemic failures.

**Discussion:** Interventions must therefore shift from individual coping to systemic, institutional reform.

## KEYWORDS

academic staff, higher education, meta-ethnography, Multi-System Resilience Model (MSMR), psychological capital (PsyCap)

## 1 Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) around the world are undergoing profound changes characterized by increasing stress, placing immense pressure on their most valuable asset—academic staff. Scholars are increasingly recognizing the impact of positive psychology interventions, exemplified by psychological capital (PsyCap), and the development of supportive psychological resources on the attitudes, behaviors, and achievements of faculty and researchers in higher education environments (Lee et al., 2021; Mutonyi, 2021). As the intellectual core of these institutions, lecturers and researchers face a complex and growing range of stressors that challenge their mental and physical health, performance, and careers (Biricik, 2020; Zakaria et al., 2021). A series of related studies in recent years have confirmed that the stress experienced by staff in higher education is not an isolated event, but rather a systemic characteristic of the modern academic landscape (Bone and Ross, 2019; Wang, 2022). While this pressure is a pervasive global phenomenon, its manifestation varies significantly across different cultural and national contexts, such as the market-driven academic systems in the UK (Augustus et al., 2023) and Australia (Bosetti and Heffernan, 2021) and the rapidly transforming higher education sectors in China (Liao et al., 2022) and South Africa (Cadete and Ruggunan, 2024). Scholars

face increasing workloads, the pressure of teaching a more diverse and larger student body with decreasing funding, and the expectation of rapidly mastering new technologies, while simultaneously managing ongoing tensions between academics and administrators.

Ross et al. (2023) categorize the roots of academic stress into two types: proximal stressors and distal stressors. Proximal stressors stem from the rejection and criticism of manuscripts and grant applications in a highly competitive professional environment. This environment fosters high rejection sensitivity, which in turn affects cognition, self-regulation, and performance, potentially leading to dysfunctional coping mechanisms and even abandonment of an academic career. Distal stressors originate from broader institutional and governmental decisions, including systemic research and education quality assessments that drive organizational restructuring, the dominance of corporate-style administrative leadership models, and the weakening of traditional academic departments. These stressors are amplified and transmitted through higher education systems to scholars themselves. However, a gap has emerged between the values of educational institution leaders and academics: the former increasingly prioritize economic bottom lines, while the latter prioritize academic rigor, scholarship, and student learning (Chan et al., 2020). This “disruptive impasse” and the resulting value conflict have led to higher education lecturers facing both restrictions on their academic careers and reduced academic freedom, while their academic positions often face instability due to performance evaluations conducted by administrators.

This pervasive adversity has forced researchers to seek psychological coping models that transcend traditional, individual-centered approaches. In recent years, the concepts of psychological capital (PsyCap) and resilience have gained significant attention in the field of education. Resilience, as a phenomenon emerging in adversity, is also defined within psychological capital (PsyCap) as the ability to “recover” from adversity, namely the capacity to adapt to challenges that threaten system function, survival, or development (Walker, 2020). For academics, a growing body of literature (Burhanuddin et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2024) demonstrates a strong positive correlation between psychological capital and key professional outcomes; higher levels of psychological capital are associated with greater work engagement, motivation, job satisfaction, and overall well-being. Resilience, a core component of PsyCap, has been identified as a key protective factor against burnout among university professors, serving as a potential buffer against stress by enabling more adaptive perceptions and coping mechanisms, thereby strengthening stress-coping capacity (Kent et al., 2013; Szanton and Gill, 2010). Therefore, PsyCap has the potential to serve as an important internal resource to help academics cope with the demanding and often stressful nature of their profession.

While these findings are encouraging, the current research framework still has significant shortcomings. One major limitation is that research focuses excessively on student groups rather than academics (Zhang, 2024). Many existing studies on teachers’ psychological capital fail to adequately explore the unique contextual challenges within higher education environments (Dreer, 2021; Kun and Gadanez, 2019). These

studies often overlook the impact of factors such as heavy teaching responsibilities, limited access to research funding, and a lack of institutional recognition, especially in resource-constrained environments (Da et al., 2024; Tian et al., 2024). Furthermore, academic resilience is not solely explained by individual characteristics, but rather is shaped by multiple interacting systems in which scholars are embedded (de los Reyes et al., 2021; Rudd et al., 2021).

As Wolke et al. (2025) review of 193 longitudinal studies over the past 30 years pointed out, 68% of the cited studies did not explicitly define resilience as a trait, outcome, or process. This confusion arising from “inconsistent conceptualizations” and inconsistent “operationalization” leads to “considerable heterogeneity” among research findings, significantly hindering evidence integration, limiting inter-study comparability, and reinforcing the view of resilience as “multidimensional”, a characteristic that may be overlooked when resilience is treated solely from an outcome perspective. This may “oversimplify resilience” because it emphasizes positive outcomes after adversity while “ignoring the underlying mechanisms and contextual influences.” Traditional resilience models for lecturers in higher education, focusing on stress and recovery processes resulting from rejection, competition, contract termination, or loss of tenure, often attribute responsibility for adaptation primarily to the individual, neglecting the profound influence of organizational and social environments (Ungar, 2018; van Zyl and Rothmann, 2022). This suggests that the resilience scholars experience under stress is not fully explained by individual characteristics, but rather is shaped by multiple interacting systems and the relationships between external and internal systems. However, current research on psychological capital is largely confined to the psychosocial level (leadership style, organizational climate, individual personality), resulting in analyses such as “the main effect of psychological capital on well-being” (Waters et al., 2021). This fails to explain why, under the same adversity, some people’s psychological capital increases, some collapse, and others remain stable (Lomas et al., 2020). For instance, stringent performance accountability might trigger maladaptive “cruel optimism” in casualized academics in Australia (Bone, 2021), whereas similar complex pressures might be navigated differently by academics in Nordic countries where distributed leadership offers distinct institutional support (Kekäle and Pinheiro, 2024).

Therefore, current research urgently needs a “process-oriented definition” to explain the interaction between individual competencies and systemic contexts in shaping psychological capital development. Multi-system resilience models provide a framework for understanding adaptation as a dynamic process distributed across individual, developmental, and environmental systems. This shifts the focus from simple “resilience” traits to complex interactions between internal resources and external support, illuminating how these psychological resources can be developed, deployed, and maintained within the higher education ecosystem (Liu et al., 2017). Based on this structure, psychological capital should not be viewed merely as a static predictor (how much PsyCap one possesses), but rather as a dynamic process explaining how PsyCap (and its four components) unfolds with time and context when individuals (students, teachers) face adversity (academic stress, professional burnout).

This research employs a meta-ethnographic analysis of published qualitative and mixed-methods studies (Noblit and Hare, 1988) to re-synthesize and reinterpret findings regarding academics' psychological capital (PsyCap) and its components (hope, self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience). The primary objective is to address the limitations of current literature that treats PsyCap as a static trait. Specifically, this study seeks to transcend individual-level analysis and construct a framework describing the multi-system psychological capital of academics by integrating the Multi-System Resilience Model (MSMR) and the Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT) framework. By synthesizing qualitative evidence from diverse cultural contexts (Asia, Europe, Australia, and Africa), this study offers an international comparative perspective that enhances the generalizability of the proposed multi-system PsyCap model. Ultimately, this model aims to clarify that academics' psychological capital is not merely a personal characteristic but a dynamic process that is negotiated, constructed, maintained, or eroded within the complex ecological context of higher education institutions over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2000).

To achieve this goal, this study is guided by the following two research questions:

RQ1: What core processes construct, maintain, and develop psychological capital within academics' lived experiences?

RQ2: How does the multi-system context of higher education promote or inhibit these psychological capital development processes?

## 2 Research literature

### 2.1 Multi-System Resilience Model

Contemporary resilience science, particularly from a developmental systems perspective, conceptualizes resilience as a dynamic, adaptive capacity. It is not a static individual trait, but rather a capability distributed across multiple interacting systems (Fullerton et al., 2021; Ungar and Theron, 2020). Resilience is defined as “the ability of a dynamic system to successfully adapt to challenges that threaten its function, survival, or development through multi-system processes” (Panter-Brick and Eggerman, 2011). This process-oriented perspective emphasizes that an individual's adaptability is inextricably linked to the resources, relationships, and structures within their environment. While current research on resilience primarily focuses on responses to specific stressors, challenges, or traumas, researchers have pointed out that individuals are not limited to experiencing a single traumatic event in their lifetime, and experiencing the same event does not guarantee similar outcomes across individuals (Ungar et al., 2012).

The “multi-system” nature of this framework integrates multiple domains—such as traits, protective factors, psychological attributes, and external social and community structures—by conceptualizing resilience as a continuously evolving capacity. MSMR maps these domains to sources of resilience across three systems (Liu et al., 2020). MSMR outlines three interdependent core systems as follows.

