

Beyond Compliance: Psychological Capital and the Internalization of Professional Ethics among University Teachers

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Abstract

Even if university teachers accept the principles of professional ethics, they often find it hard to put them into practice when fair assessment, responsible supervision, or correcting mistakes require a personal sacrifice. This article provides a theoretical account of how psychological capital facilitates the internalisation of professional ethics in such contexts. It identifies three interrelated functions. First, ethical identification shapes the professional commitments that individuals choose to uphold. Second, psychological capital provides the resources required to honour these commitments. Third, organisational support sustains the ongoing fulfilment of such commitments. Self-efficacy motivates individuals to undertake difficult ethical actions, and hope provides legitimate ways of coping with obstacles. Resilience keeps people involved in making corrections following setbacks, and optimism helps to sustain the belief that improvement is possible. Two analytical tables set out the mechanisms and the organisational arrangements by means of which they can function. Four propositions explain why the development of such resources should be combined with professional reasoning, with credible protection, and with opportunities for repair. Therefore, the account sees the internalisation of ethics as occurring through repeated instances of self-endorsed practice and offers a reason for linking teacher development with institutional responsibility.

Keywords

Psychological capital, Professional ethics, University teachers, Ethics internalization, Perceived organizational support

Introduction

A university teacher who notices that an assessment method is unfair may still choose not to challenge it. In order to bring about a remedy, it is necessary to have confidence in one's own judgment, to have a workable alternative, to remain persistent even in the face of disagreement, and to believe that changes are possible. Even though written rules specify the obligations, the ability to act on them in practice partly depends on resources that the rules themselves do not provide. The central theoretical question is to explain how these resources allow professional ethics to function as a stable basis for judgment and action.

Recent reviews describe psychological capital as a higher-order construct comprising self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism, and synthesize evidence linking psychological capital with a range of work-related outcomes [1,2]. Although this shows a connection between psychological capital and professional behaviour, performance, satisfaction, and ethical

internalisation are separate outcomes. A teacher might be confident and persistent in pursuing an unfair objective. It therefore follows that any explanation of ethical internalisation must take into account both the resources that support action and the commitments that govern their use.

The article gives a description of teaching in universities and advances the point of distinguishing among ethical direction, psychological capacity, and institutional feasibility within one explanation. Ethical identification is the factor that gives personal significance to professional duties, psychological capacity allows these duties to be fulfilled when difficulties arise, and institutional support affects whether it is possible to maintain the practice. Based on this analysis four propositions are obtained and presented in two analytical tables. The focus lies on the resource conditions necessary for internalization - that is, on the reasons why teachers are able to continue acting in accordance with

their own endorsed standards when ethical practice becomes demanding.

Internalization as a resource-dependent professional process

Ethics are said to be internalized when professional standards become the personal reasons people use to guide their judgments and actions in different situations. Compliance means there is a clear link between an action and a rule, and internalization also includes the motives behind the action. Fair grading, when closely supervised, is compatible with either of these two processes. A willingness to explain the criteria, to reevaluate a decision when it is in dispute, and to correct an error when there is no scrutiny all provide stronger conceptual evidence of internalization.

Recent meta-analytic work maps the antecedents of moral identity, while self-regulation accounts connect moral identity with the ongoing pursuit of moral goals [3,4]. In universities, ethical identification means viewing fairness, student dignity, intellectual honesty, and responsible authority as essential aspects of what it means to be a good teacher. It is these commitments that act as the standards teachers use when facing choices that are attractive but professionally questionable.

The internalization process consists of instances in which a teacher realizes a duty, carries out that duty, and then takes the results into account when carrying out their future actions. These situations call for a great deal of attention and emotional energy. When a proposal is rejected, when a grade is contested, or when an error committed by a supervisor is acknowledged, the continued commitment to ethical behaviour can become expensive. Psychological capital is involved in this process by allowing action to take place even in difficult circumstances. Even though all four dimensions of psychological capital are examples of resources, their theoretical functions differ: They are meant to initiate action, to find a way forward, to restore engagement, and to keep constructive expectations.

