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Psychological Safety in Higher Education: Theoretical Foundations and Practical Implications

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Abstract. With the continuous deepening of the "student-centered" concept in global higher education, psychological safety has gradually become a core theoretical keyword for understanding student subjectivity, academic participation and educational equity. Although psychological safety originates from organizational psychology and has been widely discussed in corporate and team environments, its theoretical integration in the field of higher education is still imperfect, and its systematic application and conceptual expansion are still limited. Drawing on the highly competitive and evaluation-driven context of higher education in the Asia-Pacific region, this paper systematically examines the theoretical applicability of psychological safety within this environment. This study clarifies the core concepts, internal dimensions, and underlying mechanisms of psychological safety, and proposes a comprehensive mechanism model encompassing three key dimensions: individual, relational, and structural. By comparing the practical cases of Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK), the relevance and applicability of the three-dimensional mechanism model in different cultural backgrounds are verified, providing empirical support and practical reference for the localization and promotion of psychological safety theory in higher education. The study also pointed out the limitations of current work, which are mainly reflected in the theoretical level and the lack of first-hand empirical data. Future research needs to verify the robustness and cross-cultural applicability of the model through qualitative interviews, classroom observations and questionnaires, and further reveal the impact of culture, policies and governance structures on the construction of psychological safety.

Keywords: Psychological safety, higher education, student engagement, individual-relational-structural model

1. Introduction

In the context of global higher education where the concept of "student-centeredness" is deepening, psychological safety is gradually becoming an important theoretical keyword for understanding student subjectivity, academic engagement, and educational equity [1]. Although the concept of psychological safety originates from organizational psychology and has been widely theorized in corporate and team contexts [2], its theoretical integration with higher education is still imperfect, and its systematic application and conceptual expansion are limited. The current situation of higher

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education in the Asia-Pacific region, characterized by high competitiveness and evaluation orientation, further highlights the structural dilemma of students in terms of psychological safety. Colleges and universities often emphasize standardized test scores, academic performance levels and a single definition of the path to "success", which can easily cause students to have "performance anxiety" and "shame of failure" in the classroom and on campus. For example, Tsinghua University once conducted a "learning engagement survey" for undergraduates, and the results showed that 34% of students self-reported that they "never spoke in class" [3]. This proportion is much higher than that of similar Western universities, reflecting that students generally have concerns and avoidance behaviors about speaking in class. Therefore, guided by the deepening of theory, this paper systematically sorts out the theoretical applicability of psychological safety in the field of higher education. And clarifying its core concept boundaries, internal dimensions, and mechanism logic has become an important path to fill the research gap in this field. This paper aims to promote the reconstruction of the context of psychological safety education through theoretical research, construct a conceptual framework suitable for higher education research and interpretation, and provide a solid theoretical foundation for future empirical research in higher education.

2. Key concepts and theoretical framework

2.1. Definition and evolution of psychological safety

The theoretical starting point of psychological safety can be traced back to the concept of “psychological presence” proposed by Kahn. Kahn emphasized that whether an individual can fully devote himself in a social or work situation depends on the psychological safety conditions he perceives in the environment, that is, whether the individual feels respected, supported and accepted in the process of role-playing. This state of “psychological presence” is the premise for individuals to actively express their true self and avoid emotional alienation and role detachment [4]. Kahn believes that psychological safety is a key psychological condition that affects individual engagement and disengagement, emphasizing the dynamic interactive relationship between individuals and the environment [4].

On this basis, Amy Edmondson introduced psychological safety to the group and organizational levels, defining it as the shared belief that team members can freely express their opinions and take risks without worrying about being humiliated or punished [5]. Edmondson's research focuses on how the interactive atmosphere at the group level affects innovation, learning and performance, highlighting the role of psychological safety as the core of the team learning environment [5].

In the field of higher education, with the diversification of student identities and the complexity of the learning environment, the dual dimensions of individual experience and group atmosphere of psychological safety are becoming increasingly important. Whether students feel inclusive and supported in the classroom directly affects their academic expression, innovative attempts and sense of belonging in learning. Therefore, understanding psychological safety need start from the perspective of the interweaving of individuals and groups, and conduct in-depth analysis combined with its specific practices and cultural constraints in the educational context.

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2.2. Theoretical framework

2.2.1. Social constructivism perspective

Social constructivism highlights that knowledge, identity, and meaning are fundamentally shaped through ongoing social interactions and discourse practices. Psychological safety, therefore, transcends being merely an internal emotional state; it is a dynamic and collective outcome co-constructed through multiple layers such as teacher-student relationships, established classroom interaction norms, prevailing cultural narratives, and broader institutional frameworks [6]. Within the context of higher education, critical factors including educators' communicative styles and responsiveness, the design and implementation of evaluation systems, as well as the surrounding peer culture, play pivotal roles in shaping whether students feel empowered to "dare to speak, can speak, and are willing to speak." Put differently, psychological safety functions as a socially mediated experience, reflecting students' ongoing assessments of the potential meanings, risks, and consequences associated with their expressions within specific educational settings. Consequently, effective research on psychological safety must move beyond focusing solely on individuals' internal cognitive and emotional processes, and instead incorporate structural analyses that examine the interplay of social relationships, power dynamics, and discursive spaces that frame and constrain student expression.