First, individual characteristics (internal resilience) represent the innermost layer of resilience, comprising relatively stable resources nested within the individual (Liu et al., 2017). This system forms the foundation of adaptability and encompasses a range of internal factors, including not only psychological attributes but also physiological stress-response systems (the autonomic nervous system and the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal axis), health behaviors (sleep, exercise, diet), and other key biological indicators such as epigenetics and telomeres (Obradović, 2012). In studies of lecturers in higher education settings, internal resilience often includes optimism, cognitive flexibility, problem-solving abilities, and the physiological capacity to manage stress (Bento et al., 2021). It typically comprises three types of “resilience acquisition nodes”: (1) “emotional nodes,” through which individuals find solutions to problems and learn to cope with change through positive experiences (García-Rivera et al., 2022); (2) “social nodes,” related to belonging, interpersonal relationships, and support from close friends, students, and family (Riquelme et al., 2023); and (3) “school nodes,” through which individuals develop problem-solving abilities via cooperation with their affiliated educational institutions (Galindo-Domínguez et al., 2020).

Second, development and coping processes (coping and pursuit) act as a dynamic and transactional bridge between the individual's internal world and the external environment. This represents the “process” dimension of resilience, reflecting individuals' orientations and responses to their living environments and encompassing the proactive ways in which they cope with challenges, pursue goals, and adapt over time (Stainton et al., 2018). For lecturers and researchers, this system is inherently developmental and consists of factors that can be gradually cultivated through interpersonal interactions and experience, including strategies for dealing with manuscript rejection, career goal-setting behaviors, learning and skill acquisition, and the ability to find meaning and purpose in work under institutional pressure (Métais et al., 2022).

Third, environmental and socio-ecological influences (external resilience) constitute the outermost system, including background factors and socio-ecological resources that contribute to or constrain individual resilience (Pi Ferrer et al., 2025). Kinchin (2021) argues that, based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, this layer can be understood by applying its nested structure to the HEI environment. The microsystem, as the direct professional environment, includes relationships with departmental colleagues, mentors, students, and direct supervisors, the quality of which provides crucial social support. The exosystem comprises broader institutional structures and policies that indirectly influence academics, such as promotion and tenure standards, funding allocation patterns, and the availability of faculty development programs. Ultimately, the macrosystem encompasses the cultural values and ideologies of academia and society, such as the “publish or perish” culture, the emphasis on research over teaching, and government policies regarding higher education funding. These contextual layers provide tangible and intangible resources, such as social support, access to information, financial stability, and a sense of belonging, that are essential for successful adaptation.

In short, the overall goal of MSMR is to capture intra-individual differences, inter-individual factors, and broader socio-political influences that shape the dynamics and outcomes of resilience (Ungar et al., 2021). Luthar et al. (2000) argue that resilience is often associated with anomalous markers or events within an individual and is therefore frequently measured at a specific point in time, despite the fact that it may not remain constant over time. This implies that the internal system is not entirely fixed; while it may show stability similar to other traits, it is also subject to long-term influences from other systems through processes such as neuroplasticity (Denckla et al., 2020). Therefore, MSMR is not trauma-based; rather, it conceptualizes resilience as holistic and comprehensive, unconstrained by any single event or outcome. This enables the development of a broad and multidimensional resilience model as part of daily functioning while accounting for dynamic system-level factors (Chmitorz et al., 2018).

## 2.2 Psychological Capital (PsyCap) in the context of higher education

Psychological Capital (PsyCap) is a higher-order construct originating from Positive Organizational Behavior (POB). It is defined as “an individual’s positive psychological state of development” (Luthans et al., 2010; Luthans and Youssef-Morgan, 2017). PsyCap consists of four positive psychological resources, collectively referred to as HERO: (1) confidence (self-efficacy), defined as the ability to mobilize the necessary effort to successfully complete challenging tasks; (2) optimism, reflected in positive attributions about present and future success; (3) hope, characterized by persistent goal pursuit and flexible pathway thinking; and (4) resilience, defined as the ability to persevere, bounce back, and overcome adversity, ultimately achieving success. These components share a common theme of positive appraisal and goal attainment through effort and perseverance. Evidence suggests that their synergistic combination has a greater impact than the sum of its parts. A key characteristic of PsyCap is its “state-like” nature, which differs from more fixed “trait-like” personality characteristics. This malleability implies that PsyCap can be cultivated and enhanced through targeted interventions and supportive environments. Zhang et al. (2024), based on an analysis of 412 journal articles in the Web of Science database, indicate that current research primarily focuses on several established areas, such as the relationships between PsyCap and academic achievement, student well-being, engagement, and faculty performance and burnout. However, research on PsyCap among university faculty, particularly novice teacher educators, remains relatively scarce compared with studies focusing on students. For example, empirical evidence on how institutional support (mentoring and resource allocation) translates into sustained teacher motivation remains limited.

While mainstream PsyCap research methods are generally considered practical, they also have limitations. As a higher-order construct, the relationships and distinctions among the four components of PsyCap (HERO), namely hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, are sometimes questioned, potentially reflecting a “jingle–jangle fallacy,” in which different terms describe

the same phenomenon. In higher education research, this can lead to measurement redundancy and theoretical ambiguity regarding whether the four components function independently or synergistically (Altgassen et al., 2023; Marsh et al., 2019). van Zyl et al. (2023) argue that because such models often detach from context and focus excessively on the individual, the operationalization of psychological resources, while measurable, may remain linear and fail to capture the dynamic interaction between individuals and their environments. Although PsyCap (including hope, self-efficacy, resilience, and optimism) is often defined as a “state-like” resource, meaning it is variable and developable, in empirical research it is frequently treated as a static “trait-like” variable measured at a single time point and then used to predict outcomes.

This implies that research on positive psychological resources aimed at alleviating the persistent and multifaceted nature of academic stress requires a more complex, multi-system theoretical perspective that supports a process-oriented definition. Such a definition would clarify the “psychological resource activation process” and its triggering factors arising from interactions between university lecturers’ individual capacities and their systemic contexts, which may be domain-specific or time-limited, and even achieved at the expense of other functional domains (Quinlan et al., 2015).

## 3 Research methods

This study employed meta-ethnography to qualitatively synthesize, evaluate, and integrate existing literature on the development of psychological capital (PsyCap) among lecturers and researchers in higher education institutions, with a particular focus on hope, optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience, as well as their environmental influences (Noblit and Hare, 1988; Polat and Ay, 2016). This method is interpretive rather than purely aggregative. Unlike traditional systematic reviews, meta-ethnography aims to integrate metaphors, concepts, and themes across qualitative studies through “reciprocal translation,” thereby generating a novel theoretical understanding of PsyCap among academics in higher education (Doyle, 2003; Walsh and Downe, 2005).

This study was reported in accordance with the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines (Page et al., 2021) to ensure transparency, rigor, and reproducibility. The review protocol was not registered in PROSPERO. However, the study was conducted in strict accordance with the PRISMA guidelines and followed the seven-phase meta-ethnographic approach outlined by Noblit and Hare (1988).

### 3.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To ensure a rigorous and systematic selection process, this study developed strict eligibility criteria structured around the PICOS framework (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, and Study Design), as recommended by the PRISMA guidelines (Methley et al., 2014; Page et al., 2021). Specifically,

the population (P) was defined as academic staff within higher education institutions (lecturers, researchers, professors), explicitly excluding K–12 teachers and students to focus on the unique pressures of academia. The intervention/exposure (I) examined was the academic work environment, particularly contexts characterized by neoliberal pressures, crisis events (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), or specific institutional challenges. As this is a meta-ethnographic synthesis of qualitative experiences, a comparator (C) group was not applicable. The primary outcome (O) of interest was the development, maintenance, or erosion of psychological capital (PsyCap) and its core components (hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism). Finally, regarding study design (S), the review was restricted to qualitative (phenomenology, grounded theory) and mixed-methods studies that provided rich, descriptive data suitable for synthesis.

Based on this framework, the authors' search terms focused on the antecedents, processes, and contexts of academics' psychological capital, and Boolean operators were applied (Bramer et al., 2018). The databases were selected based on disciplinary relevance to ensure optimal retrieval of educational and organizational psychology literature (Bramer et al., 2018). Specifically, ERIC and Scopus were chosen for their comprehensive coverage of the social sciences, whereas clinical databases (MEDLINE) were excluded because their biomedical focus did not align with the study's scope. To identify research related to academics' psychological capital, the authors constructed a comprehensive multi-string search strategy using AND and OR operators. Search strings were tailored to the syntax of each database (Scopus, ERIC, ProQuest, and Google Scholar) by combining keywords across three core concepts (see Table 1) to maximize the accuracy and relevance of retrieval.