The argument also distinguishes general efficacy from moral self-efficacy, since having confidence in teaching or in research does not imply that one has the confidence to handle an ethical disagreement. As the research that has connected moral identity, moral self-efficacy, elevation and moral intentions or behaviour demonstrates, this distinction is important [5]. Teacher development

should therefore integrate general resources with specific professional judgments. The proposed relationship is conditional in the sense that psychological capital leads to internalisation only when its use is aimed at defensible professional commitments and is supported by actual enactment.

Four resource mechanisms

Teachers often recognise what professional ethics require of them, yet they frequently hesitate or fail to translate ethical awareness into real-world action when facing interpersonal pressure, institutional barriers, or potential personal costs. Psychological capital, composed of self-efficacy, hope, resilience and optimism, supplies distinct psychological resources that bridge this knowing-doing gap. Each dimension addresses a specific practical obstacle encountered in ethical practice and performs unique theoretical functions. These functions include initiating difficult ethical action, generating feasible alternative pathways when initial plans fail, restoring constructive professional engagement after setbacks or mistakes, and sustaining long-term positive expectations for ethical improvement. Importantly, these resources are morally neutral on their own. They can support unethical goals if not guided by clear ethical identification. Therefore, they must be anchored to shared professional commitments rather than treated as standalone personal strengths.

Self-efficacy: Initiating defensible action

Self-efficacy is the degree of confidence a person has in their ability to carry out a difficult task. In ethical situations it helps to bridge the gap between recognizing a responsibility and then taking action. A teacher who can explain the assessment criteria, note a concern, or have a difficult conversation is in a better position to act than one who knows that a duty exists but expects to be unable to carry it out.

The method involves preparing in a manner specific to the task in question. For instance, if individuals practise explaining the errors they make when grading, this can help to build confidence on the basis of a sound procedure. Conversely, confidence that is not backed by professional reasoning may result in an uncritical defence of the initial judgement. It therefore follows that the development process should involve acquiring mastery through experience, providing opportunities to explain one's decisions, and also taking the students'

views into account. It is ethical identification that determines whether a point deserves defence; it is efficacy that supports the effort to defend it.

Proposition 1: When people gain confidence through actively carrying out and logically evaluating the professional duties that they support, this confidence enhances the internalization of ethical principles.

Hope: Preserving the goal while revising the route

Hope consists in having a feeling of agency directed towards achieving a goal together with the capacity to find ways of reaching it. It becomes evident in an ethical context when a response that was at first preferred is no longer possible. For instance, if a teacher cannot obtain immediate agreement on an assessment reform, he or she might propose moderation, request peer review, or establish a formal appeal procedure. The benefit in this case is that legitimate alternatives are produced while at the same time maintaining the original commitment to fairness.

Flexible implementation may therefore be differentiated from flexible standards. The factor of hope contributes to internalisation in the case of teachers who change the way in which they fulfill an obligation without abandoning the ethical purpose of that obligation. Where every obstacle is taken as a sufficient reason for reducing the standard, pathway generation amounts to rationalisation. The way of considering conflicts between professional and personal values provides a useful conceptual framework for examining how commitments are understood when under pressure [6]. In university settings, alternatives must be assessed in relation to their effects on students, colleagues, and the integrity of the process.

Proposition 2: Hope facilitates the internalization of professional ethics by sustaining agency and enabling teachers to identify legitimate alternative courses of action when an initial approach is blocked.

Resilience: Returning to responsible practice

The ability to regain the habit of taking part again after having encountered adversity is what resilience provides. When practicing in an ethical manner, one should consider setbacks resulting from opposition as well as those arising out of one's own mistakes. A teacher might have to begin again with a difficult supervisory relationship after having received criticism or have to change a previous decision without becoming defensive.

The right course of action when recovering is to once more engage in responsible professional behaviour.