2.2.2. Culture-structure dualism

Giddens' structuration theory and Bourdieu's field theory provide deep social theoretical support for understanding psychological safety [7]. In Giddens' view, social structure is not a fixed framework external to the individual, but a "rule resource" that is constantly reproduced through practical behavior. Students' silence or expression in the classroom is not only an individual choice, but also a response and reconstruction of the structural environment. Similarly, the "habitus" and "field" emphasized by Bourdieu reveal how individuals form behavioral tendencies in existing power relations [7]. When students face highly evaluative orientation and cultural conflicts, their expression methods, willingness to participate, and psychological risk judgments are often deeply disciplined by social and cultural structures. This perspective helps to understand how psychological security is generated in the tension of "agency-structure": it not only reflects students' subjective initiative, but is also constrained by institutional logic and cultural capital distribution.

3. Theoretical transfer and reconstruction of psychological safety in higher education

3.1. The particularity of higher education

In the context of higher education, the generation of psychological security is deeply influenced by its unique structural and cultural factors. First, the long-standing unequal relationship of knowledge power between teachers and students has caused students to face identity tension and risks when expressing dissent or raising open questions. The concentration of teacher evaluation power and academic authority has made students generally worry about "saying the wrong thing" or "asking stupid questions", thus forming a self-censorship mechanism. Secondly, many university systems emphasize performance orientation, standardized evaluation and elite selection logic. This high-pressure competitive environment invisibly constitutes a "hidden danger", making students highly sensitive to failure or mistakes, seriously affecting their classroom participation and innovative expression. In addition, with the acceleration of the internationalization process, students from

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multicultural backgrounds often face identity dislocation or marginalization in terms of language expression, cultural etiquette and classroom interaction norms. This situation further exposes the insensitivity of the existing education mechanism to cultural differences and the insufficiency of the support system.

3.2. Theoretical reconstruction path

In response to the above challenges, the effective transfer of psychological safety theory to higher education requires systematic reconstruction in the three dimensions of cognition, emotion and system. At the cognitive level, emphasizing students' rights to information security and freedom of expression means that the classroom should become an exploratory space that allows uncertainty and accepts differentiated opinions. Teachers should intentionally mitigate the evaluative pressure embedded in classroom dynamics by adopting inquiry-based learning and fostering non-judgmental discussion environments. Such approaches create a space for diverse forms of student expression, encouraging them to ask questions and share uncertainties when engaging with complex knowledge. This, in turn, helps cultivate a positive sense of cognitive psychological safety. At the emotional level, the establishment of psychological safety depends on emotional acceptance and peer support mechanisms among students. Colleges and universities should encourage a non-competitive cooperative atmosphere among students, cultivate trust and emotional connections, and thus alleviate isolation and anxiety. At the institutional level, the institutional guarantee of psychological safety should include institutional response channels to students' voices, predictable feedback mechanisms, and a tolerant culture of failure and trial and error. For example, establish clear, fair, and transparent academic appeal channels and support services. This will not only help students incorporate their individual experiences into the cognitive scope of the education system, but also help higher education institutions establish a more inclusive and supportive teaching culture, thereby realizing the implementation of the "student-centered" education concept at the institutional level.

4. Construction of a three-dimensional mechanism model of psychological safety

In the higher education environment, whether students can safely express their opinions, raise questions, and admit mistakes without worrying about humiliation or negative evaluation is the core manifestation of psychological safety. Compared with the equal team relationship in organizational management, the structural factors such as power asymmetry between teachers and students, performance-oriented evaluation system, and identity tension in a multicultural background are common in university classrooms, which pose challenges to students' freedom of expression and psychological safety.

In order to understand its generation mechanism more systematically, this paper proposes a "three-dimensional mechanism model of psychological safety" based on theoretical analysis: (1) Individual mediation mechanism emphasizes students’ internal psychological processes, including their awareness and assessment of the risks involved in expressing opinions, their self-efficacy or belief in their own abilities, and their capacity for emotion regulation. These cognitive and emotional capabilities form the essential foundation for establishing a sense of psychological safety, enabling students to engage confidently without excessive fear of negative consequences. (2) Relationship mechanism highlights the importance of interpersonal dynamics within the learning environment. Key factors include teacher responsiveness—how instructors acknowledge, validate, and support student contributions—peer support networks that foster mutual trust and acceptance among classmates, and the overall quality of teaching interactions. Together, these relational

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elements shape whether students feel genuinely respected, valued, and emotionally secure in academic settings. (3) Structural mechanism addresses the broader institutional and cultural context that frames psychological safety. This involves whether university policies, administrative systems, and campus culture actively create spaces for open, non-judgmental dialogue (e.g., discussion forums free from punitive evaluation), implement inclusive feedback and grievance channels, and foster a culture tolerant of mistakes and learning through trial and error. Such structural supports are critical for sustaining an environment where students feel safe to express themselves and take intellectual risks.