Following the search, the authors applied predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 2) to select the final studies. The search scope was limited to English-language literature published between 2020 and 2024. This timeframe (2020–2024) was selected to capture the “dual disruption” facing higher education: the immediate systemic shock of the COVID-19 pandemic (Krsmanovic et al., 2024; Watermeyer et al., 2021) and intensified neoliberal pressures—such as casualization and the “audit culture”—that have fundamentally altered the academic work environment in recent years (Bone, 2021; Bosetti and Heffernan, 2021).

The study population was limited to academics in higher education institutions (including professors, lecturers, and researchers), explicitly excluding studies with primary samples of K–12 teachers, administrators, or students. Regarding research phenomena and context, this study focused on psychological capital and its core dimensions (resilience, self-efficacy, hope, and optimism) within higher education. Studies conducted in clinical nursing or other non-academic organizational settings were excluded. Methodologically, only qualitative research (phenomenological, narrative inquiry, grounded theory) and mixed-methods research containing rich substantive data were included. Purely quantitative studies, literature reviews, editorials, and theoretical articles lacking empirical data were excluded. Furthermore, to ensure corpus consistency, only peer-reviewed English-language journal articles were included.

TABLE 1 Search string.

Database	Search string/syntax	Filters/limits
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ((“psychological capital” OR “PsyCap” OR “hope” OR “self-efficacy” OR “optimism” OR “resilience”) AND (“academic*” OR “faculty” OR “lecturer*” OR “researcher*” OR “professor*” OR “teacher*” OR “university staff”) AND (“higher education” OR “university” OR “universities” OR “academia”))	Year: 2020–2024 Document type: Article Language: English
ERIC (EBSCO)	(TX “psychological capital” OR TX “PsyCap” OR TX “resilience” OR TX “self-efficacy” OR TX “hope”) AND (TX “academic staff” OR TX “faculty” OR TX “lecturer*” OR TX “professor*” OR TX “university staff”) AND (TX “higher education” OR TX “university” OR TX “academia”)	Date published: 2020–2024 Publication type: journal articles Language: English
ProQuest	noft((“psychological capital” OR “resilience” OR “self-efficacy” OR “optimism”) AND (“academic*” OR “faculty” OR “lecturer*” OR “staff”) AND (“higher education” OR “university” OR “academia”))	Date range: 2020–2024 Source type: scholarly journals Language: English
Google scholar	(“psychological capital” OR “PsyCap” OR “resilience”) AND (“academics” OR “faculty” OR “university staff”) AND (“higher education”)	Year: 2020–2024 First 200 relevant results screened manually

Figure 1 illustrates the process by which the research team systematically searched four major databases, namely Google Scholar, ERIC, Scopus, and ProQuest, based on the above criteria. This study initially identified 2,968 relevant articles. After removing 873 duplicates using literature management software, the remaining 2,095 articles entered the initial screening stage. After reviewing titles and abstracts, 1,737 articles were excluded due to mismatched research subjects (mainly students,  $n = 685$ ), purely quantitative designs ( $n = 602$ ), or clinical nursing backgrounds ( $n = 450$ ). Subsequently, full-text screening and in-depth assessment were conducted on the remaining 358 articles. At this stage, another 339 articles were excluded, primarily due to a lack of qualitative depth in the research design ( $n = 145$ ), a lack of focus on psychological capital theory ( $n = 112$ ), indistinguishable sample pools ( $n = 60$ ), and a lack of empirical data ( $n = 22$ ). Ultimately, 19 studies met all inclusion criteria, forming the basis for this meta-ethnographic synthesis.

TABLE 2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Inclusion	Exclusion
Focuses on the developmental processes or environmental factors of psychological capital (hope, efficacy, optimism, resilience)	Purely quantitative/statistical studies
Participants are higher education academic staff (lecturers, researchers, faculty, etc.)	Studies focusing exclusively on student or non-academic administrative staff populations
Qualitative studies or mixed-methods studies (qualitative component only)	Studies where PsyCap elements are not the primary focus of the research
Conceptual papers or theoretical reviews (for building the discussion)	Non-English publications
Published between 2020–2024 (to capture the contemporary crisis context)	Studies published before 2020
Full text available	Articles with abstract as the only available content

### 3.2 Quality assessment

To ensure the reliability and validity of the synthesis results, this study used the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) qualitative research checklist to assess the quality of the 19 included articles (see [Supplementary Table 1](#)). The CASP tool comprises 10 appraisal dimensions, covering clarity of research objectives, appropriateness of methodology, rigor of research design, adequacy of data collection and analysis, and the value of the findings (Long et al., 2020). To provide a quantifiable overview of methodological rigor, a scoring system was applied to the CASP checklist (Yes = 1, Can't tell = 0.5, No = 0), resulting in a total possible score of 10. The authors evaluated each study and discussed score discrepancies until consensus was reached. Based on this appraisal, all 19 studies were classified as high quality (scores ranging from 8.0 to 10.0).

The results indicated that most included studies demonstrated rigorous research designs and clearly elucidated academics' psychological experiences. While most criteria were met, minor deductions were primarily due to Question 6 (reflexivity), where some authors did not explicitly articulate the influence of the researcher–participant relationship. However, given that the core of meta-ethnography lies in the interpretive potential of concepts rather than methodological perfection, these studies were retained. Their inclusion was justified by their rich “second-order constructs”—that is, the original authors' interpretations of academics' psychological capital experiences—which were essential for ensuring the integrity and diversity of the theoretical synthesis.

### 3.3 Data extraction and synthesis

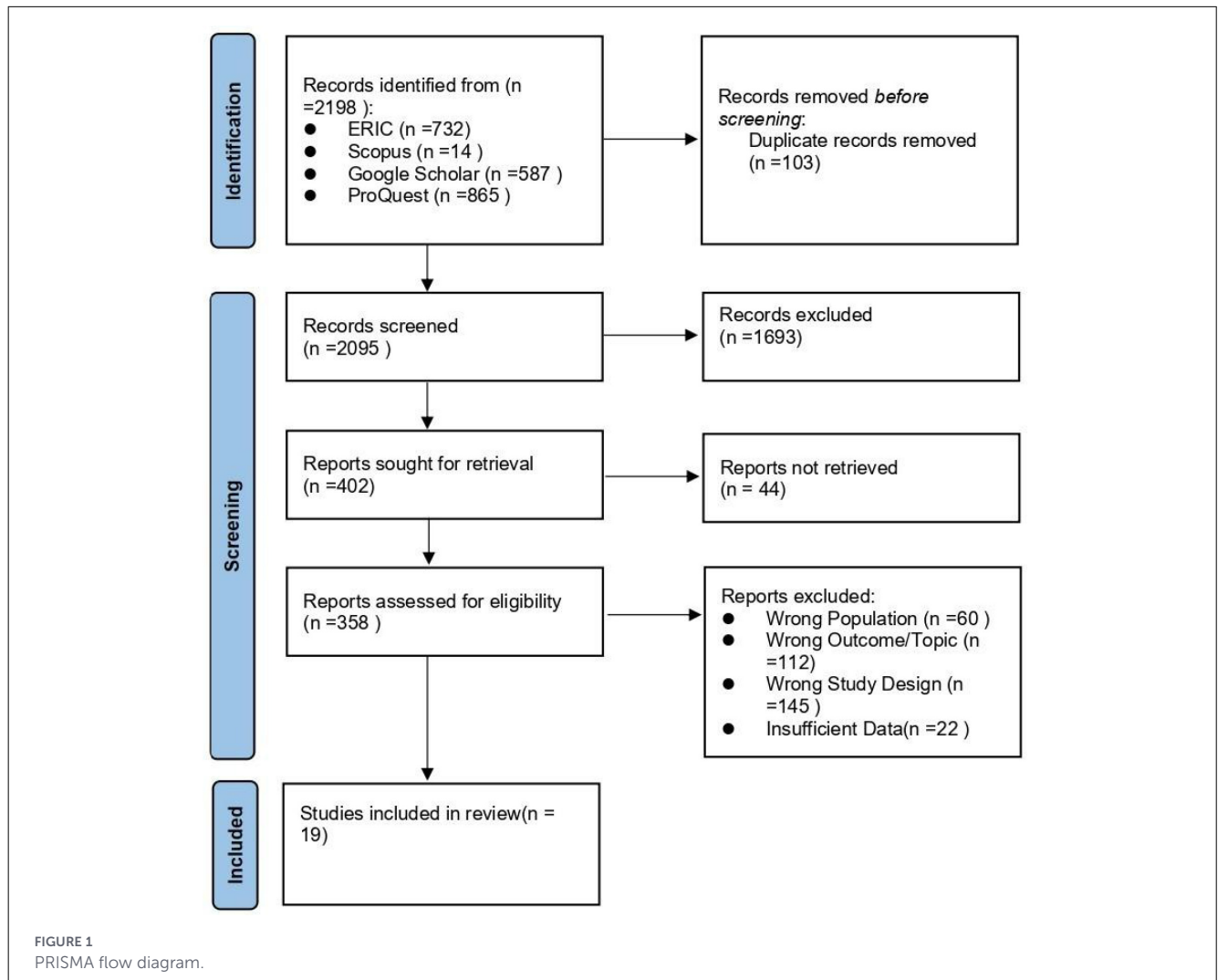
The initial data extraction was performed by the first author used a standardized form. To ensure reliability and minimize bias, the corresponding author acted as a second reviewer, independently cross-checking the extracted codes and themes against the original texts. Consistent with the meta-ethnographic approach, the authors extracted both “first-order constructs” (participants' direct quotes) and “second-order constructs” (the original authors' interpretations). Any discrepancies regarding data extraction or interpretation were resolved through discussion between the two authors until consensus was reached.