If one is to achieve internalization, it is essential to learn from the event; simply tolerating a harmful situation will merely result in the same conditions that caused the problem reoccurring. On the other hand, resilient ethical engagement involves not only emotional recovery but also a review of one's responsibilities, carrying out a feasible repair, and making appropriate escalation when the issue moves beyond individual authority. Research on workplace loneliness indicates that psychological capital is a resource that is associated with fewer negative outcomes in terms of workplace behaviour [7]. This supports the general resource rationale; applying this to ethical repair shows a specific theoretical mechanism.

Optimism: Sustaining investment in improvement

Because one is optimistic, they have positive expectations about the outcomes in the future. When acting ethically, the benefits are generally delayed and uncertain. For instance, introducing an open feedback process may cause a temporary increase in complaints, while fair supervision typically leads to only a small amount of immediate recognition. Yet a reasonable expectation that things will improve can still motivate continued investment during this time.

Optimism should stay open to what the evidence shows. Teachers have to be capable of distinguishing between a temporary setback and a situation that cannot be changed without ignoring the numerous signs of institutional failure. So long as it promotes further investigation and the right kind of action, optimism has practical value. It is due to their resilience and optimism that teachers are able to recover from a difficult experience and yet continue to work towards improved practice.

Proposition 3: Ethics can be internalised as a result of renewed engagement, taking corrective action, and keeping on investing following ethical setbacks due to resilience and evidence-responsive optimism. The various dimensions may support one another in a given situation: Efficacy enables the first attempt, hope offers an alternative approach, resilience aids recovery from setbacks, and optimism promotes ongoing investment. Table 1 separates out the functions of these factors without assuming that they operate independently and also illustrates the fact that the same resource can result in poor judgment when ethical commitments are not directing its use.

Table 1. Distinct contributions of psychological capital to ethics internalization.

Resource	Obstacle addressed	Proposed internalization mechanism	Illustrative university practice	Condition distinguishing ethical use
Self-efficacy	Anticipated inability to handle disagreement	Competent enactment makes an endorsed obligation actionable	Explain a contested grade using documented criteria	Confidence remains open to evidence and correction
Hope	The first course of action is blocked	Alternative legitimate pathways sustain commitment to the goal	Seek moderation or an appeal route when informal resolution fails	The alternative preserves fairness and student dignity
Resilience	Criticism, conflict, or personal error disrupts engagement	Recovery enables acknowledgment, repair, and re-entry into practice	Correct a supervisory mistake and agree on follow-up	Recovery includes accountability and appropriate escalation
Optimism	Benefits are delayed or uncertain	Constructive expectations sustain effort toward improvement	Continue a transparent feedback process while reviewing its effects	Expectations change when evidence changes

Organizational support and the feasibility of ethical action

Perceived organizational support refers to employees' belief that their organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being. A recent systematic review synthesizes research on perceived organizational support in public and nonprofit organizations and identifies directions for further research [8]. In the present argument, the key question is whether teachers experience credible support when carrying out professional duties entails a cost.

In Pakistan, research on higher education has associated psychological capital and the perception of organizational support with innovative work behaviour [9]. Studies that include both primary and secondary teachers also examine authentic leadership, moral courage, and psychological capital, with moral courage serving as a mediator between the two [10]. Although these studies have identified relevant connections between resources, leadership, and professional action, they do not confirm the causal pathway proposed here. The theory suggests credible support can enable one to carry out difficult ethical actions and offer experiences

through which resources are developed.

It can be grasped by considering three distinctions. The first is that a general expression of appreciation is not the same as giving support when a conflict occurs. For example, a teacher who is opposing favouritism needs an impartial procedure and should be protected from retaliation. The second distinction is that supporting ethical reasoning is different from approving something on the grounds of loyalty. If a department gives rewards for agreeing but at the same time discourages justified dissent, it directs its resources towards conformity. The third distinction is that offering developmental support is different from handing over to individual teachers the responsibility for institutional failures. The actual choices available to people depend on their workload, the reporting procedures and their access to advice.