5. Comparative case analysis of psychological safety practices in higher education

5.1. International model: the multidimensional approach to psychological safety at MIT

In terms of individual mechanisms, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) provides a variety of psychological counseling, emotion management, and stress adjustment services through the Student Support Services (S3) and the Health Center (MIT Health) [8]. In terms of relationship mechanisms, MIT has a "Teaching + Learning Lab" that provides teachers with professional development programs such as "inclusive teaching" workshops and empathy communication training to strengthen the interactive trust and non-evaluative feedback mechanism between teachers and students [9]. At the same time, the school also advocates promoting mutual assistance and cooperation among academic communities to reduce students' loneliness and expression anxiety. At the structural mechanism level, MIT institutionalizes the positive construction of "error culture", such as the campus activity "Fail! Inspiring Resilience" to encourage the sharing and reflection of failures across the school [10], supplemented by a fair and transparent academic appeal mechanism and a flexible and inclusive support system to build a learning atmosphere that encourages exploration and tolerates errors. MIT's practice shows that the construction of psychological safety requires multi-dimensional coordination, which not only pays attention to the psychological state of individual students, but also requires improving the support capabilities of educators and inclusive design at the institutional level.

5.2. Local case study: cultural adaptation and institutional exploration at the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK)

Compared to MIT’s model, which places greater emphasis on individual resilience and the open normalization of failure, the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) has developed a culturally adaptive approach to building psychological safety, rooted in local cultural norms and institutional contexts.

From the perspective of individual mediation mechanisms, CUHK has established a complete student psychological counseling service and learning support system, including a psychological counseling center, academic counseling, and stress management workshops, to help students improve their self-awareness and emotional regulation abilities, and enhance their psychological resilience when facing academic challenges [11]. These services not only provide students with a platform for emotional acceptance, but also effectively reduce students' anxiety caused by fear of failure or being evaluated, and promote their active expression in class, courage to admit mistakes, and form a positive sense of cognitive safety. From the perspective of relationship mechanisms, CUHK actively promotes teacher-student interaction and the construction of peer support networks. For example, many course designs incorporate group cooperation and open discussions, advocate

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non-judgmental feedback, and reduce the social pressure of "fear of expression". From a structural perspective, the university continually enhances its evaluation system via the Academic Affairs Office by promoting formative assessments and inclusive policies, fostering a culture of tolerance that aims to reduce students' fear of punishment for mistakes. This is consistent with the concept of institutional trust and tolerance culture in the "structural mechanism" [11]. In addition, the school's Student Affairs Office has also performed outstandingly in promoting multicultural integration and supporting international students, reflecting the important role of psychological safety in cross-cultural adaptation [11].

In summary, the multi-dimensional practice of the Chinese University of Hong Kong has effectively reflected the three-dimensional mechanism model of psychological safety proposed in this paper, and verified the core role of individual, relationship and structural paths in the construction of psychological safety in higher education. At the same time, this case also reflects the cultural adaptability of the model proposed by the research institute, which can provide valuable experience and practical support for the localization of higher education psychological safety theory in the Asia-Pacific region. In the future, the model can be further combined with the diverse practices of more universities to deepen the theoretical improvement and application promotion of the model.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study systematically explores the theoretical transformation, structural mechanism and contextual applicability of psychological safety in higher education contexts. Drawing on psychological and sociological theories, this paper dissects psychological safety in university contexts and re-examines the development of psychological safety in colleges and universities. This study provides a detailed three-dimensional mechanism model with individual, relational and structural dimensions to understand how psychological safety is generated, maintained or inhibited in higher education contexts. Comparative case studies from MIT and the Chinese University of Hong Kong further validate the cross-cultural relevance and practical applicability of the model.

However, this study also has some limitations. First, it mainly stays at the conceptual and theoretical level. Although some illustrative cases are proposed, they are based on secondary data rather than original field surveys, which may limit the depth and contextual accuracy of the research results. Second, although the proposed three-dimensional model is theoretically solid, it needs to be empirically verified in different education systems, disciplines and student groups. Future research needs to conduct empirical studies using qualitative interviews, classroom observations or survey-based evaluations to test the robustness and transferability of the three-dimensional model. Additionally, comparative studies across different cultural or policy contexts could further illuminate how local values, governance structures, and social expectations influence the construction of psychological safety in higher education.

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