Following this extraction process, the study adhered to the meta-ethnographic framework proposed by Noblit and Hare (1988) to synthesize the data. The analysis began by confirming the research objective and identifying the 19 core articles through the screening process described in Section 3.1. The authors then engaged in immersive and repeated readings of the full texts to identify core metaphors and concepts embedded within the narratives. This progressed to determining relationships between studies by juxtaposing their core themes (see [Table 3](#)). The synthesis revealed primarily “reciprocal” relationships, where different scholars used varying terms (“professional resilience” and “academic buoyancy”) to describe similar processes of psychological resource development. Simultaneously, “refutational” viewpoints were identified, such as debates over whether stress acts as an inhibitor or an activator of psychological capital, providing an opportunity to examine the dialectical nature of the phenomenon.

### 3.4 Translational synthesis

In the fifth stage, “reciprocal translation,” the authors followed relevant qualitative coding guidelines (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015), using the core concepts of one study as a frame of reference to compare and translate corresponding concepts in another study. For example, the description of “self-efficacy” in one study was translated and mapped onto the narrative of “teaching confidence” in another study, thereby extracting common themes across studies while maintaining the original meaning. This process is not a simple merging of findings, but rather an identification of shared psychological mechanisms across different educational and cultural contexts through constant comparison.

In the subsequent sixth stage (“synthetic translation”) and seventh stage (“expressive synthesis”), the authors moved beyond individual studies to construct higher-level “third-order constructs” by integrating the translation results. The synthesis was ultimately expressed through a “multi-system psychological capital model,” which integrates individual-level psychological resources (hope and optimism) with meso-level organizational support and macro-level socio-cultural conditions. Through a “line-of-argument” synthesis, the study presents an integrated account of how academics reconstruct psychological capital through dynamic adaptation across multiple systems.



## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Study characteristics

The 19 research articles included in this analysis collectively constitute a rich international evidence base on the psychological states and professional experiences of contemporary higher education academics (including lecturers, professors, deans, and researchers, as well as specific groups such as medical, STEM, and female scholars). These studies show substantial convergence in themes, contexts, and methodologies (see Table 4).

At the thematic level, although these studies focus primarily on the elements of psychological capital (PsyCap) among academics under both longstanding and emerging stressors, particularly resilience, self-efficacy, hope, and optimism, they also commonly examine work–life balance and mental health concerns as related outcomes associated with PsyCap and its components. A prominent shared feature of these stressors is that the studies are almost universally situated within a context of “crisis.” This crisis takes two forms. First, chronic stressors refer to systemic pressures driven by neoliberal ideology, manifested in precarious employment, managerialism, a “publish or perish” performance

culture, educational reforms, and increasing complexity (Bone, 2021; Bosetti and Heffernan, 2021; Kekäle and Pinheiro, 2024; Ross et al., 2022; Yin and Mu, 2023). Second, acute shocks primarily refer to the COVID-19 pandemic. As a sudden and global disruption, this event comprehensively tested the resilience of the academic system (Bento et al., 2021; Cerbin-Koczorowska et al., 2023; Krsmanovic et al., 2024; Millican et al., 2023; Shaik et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2023).

Across the 19 included studies, researchers employed diverse methodological approaches to explore psychological capital, resilience, and occupational stress among academics. The methodologies primarily included phenomenology (Cerbin-Koczorowska et al., 2023; Ramachandaran et al., 2024; Shaik et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2023), case studies (Krsmanovic et al., 2024; Millican et al., 2023; Ross et al., 2022) and multi-case studies (Bone, 2021), narrative inquiry and self-socioanalysis (Yin and Mu, 2023), and various descriptive and exploratory qualitative designs (Augustus et al., 2023; Bento et al., 2021; Bosetti and Heffernan, 2021; Chan et al., 2020; Kekäle and Pinheiro, 2024; Veletsianos and Johnson, 2022). A notable feature is the use of mixed-methods sequential explanatory designs in several studies (Cadete and Ruggunan, 2024; Matahela and van Rensburg, 2024; Millican

TABLE 3 Coding system.

Main codes	Sub-codes	References
Internal resources of psychological capital	Self-efficacy	Self-perceptions and benefits of psychological resilience among women academics... Research self-efficacy and productivity of select faculty members... How self-efficacy beliefs are related to assessment practices... Factors affecting the self-efficacy of medical teachers during a health crisis...
	Hope and (Cruel) optimism	Canadian faculty members' hopes and anxieties about the... Diminishing hope and utopian thinking: faculty leadership under neoliberal regime Optimism and precarious employment: the crisis ordinariness of academic work
	Coping mechanisms and reflection	An exploration of the resilience of university academics in the face of ongoing criticism... Cultivating the professional resilience in university academics during the COVID-19 pandemic... Exploring resilience of academics at an education faculty during Covid-19 Enhancing nurse faculty resilience through self-leadership... Thriving in the neoliberal academia without becoming its agent?
	Personal vulnerabilities	Understanding work-life balance challenges among academic professionals... Does the role of personal academic tutor have an impact on staff wellbeing? Self-perceptions and benefits of psychological resilience among women academics...
Relational development of psychological capital	Collegial and team support	Exploring the impact of disruption on university staff resilience... Resilience in higher education: a complex perspective to lecturers' adaptive processes... Developing good practices and organizational resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic... Factors affecting the self-efficacy of medical teachers during a health crisis...
	Community, belonging, and mentorship	Understanding STEM academics' responses and resilience to educational reform... Thriving in the neoliberal academia without becoming its agent? Research self-efficacy and productivity of select faculty members...
Institutional and macro-contexts shaping psychological capital	Organizational support and risks (exo-system)	Exploring resilience of academics at an education faculty during Covid-19 Exploring the impact of disruption on university staff resilience... Does the role of personal academic tutor have an impact on staff wellbeing? Enhancing nurse faculty resilience through self-leadership... Developing good practices and organizational resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic...
	Macro-system stressors (neoliberalism, precarity, complexity)	Complexity, resilience, and human resource management illustration from Nordic higher education Diminishing hope and utopian thinking: faculty leadership under neoliberal regime Optimism and precarious employment: the crisis ordinariness of academic work Thriving in the neoliberal academia without becoming its agent? Understanding STEM academics' responses and resilience to educational reform... An exploration of the resilience of university academics in the face of ongoing criticism...

et al., 2023; Pentang and Domingo, 2024), which typically involve collecting quantitative questionnaire data followed by qualitative interviews to interpret the statistical results.

Regarding data collection, the vast majority of studies (18 out of 19) relied on semi-structured interviews (Augustus et al., 2023; Bosetti and Heffernan, 2021; Chan et al., 2020; Kekäle and Pinheiro, 2024; Myyry et al., 2021; Ross et al., 2022). Among these, individual interviews (Cerbin-Koczorowska et al., 2023; Veletsianos and Johnson, 2022) and focus group discussions (Matahela and van Rensburg, 2024; Pentang and Domingo, 2024; Shaik et al., 2022) accounted for the largest proportion. To supplement interview data, studies also incorporated online questionnaires (Millican et al., 2023), chronicle workshops, document analysis (Krsmanovic et al., 2024), and social media communication records (Yin and Mu, 2023), consistent with their epistemological approaches.

Most studies employed thematic analysis (Augustus et al., 2023; Chan et al., 2020; Bone, 2021; Pentang and Domingo, 2024; Ramachandaran et al., 2024) as the primary data analysis strategy. Other analytical approaches included interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Cerbin-Koczorowska et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2023), inductive content analysis (Myyry et al., 2021; Shaik et al., 2022), the constant comparative approach (Veletsianos and Johnson, 2022), and coding guided by specific theoretical frameworks (the DIMOR or socio-technical framework) (Krsmanovic et al., 2024; Millican et al., 2023; Ross et al., 2022).

This strong preference for qualitative inquiry and mixed-methods designs further reflects researchers' recognition that simply measuring individual-level indicators (self-efficacy scores) is insufficient for understanding academics' psychological capital. Researchers generally need to examine the processes

TABLE 4 Descriptive characteristics of the studies included in the meta-analysis.