Organizational factors also influence the things that teachers are able to perceive and interpret. A philosophical analysis of online teaching in the primary and secondary sectors shows how concerns about privacy and proximity alter the range of resources available for practical ethical reasoning [11]. Although the situation is different from that in university teaching, it illustrates why ethical judgment depends on the arrangements

through which professionals interact with their students. Universities should therefore consider whether their advising systems, digital platforms, and methods of allocating students enable teachers to identify and handle ethically important information.

Proposition 4: If teachers encounter fair procedures, credible protection, useful assistance, and a consistent recognition of professionally justified action, then the organisation's support will increase the way in which psychological capital contributes to the internalisation of

ethics. Table 2 treats support as a condition experienced by teachers. Each arrangement links a resource mechanism to an observable institutional response. The indicators are meant to help professionals carry out reflection; they are not a validated measurement tool. The analysis points to a two-way process in which support allows ethical action to take place and successful enactment, in turn, increases teachers' confidence, their pathways, their ability to recover, and their constructive expectations.

Table 2. Organizational conditions connecting resources with ethical enactment.

Organizational condition	Resource mechanism enabled	Concrete institutional arrangement	Proximal sign of enacted commitment	Failure mechanism to examine
Accessible professional advice	Efficacy grounded in reasoned practice	Confidential consultation and rehearsal of difficult conversations	Teachers seek advice and explain decisions before conflict escalates	Advice is available only after a formal complaint
Legitimate alternative routes	Hope through feasible pathways	Independent moderation, appeals, and transparent escalation	A blocked concern moves through a documented alternative process	Every route returns to the person whose decision is questioned
Protected correction and repair	Resilience through accountable recovery	Proportionate error review and supported correction	Teachers acknowledge errors and complete agreed remedies	Disclosure produces indiscriminate punishment or concealment
Consistent follow-through	Optimism grounded in institutional experience	Timely responses with reasons and named responsibility	Teachers can identify completed responses to prior concerns	Consultation repeatedly produces no action or explanation
Recognition aligned with student interests	Ethical direction across all four resources	Evaluation credits fair supervision and responsible assessment	Staff can justify practice through professional obligations	Performance targets reward outcomes obtained through unfair means

Implications for teacher development

Universities should work on developing psychological capital in connection with significant professional situations. When an assessment is in dispute, teachers are required to justify the standard in question, give a response, identify other possible courses of action, and plan out corrective actions if their initial judgment proves to be wrong. In this way the four resources are combined with ethical reasoning and result in professional commitments that have a concrete focus.

A recent meta-analysis has offered evidence for the developability of psychological capital and has also examined the persistence of the effects of the interventions [12]. The study forms a basis for making investments in resource development and the present framework shows how such investments can be focused on ethics. Suitable activities include supervised case discussions, mentoring, rehearsal, and follow-up on decisions that teachers actually make.

It is just as essential to have adequate institutional support in connection with this method. Training

designed to encourage people to speak up should offer a practical means of raising concerns; similarly, training in resilience should provide opportunities for accountable repair. Development and governance should be carried out jointly. A department should be able to look at the options that the teachers had in a difficult situation, the resources that helped them to take action, and the organisation's response thereafter. Only in this way can assessment be focused on the conditions under which an official obligation becomes a sustained practice.

Conclusion

Psychological capital enables ethics to be internalised by allowing individuals to adhere to and maintain their high professional commitments. It is self-efficacy that prompts people to begin, hope ensures that legitimate alternatives remain possible, resilience facilitates recovery and repair, and optimism helps to keep the effort to improve going. Ethical identification directs these various resources, and organizational support enables their use in a responsible manner. The theory therefore connects individual development with the organisation's structure and demonstrates how consistent ethical behaviour can lead to professional standards becoming a permanent part of university teachers' practice.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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