Author (year)	Title	Country	Population	Design	Data collection	Data analysis	Aim
Veletsianos and Johnson (2022)	“Canadian faculty members’ hopes and anxieties about the near-future of higher education”	Canada	37 faculty members	Qualitative study	One-to-one semi-structured interviews	Constant comparative approach	To understand faculty’s hopes and anxieties about the near-future (next 5 years) of higher education.
Bosetti and Heffernan (2021)	“Diminishing hope and utopian thinking: faculty leadership under neoliberal regime”	Australia	15 deans and heads of school	Qualitative study	60-min semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis	To explore the impact of managerial practices and neoliberal ideology on the mindsets and actions of deans/heads of school.
Tan et al. (2023)	“Cultivating the professional resilience in university academics during the COVID-19 pandemic: an interpretative phenomenological analysis”	Malaysia	10 university academics	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	Semi-structured interviews (Zoom)	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	To explore the professional resilience of university academics during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Krsmanovic et al. (2024)	“Developing good practices and organizational resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic: a retrospective qualitative case study in a higher education institution”	Switzerland	67 university staff (management, teaching, admin, technical)	Retrospective qualitative case study	Chronicle workshops, semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis (sociotechnical framework)	To identify impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on work organization and staff activities, and identify good practices and resilience initiatives.
Augustus et al. (2023)	“Does the role of personal academic tutor have an impact on staff wellbeing?”	UK	26 personal academic tutors (PAT)	Qualitative method	Semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis (w/Drama Triangle)	To explore the experience of being a Personal Academic Tutor (PAT), focusing on staff and student well-being.
Kekäle and Pinheiro (2024)	“Complexity, resilience, and human resource management: illustration from Nordic higher education”	Nordic countries	9 senior academic leaders	Qualitative research design	Semi-structured interviews (MS Teams)	Thematic analysis	To explore increasing complexity, resilience, and potential HRM responses in Nordic higher education.
Chan et al. (2020)	“The battle-hardened academic: an exploration of the, resilience of university academics in the face of ongoing, criticism and rejection of their research”	Australia	12 health sciences academics	Qualitative research (constructivist)	Individual semi-structured interviews	Thematic analysis	To explore: “What factors influence academics’ resilience when receiving criticism and rejection of their research?”
Matahela and van Rensburg (2024)	“Enhancing nurse faculty resilience through self-leadership: guidelines for resource mobilization in dynamic academic environments”	South Africa	265 nurse faculty (quant); 4 focus groups (qual)	Exploratory, sequential mixed-method design	Focus group interviews, structured questionnaire	Thematic analysis, Descriptive statistics, EFA	To develop guidelines for promoting self-leadership among nurse faculty, focusing on enhancing resilience.

(Continued)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Author (year)	Title	Country	Population	Design	Data collection	Data analysis	Aim
Shaik et al. (2022)	"Sink or swim: exploring resilience of academics at an education faculty during Covid-19"	South Africa	13 education faculty academics	Qualitative method (interpretivism)	Focus group interview (MS Teams)	Thematic analysis (Content analysis)	To explore how academics experienced resilience during Covid-19.
Millican et al. (2023)	"Exploring the impact of disruption on university staff resilience using the dynamic interactive model of resilience"	UK	159 university staff (survey); 9 (interviews)	Mixed-methods; interpretivism, case study	Online questionnaire, individual online interviews	Thematic analysis (DIMOR framework)	To investigate the impact of disruption (COVID-19) on university staff resilience using the DIMOR model.
Myrty et al. (2021)	"How self-efficacy beliefs are related to assessment practices: a study of experienced university teachers"	Finland	16 'Excellent Teacher' award-winning academics	Qualitative study	Thematic interviews (semi-structured)	Deductive and inductive content analysis	To investigate how academics' self-efficacy beliefs relate to their assessment practices.
Yin and Mu (2023)	"Thriving in the neoliberal academia without becoming its agent? Sociologising resilience with an early career academic and a mid-career researcher"	China/Australia	1 early career academic (ECA), 1 mid-career researcher	Collective narrative/auto-socioanalysis	Collective narrative (WeChat text/voice)	Sociological narrative analysis, Self-socioanalysis	To explore ECA resilience to neoliberalism and ask: "Is it possible to thrive in neoliberal academia without becoming its agent?"
Cadete and Ruggunan (2024)	"Self-perceptions and benefits of psychological resilience among women academics... A mixed-method approach"	South Africa	135 female academics (quant); 27 (interviews)	Mixed-method sequential explanatory design	Online survey, individual in-depth interviews (Zoom)	Descriptive statistics, thematic analysis	To document the perceived experiences of psychological resilience (PR) among women academics in SA-HEIs.
Ramachandaran et al. (2024)	"Understanding work-life balance challenges among academic professionals in higher education: a phenomenological study"	Malaysia	6 academics	Qualitative study; phenomenological approach	In-depth interviews (semi-structured)	Thematic analysis	To examine and analyze the challenges experienced by Malaysian academics regarding work-life balance (WLB).
Bone (2021)	"Cruel optimism and precarious employment: the crisis ordinariness of academic work"	Australia	10 young (30 or under) precariously employed academics	Qualitative multi-case study approach	3 in-depth semi-structured interviews per person	Thematic analysis (cruel optimism framework)	To investigate how young academics cope with and rationalize their precarious employment and experience "cruel optimism."
Ross et al. (2022)	"Understanding STEM academics' responses and resilience to educational reform of academic roles in higher education"	Australia	32 STEM academics and senior leaders	2-year case study	Semi-structured interviews	Inductive thematic coding (Bronfenbrenner framework)	To examine STEM academics' responses and resilience to educational reforms of academic roles (education-focused pathways).

(Continued)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Author (year)	Title	Country	Population	Design	Data collection	Data analysis	Aim
Pentang and Domingo (2024)	“Research self-efficacy and productivity of select faculty members: inferences for faculty development plan”	Philippines	36 faculty (quant); 9 (interviews)	Mixed-method sequential explanatory research design	Questionnaire, focus group discussion (FGD)	Descriptive statistics, regression analysis, thematic analysis	To describe faculty’s research self-efficacy and productivity, and the challenges they face.
Bento et al. (2021)	“Resilience in higher education: a complex perspective to lecturers’ adaptive processes in response to the covid-19 pandemic”	Brazil	12 lecturers	Exploratory basic qualitative research	Interviews (semi-structured)	Text analysis (NVivo), theory-driven coding	To investigate lecturers’ experiences and understand how the university self-organized during the COVID-19 pandemic, from a systems resilience perspective.
Cerbin-Koczorowska et al. (2023)	“Factors affecting the self-efficacy of medical teachers during a health crisis... a qualitative study on the example of the COVID-19 pandemic”	Poland	25 medical teachers	Qualitative study; phenomenological method	Semi-structured interviews (MS Teams)	Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)	To identify factors influencing the self-efficacy of medical teachers and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on them.

and underlying mechanisms that promote the development of psychological capital (and its core elements such as resilience). By incorporating inductive (Chan et al., 2020; Ross et al., 2022) or exploratory (Bento et al., 2021; Matahela and van Rensburg, 2024) approaches, these studies move beyond simple causal relationships to capture complex and dynamic interactions. Specifically, phenomenological (Ramachandaran et al., 2024) and narrative inquiry (Yin and Mu, 2023) approaches allow research to reveal more nuanced aspects of psychological capital—such as hope, self-efficacy, optimism, and resilience—and their multi-system formation processes, as described in the Multi-System Resilience Model (MSMR). For example, in-depth interviews not only confirmed the presence of “self-efficacy” at the individual level but also revealed how it is negotiated, constructed, or eroded through interactions with microsystems (peer support) (Cerbin-Koczorowska et al., 2023) and the exosystem (institutional policies) (Pentang and Domingo, 2024). Therefore, these qualitatively driven designs are necessary for capturing the crucial context and process dimensions in the PPCT model, thereby supporting an ecological understanding of resilience.

## 4.2 Individual (PERSON): internal resource pool of psychological capital and vulnerability

It is noteworthy that several studies included in the analysis explicitly adopted ecological systems perspectives. For example,

Ross et al. (2022) used Bronfenbrenner’s socio-ecological model, while Millican et al. (2023) used the Dynamic Interaction Model of Resilience (DIMOR). This makes it theoretically appropriate to synthesize PsyCap-related findings across the 19 studies using the Multi-System Resilience Model (MSMR) and the PPCT (Process–Person–Context–Time) framework (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2007; Tong and An, 2024). By integrating these frameworks, the findings of this study support a core argument: academics’ psychological capital is not an isolated, static personal trait, but rather a product of continuous negotiation, depletion, and regeneration across multiple ecological systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-level contexts) through dynamic “process” and “time” dimensions. Collectively, the studies reveal a central tension between academics’ individual agency and psychological resources (self-efficacy, reflection, and coping strategies) and substantial institutional barriers (workload, lack of support, bureaucracy, and unfair evaluation systems).

The “Person” component of the PPCT framework forms the basis of psychological capital. These studies depict academics’ internal resource pools (primarily resilience, self-efficacy, and hope) as well as their vulnerabilities (neuroticism and anxiety). Self-efficacy is a critical internal PsyCap resource for academics. It has been identified as a core component of resilience (Cadete and Ruggunan, 2024) and a key predictor of productivity (Pentang and Domingo, 2024). This sense of efficacy is highly situation-specific. For example, in teaching evaluations, academics’ self-efficacy often stems from prior “mastery experiences”:

*“My evaluation system has received a huge amount of praise from the students. And I have modified the system quite extensively over the years based on the student feedback.” (005, cited in Myyry et al., 2021)*

However, this self-efficacy can become fragile during crises. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, many medical educators experienced a sharp decline in self-efficacy. One interviewee described the collective fear:

*“Very strong emotions. Because everyone was afraid of the disease, infection, but most of all, when it comes to the role of the teacher, we were terrified of how we would teach these students, right?” (R20, cited in Cerbin-Koczorowska et al., 2023)*

Another participant reported:

*“I am new to teaching and have yet to learn, even for research and publication.” (Instructor, A Campus, cited in Pentang and Domingo, 2024)*

Hope and optimism, as two PsyCap resources, exhibit a contradictory duality. On the one hand, academics may hold hope for the future of higher education, while simultaneously experiencing anxiety about the system (Veletsianos and Johnson, 2022). On the other hand, under unstable employment conditions, optimism may evolve into “cruel optimism,” leading scholars to endure an unsustainable “crisis normalcy” (Bone, 2021). A young scholar on an insecure contract captured this contradictory mentality:

*“I would kind of hope that the shorter-term stuff would give me a better chance of getting the longer-term stuff, but I don’t know that for sure. I really don’t know how long I could stand it. Hopefully as long as I need to.” (Mia3, cited in Bone, 2021)*

Finally, individual-level factors also include vulnerabilities. Neuroticism has been identified as a negative factor for resilience, amplifying negative emotional responses to adversity in academic work environments (Cadete and Ruggunan, 2024). Furthermore, fear, anxiety, and mental health concerns are pervasive personal states that directly deplete psychological capital (Millican et al., 2023; Ramachandaran et al., 2024).

### 4.3 Process: the dynamic development mechanism of psychological capital

The “process” component in the PPCT framework reveals how psychological capital is actively constructed or eroded over time. Several studies move beyond static trait descriptions by demonstrating the agency scholars exercise to maintain psychological balance. Specifically, protective processes suggest that scholars do not respond passively; rather, they actively build

resilience through a series of cognitive and behavioral processes, which can be summarized in three characteristics:

- (1) Cognitive reflection: When faced with the “symbolic violence” of neoliberalism, scholars deconstruct it through reflexive sociology. One early-career academic (ECA) noted in a conversation with her mentor that she needed to “accumulate my capital, the effective weapon to play this game” (Melody, cited in Yin and Mu, 2023).
- (2) Self-regulatory strategies: Among these, “self-leadership” and “self-care” are key active processes. Scholars combat burnout by “connecting with self” (Shaik et al., 2022). One scholar, describing their coping strategy during the pandemic, stated:

*“I had to practice a lot of self-care, really radical self-care, to keep it up every day.” (P1, cited in Shaik et al., 2022)*

- (3) Cognitive reframing: This refers to scholars learning to view research rejection as a learning opportunity rather than a judgment of their abilities:

*“If you interpret it as a reflection on your ability or a reflection on your capability, it could obviously have a negative effect—if you internalize it too much: ‘it’s all due to me, I’m not good enough’ ...” (Participant 5, cited in Chan et al., 2020)*

Conversely, certain processes systematically deplete psychological capital, namely risk processes. This can manifest as emotional labor, and when role boundaries are unclear (in personal academic mentorship), scholars may fall into a “drama triangle” of role ambiguity, assuming the role of a “savior” and ultimately experiencing emotional exhaustion (Augustus et al., 2023). This emotional drain is particularly significant for university lecturers who simultaneously bear the roles of academic leader and mentor. One dean nearly broke down when describing the pressure of his role:

*“I nearly just burst out in tears... ‘Oh my God, what have I done? What have I done?’” (Noel, cited in Bosetti and Heffernan, 2021)*

### 4.4 Context: shaping the multi-systemic psychological capital (MSMR) ecosystem

The “Context” component in the PPCT framework is central to this analysis. It maps onto the micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-level systems through which psychological capital is constructed within a multi-system model. The microsystem, as the most immediate layer of social relationships and a “first line of defense” for individual resilience, relies heavily on supportive collegial

relationships. A medical educator, describing team support during the pandemic, stated:

*“We all were drawing one from another. I think these relations were very good. We were all supporting each other.” (R5, cited in Cerbin-Koczorowska et al., 2023)*

However, when these social connections are disrupted, feelings of isolation can exacerbate vulnerability and trigger risk processes. One scholar, describing remote work during the pandemic, noted:

*“Not being able to just walk into an office next door and have a discussion about a student who’s really struggling is a big issue.” (I, cited in Millican et al., 2023)*

The exosystem highlights the role of institutional structures (university management, policies, and resources) in shaping academics’ resilience experiences. Scholars do not operate in a vacuum; institutional actions directly influence their psychological capital. Across the included literature, universities are frequently portrayed as sources of risk, particularly due to a lack of support, rather than as protective buffers:

*“I think we were all sort of left to be resilient by ourselves, and like I’ve said earlier, sink or swim. We all decided that we were going to swim, and we made it through regardless of [receiving] support from the university or not.” (P3, cited in Shaik et al., 2022)*

This suggests that when universities act as protective systems and provide active support, particularly through top-down leadership and coordinated management, such interventions are generally perceived as effective (Krsmanovic et al., 2024).

The macrosystem represents chronic neoliberal pressures that function as “atmospheric pressure” on institutions and individuals. Neoliberalism and increasing complexity constitute major macro-level stressors. Scholars note that the pursuit of “social relevance” (Kekäle and Pinheiro, 2024) and the “publish or perish” culture (Yin and Mu, 2023) push them into a logic of “capital accumulation”:

*“I realized that papers and grants are the ‘hard currency’ of higher education ... I’m just trying to accumulate my capital, which is an effective weapon in playing this game.” (Melody, cited in Yin and Mu, 2023)*

The macrosystem is also reflected in discipline-specific cultures. In STEM contexts, education-focused scholars may face pressure that devalues their work. A senior scholar relayed a common view about educational research:

*“A lot of (educational) literature is dross.” “They’re published in low-quality journals...” (Interviewee 11, Level E, Go8, cited in Ross et al., 2022)*

## 4.5 Time: the chrono-system of psychological capital

The “Time” dimension in the PPCT framework reveals the trajectory of resilience development, distinguishing between acute shocks and chronic stressors. Regarding acute shocks, the COVID-19 pandemic provides a clear example. As a sudden and disruptive event, it caused immediate disruption to the academic system. The literature depicts this temporal process, moving from an initial “decline in self-efficacy” (Cerbin-Koczorowska et al., 2023), to an intermediate phase of “adaptive processes” (Bento et al., 2021; Millican et al., 2023), and then to later “reflection and learning” (Krsmanovic et al., 2024).

In contrast, chronic stressors represent long-term and persistent pressures. Neoliberalism (Bosetti and Heffernan, 2021) and unstable employment (Bone, 2021) are examples of such chronic stressors. They contribute to a “normalization of crisis” (Bone, 2021), in which time is not experienced as a discrete event but as an “impasse” or a “stretched present” that gradually erodes scholars’ hope and optimism.

Career stages also function as temporal markers in the development of psychological capital, as experience becomes a key time-related resource. Senior scholars can draw on accumulated “mastery experiences” (Myry et al., 2021) and long-established “beliefs and values” (Chan et al., 2020). Over time, these resources contribute to resilience. One senior scholar, reflecting on early experiences, stated:

*“I was pretty much emotionally devastated by a lot of the comments that were made and the rejection that I experienced... It’s a process that I’ve been involved in over a number of years and I think I’ve developed a better understanding and I’ve become more resilient.” (Participant 7, cited in Chan et al., 2020)*

In conclusion, the above analysis suggests that academic psychological capital (PsyCap) is a deeply ecological and relational construct. It is not a static trait “possessed” by individual scholars, but rather the result of continuous negotiation within challenging multi-system contexts (colleagues, institutions, and culture). Across the 19 studies, contemporary academics, especially women and early-career scholars, face substantial pressure from both the exosystem (institutional management) and the macrosystem (neoliberalism and precarious employment). However, institutional responses often emphasize individual coping with systemic problems through processes such as self-care and time management. This individualized approach, in which scholars are expected to “be resilient on their own” (Shaik et al., 2022), is ultimately unsustainable.

## 5 Discussion

This meta-ethnographic analysis of 19 empirical studies explores how the four elements of psychological capital (PsyCap) among higher education academics, resilience, self-efficacy, hope,

and optimism, are formed, maintained, and eroded within the contemporary academic ecosystem. Through the synthesis and reinterpretation of qualitative evidence, this study identifies a core PsyCap paradox: the tension between a dysfunctional system and a resilient individual. The findings support a central argument: academics' psychological capital is not an isolated, static personal trait, but rather a product of continuous negotiation, depletion, and regeneration across multiple ecological systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macro-level contexts) through dynamic processes over time. This analysis further suggests that contemporary academics, especially women and early-career scholars, face substantial pressure from both the exosystem (institutional demands and lack of support) and the macrosystem (neoliberalism and precarious employment). However, institutional responses (or lack thereof) often shift responsibility for addressing these systemic problems onto individuals. Shaik et al. (2022) captures this paradox clearly in their exploration of academics' resilience experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. One interviewee noted, "I think we all have to rely on ourselves to become resilient, like I said before, sink or swim." This disconnect between individual positive psychological resources (Person) and an institutionally draining environment (Context) provides the central framing for this discussion. The following sections examine how PsyCap's four core elements (HERO) are negotiated, constrained, and reconstructed within this paradox.

## 5.1 Self-efficacy: mastery experiences weakened by systemic impairments

Self-efficacy, a key driver of PsyCap, has been shown to be highly experience-dependent in its development. The evidence synthesized in this study indicates that self-efficacy is not a static trait but a dynamic process shaped by experience. It may undergo a decline-rebuild cycle in the face of acute shocks (COVID-19) (Cerbin-Koczorowska et al., 2023), while its longer-term development relies on the accumulation of successful mastery experiences (Myrny et al., 2021). Conversely, limited research experience has been identified as a direct contributor to low self-efficacy (Pentang and Domingo, 2024). For example, Myrny et al. (2021), in examining how experienced university faculty's self-efficacy beliefs relate to assessment practices, found that mastery experience was the most common source of efficacy. This was reflected in one faculty member's assessment system, which received high praise from students and had been extensively modified over the years based on student feedback.

However, the PsyCap paradox is evident in that efficacy accumulated through personal effort remains experience-dependent and therefore vulnerable to disruption and systemic constraints. Whether facing acute shocks such as COVID-19, reflected in the decline in self-efficacy at the onset of crisis reported by Cerbin-Koczorowska et al. (2023), or chronic stressors such as limited research experience and insufficient guidance, as described by Pentang and Domingo (2024), academic self-efficacy may deteriorate substantially. When the institution (exosystem) fails to provide necessary support or resources, the mechanism through

which individuals build self-efficacy via mastery experiences is undermined.

## 5.2 Resilience: individualized responses to systemic failure

The development of resilience reflects a maturation process from passive to active coping, evolving from initial emotional responses to adversity, such as research rejection (Chan et al., 2020), to proactive cognitive reframing and agency. Early in their careers, scholars often experience emotionally devastating reactions to rejection. However, with accumulated experience, they may transform stress into manageable challenges through behavioral strategies such as "connecting with oneself" (Shaik et al., 2022) and "self-leadership" (Matahela and van Rensburg, 2024). Over time, this response can develop into proactive cognitive reframing. Chan et al. (2020), in examining resilience factors among scholars facing research criticism and rejection, illustrated this "battle-hardened" trajectory: scholars gradually learn to view rejection as a "learning opportunity" rather than an "evaluation of their abilities."

The PsyCap paradox is particularly evident here. This mature resilience process, including the adoption of "self-leadership" strategies (Matahela and van Rensburg, 2024) or "radical self-care" (Shaik et al., 2022), does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, these are defensive processes that individuals are compelled to adopt when faced with neoliberal "symbolic violence" (Yin and Mu, 2023) and institutional abandonment (being "left to be resilient by themselves," as described by Shaik et al., 2022). Resilience is thus reframed into a management tool: systemic failures within higher education institutions (the exosystem), such as excessive workload and bureaucracy, are shifted into individualized problems of insufficient "self-care."

Unlike traditional organizational psychology perspectives that often treat PsyCap as a stable, context-free asset to be measured (Luthans et al., 2007), this synthesis highlights its processual and vulnerable nature. This shift in perspective is not contradictory but complementary: it suggests that what quantitative scales capture as "resilience" may involve a hidden and labor-intensive process of emotional negotiation.

## 5.3 Hope and optimism: alienated into "cruel optimism"

Hope and optimism most clearly reveal the context-dependent nature of the PsyCap paradox. As a duality shaped by context, the development of these resources reflects the coexistence of adaptation and maladaptation. On the one hand, scholars' hope often coexists with anxiety arising from systemic uncertainty. For example, Veletsianos and Johnson (2022) examined the "hope and anxiety" of Canadian faculty regarding the near future of higher education and found that their hopes were constrained by limited resources and support, while they felt anxious about factors "beyond their control."

On the other hand, under unstable employment conditions and chronic neoliberal pressures (macrosystem), these positive

resources may become “weaponized” or “alienated.” Bone (2021), in a study of early-career scholars under insecure employment systems, proposed the concept of “cruel optimism.” Scholars’ attachment to “ideals of a better life” (stable employment) ironically becomes an obstacle, trapping them in “crisis ordinariness.” As one interviewee stated, “I somewhat hope that short-term jobs will give me a better chance of getting long-term employment, but I’m really not sure.” Here, the PsyCap paradox manifests as the higher education system (macrosystem) exploiting individuals’ positive resources (hope and optimism) and transforming them into mechanisms that sustain a dysfunctional status quo. The pursuit of “ideals of a better life” may thus constrain scholars’ capacity to develop strategies for changing their predicament, leaving them suspended in “crisis ordinariness.” This pressure is also evident among academic leaders. For example, Bosetti and Heffernan (2021) found that deans’ “critical hope” gradually diminishes in the face of persistent institutional resistance.

This contrast highlights a critical divergence in the literature. While prior quantitative research typically depicts a linear, positive relationship between PsyCap and performance (Luthans et al., 2007), this meta-ethnographic synthesis reveals a more complex and sometimes paradoxical dynamic, captured here as “cruel optimism.” This discrepancy may stem from methodological differences: whereas quantitative scales measure the level of hope, qualitative evidence reveals the psychological and relational costs of sustaining that hope. This synthesis further suggests that hope and resilience, when leveraged by institutions to mask systemic failures, may paradoxically contribute to self-exploitation, an important nuance that trait-based statistical measures often overlook.

## 5.4 Social capital: catalysts of microsystems and systemic erosion

The analysis of social capital further pinpoints the core of the PsyCap paradox. This study confirms that the development of PsyCap, particularly self-efficacy and resilience, is not an isolated individual process but is highly dependent on social relationships within the microsystem. However, these microsystems operate under substantial structural pressure. Our findings on the erosion of PsyCap through excessive workload and institutional demands align with previous research (Kinman, 2014; Rusdi et al., 2023). This consistency may be attributed to the global prevalence of neoliberal management practices. Across national contexts, the pervasive “audit culture” creates a broadly similar high-pressure environment that depletes psychological resources, forcing academics to “do more with less” (Kinman, 2019). Within this demanding context, collegial support and “vicarious experiences” serve as key catalysts. For instance, Cerbin-Koczorowska et al. (2023), in a study of medical faculty during the pandemic, found that peer support was crucial for enhancing self-efficacy; one respondent noted, “We all learn from each other ... we all support each other.” Krsmanovic et al. (2024) similarly emphasized “solidarity” as a best practice for organizational resilience. Conversely, a lack of mentorship and community has been identified as a key process barrier hindering PsyCap development. Pentang and Domingo (2024) highlight this issue: a STEM scholar, comparing their situation with that

of research colleagues, described a “lack of community,” noting that while researchers often operate within rich ecosystems of postdoctoral fellows and students, academics in education-focused roles may lack connected support networks.

The paradox culminates here. When the exosystem (institutions) fails to provide support (as in Shaik et al., 2022), scholars are forced to rely on microsystems (colleagues and teams) as their primary buffer. However, macro-level pressures, such as the competitive logic of “capital accumulation” described by Yin and Mu (2023) and the denigration of educational research within STEM disciplinary cultures reported by Ross et al. (2022), simultaneously and systematically erode these microsystems. This ultimately isolates scholars, pushing them back into a condition of “solo perseverance,” thereby reinforcing the closed loop of the PsyCap paradox.

## 5.5 Practical implications for higher education institutions

The core finding of this study, the “PsyCap Paradox”, has significant practical implications for administrators, deans, human resources departments, and policymakers in higher education institutions (HEIs). If academics’ psychological capital is depleted within the system, it must also be repaired within the system. Interventions that place responsibility primarily on individuals (personal well-being workshops) are insufficient because they fail to address underlying structural causes. Therefore, HEIs must shift their intervention focus from the “person” to the “context.”

First, universities should invest in microsystems as a protective buffer. Since PsyCap relies heavily on social capital, HEIs must move from passive reliance to active cultivation. University administrators should systematically invest in cultures of collegiality and mentorship. To address the “lack of mentorship” and “lack of community” identified by Pentang and Domingo (2024) and Ross et al. (2022), universities should provide dedicated funding to support interdepartmental collaborative workshops and establish formal, recognized, and rewarded mentorship programs for early career academics (ECAs).

Second, institutions should avoid functioning as “pressure transmitters” by reforming draining practices within the exosystem. Administrators need to critically examine institutional mechanisms that systematically deplete PsyCap. For example, in response to the “overwork” concerns raised by Ramachandran et al. (2024) and the “publish or perish” culture described by Yin and Mu (2023), HEIs should reform assessment standards and workload models. Reforming the exosystem means buffering chronic pressures from the macrosystem (neoliberalism), rather than amplifying them.

Finally, higher education leaders need to move beyond the performance-based myth of “individual resilience.” This study highlights the paradox of “resilience by oneself” (Shaik et al., 2022), suggesting that widely promoted self-compassion-based coping strategies are often only stopgap measures. Human resources departments must recognize that demanding greater resilience from individuals while the system remains dysfunctional risks becoming a form of managerial responsibility shifting. In contrast, true organizational resilience (Krsmanovic et al., 2024) is developed

through tangible institutional support, fair evaluation systems, and a supportive academic culture, rather than being continuously “extracted” from individuals.

## 5.6 Strengths and limitations

This meta-ethnography contributes to the existing literature in three critical ways. First, theoretically, by integrating the MSMR and PPCT frameworks, this research moves beyond the traditional trait-based view of PsyCap and reframes it as a dynamic, multi-systemic process. This theoretical realignment addresses the “black box” of how academic resilience is negotiated through real-time interactions, offering a more ecological understanding than static measurement scales. Second, methodologically, the use of meta-ethnography enabled the synthesis of deep qualitative insights (third-order constructs) that quantitative meta-analyses often overlook, such as the nuanced emotional labor behind “staying positive” and the paradoxical nature of “cruel optimism.” Third, contextually, by focusing on the 2020–2024 timeframe, this study captures the specific impact of the “dual disruption” (the COVID-19 pandemic and intensified neoliberalism), providing timely implications for post-crisis higher education management.

These findings, however, should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the search was restricted to English-language publications. While this ensured the inclusion of peer-reviewed studies, it may have excluded relevant non-Western perspectives published in local languages. Second, although the inclusion of diverse geographical contexts (Asia, Europe, and Australia) enhances the global relevance of the synthesis, specific cultural nuances of PsyCap, such as differences between Western “individual agency” and Eastern “collective resilience”, could not be fully differentiated due to the aggregated nature of the analysis. Third, as this study relies on secondary qualitative data, the findings remain subject to the interpretations of the original authors. To mitigate this potential bias, strict quality appraisal (CASP) and investigator triangulation were employed during data extraction to enhance the reliability of the synthesized themes.

Finally, regarding the macrosystem, while this synthesis identified the overarching pressure of neoliberal ideology, the heterogeneity of the included studies limited our ability to conduct a more granular analysis of how specific disciplinary cultures (STEM vs. Humanities) or distinct forms of precarious employment (adjunct vs. tenure-track) differentially shape PsyCap. This remains an important gap for future empirical inquiry.

## 5.7 Future directions and research gaps

While these 19 articles provide a solid foundation for understanding the psychological capital of academics, five key research gaps remain to be addressed from a multi-system perspective.

First, regarding the shift from individual coping to collective action, existing literature (Chan et al., 2020; Shaik et al., 2022; Ramachandaran et al., 2024) largely focuses on individual and largely reactive coping mechanisms (self-care and cognitive

reframing) when examining the “process” dimension. There remains a paucity of research on collective, proactive, and transformative processes, as well as limited clarity on how academics, within microsystems, develop “collective psychological capital” (collective efficacy or collective hope) to influence the exosystem (university policies). Future research should move beyond “how individuals survive” to “how the collective acts,” exploring how academics reshape their work environment through collective negotiation, peer alliances, or coordinated action (Ross et al., 2022; Shaik et al., 2022).

Second, the internal dynamics among PsyCap elements remain underexplored. Existing studies (Bone, 2021; Pentang and Domingo, 2024) often examine the four elements (hope, efficacy, optimism, and resilience) as relatively independent resources, leaving limited understanding of the synergistic or potentially antagonistic relationships among them. For example, under conditions of unstable employment, it remains unclear whether high self-efficacy may inadvertently intensify “cruel optimism,” leading scholars to persist in unsustainable roles for longer. Future research should move beyond isolated element-level analyses and examine how PsyCap functions as a dynamic constellation.

Third, mediating and moderating mechanisms within the multi-system framework require further empirical validation. While current evidence suggests that contextual factors (lack of support) are associated with negative outcomes and individual factors (high self-efficacy) with positive outcomes, boundary conditions remain unclear. For instance, does peer support in the microsystem mediate the relationship between self-efficacy and resilience (Cadete and Ruggunan, 2024)? Can self-leadership (Matahela and van Rensburg, 2024) moderate the negative impact of high workload within the exosystem on mental health? Future research should further unpack this “black box” to clarify these pathways.

Fourth, regarding the chronosystem, the longitudinal development and erosion of PsyCap requires deeper investigation. The literature synthesized in this study relies largely on cross-sectional designs (Myrsky et al., 2021), retrospective interviews (Chan et al., 2020), or immediate responses to acute disruptions (COVID-19). As one participant in Chan et al. (2020) noted, “This is a process I’ve been involved in for many years...”. While retrospective approaches provide valuable insight, they cannot fully capture real-time trajectories of PsyCap development and depletion. Longer-term longitudinal designs are therefore needed to examine how PsyCap accumulates, changes, or erodes across academic career stages, from doctoral training to early career academics (ECAs) and senior professors.

Finally, future research should examine macrosystemic determinants of PsyCap in greater depth. Although this synthesis highlights the influence of “audit culture,” more targeted investigations are needed to explore how neoliberal ideology intersects with disciplinary cultures. For example, does “publish or perish” pressure shape the PsyCap of STEM academics differently from that of humanities academics? In addition, given the rise of the “gig academy,” researchers should examine how precarious employment shapes the erosion of hope and resilience, comparing experiences across employment categories (adjunct vs. tenure-track) to inform more equitable higher education policies.

## 6 Conclusion

This meta-ethnographic synthesis presents a complex, multi-systemic picture of the psychological capital (PsyCap) of academics in higher education institutions (HEIs), challenging the prevailing narrative that treats PsyCap solely as a personal asset. By synthesizing evidence from diverse international contexts, the analysis shows that resilience, self-efficacy, hope, and optimism are not isolated individual traits but are continuously negotiated at the intersection of individual agency and structural constraints.

The findings demonstrate the dual nature of this developmental process: PsyCap is built through mastery experiences (Myrsky et al., 2021) and social capital (Cerbin-Koczorowska et al., 2023), yet it is simultaneously eroded by systemic pressures. Crucially, the synthesis reveals the “dark side” of resilience, captured through the notion of “cruel optimism” (Bone, 2021), in which positive traits may be sustained at significant personal cost. PsyCap is often compromised by emotional labor (Bosetti and Heffernan, 2021) and the internalization of rejection (Chan et al., 2020).

The most significant finding is that the PsyCap challenges faced by contemporary academics are primarily shaped by context, particularly pressures arising from both the exosystem (institutional policies, workload, and lack of support) and the macrosystem (neoliberal ideology, precarious employment, and disciplinary culture). As the literature highlights (Shaik et al., 2022), when institutional support is absent, academics are forced to become “resilient by themselves,” accelerating the erosion of psychological resources. Therefore, efforts to enhance academic PsyCap must move beyond individual-level interventions (superficial self-care mandates) and shift toward systemic reforms of the context. Higher education institutions should begin by strengthening the exosystem, systematically fostering resilience through tangible institutional support, equitable evaluation systems, and supportive microsystems (team culture), while buffering chronic pressures associated with audit culture. Only by aligning institutional values with the psychological realities of academic work can universities cultivate a genuinely sustainable and thriving academic community.

## Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/Supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

## Author contributions

WA: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. MC: Writing – review & editing.

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## Conflict of interest

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## Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

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## Supplementary material

The Supplementary Material for this article can be found online at: <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2026.1753121/full#supplementary-material>

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