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Academic PsyCap as a Predictor of Perceived Stress in Ecuadorian High School Adolescents

Abstract

Objective: This study examines whether academic psychological capital (PsyCap), composed of self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism, significantly predicts perceived stress and coping with stress in Ecuadorian high school adolescents. Method: A quantitative, cross-sectional, non-experimental study was conducted. A sample of 371 adolescents (57% female, 43% male, mean age = 13.41) completed the PsyCap Questionnaire (PCQ-12) and the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-13). Data were analyzed using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) with maximum likelihood estimation. Results: Self-efficacy positively predicted both perceived stress ($\beta = 0.369$, $p = 0.014$) and coping with stress ($\beta = 0.297$, $p = 0.039$), suggesting that while students with high self-efficacy may experience greater stress due to academic demands, they also develop better coping strategies. Resilience significantly predicted coping with stress ($\beta = 0.415$, $p = 0.007$), reinforcing its protective role. However, hope and optimism were not significant predictors of either perceived stress or coping. Conclusions: PsyCap is a crucial psychological resource for managing academic stress. Self-efficacy and resilience play key roles in stress regulation, emphasizing the need for educational interventions that strengthen these psychological capacities to improve students' well-being and academic performance.

Keywords: PsyCap, stress, adolescents

Academic PsyCap as a Predictor of Perceived Stress in Ecuadorian High School Adolescents

Introduction

Academic psychological capital (PsyCap), which includes self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism, has been proposed as a key theoretical model for understanding the psychological resources that influence students' academic well-being and performance (King & Caleon, 2021). These components allow individuals to effectively cope with the difficulties that arise in their educational environment, improving their ability to adapt (López-Guerra et al., 2023; Martínez et al., 2021). In Ecuador, the results of the international PISA tests show a stagnation in academic performance, especially in the areas of reading, mathematics and science, which reflects a constant challenge in the education system (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2024).

In the Ecuadorian context, the study of these factors is limited, despite the growing need to understand how PsyCap can influence stress coping and academic performance (Carmona-Halty et al., 2018). Perceived stress originates when individuals perceive that the challenges of the environment exceed their personal resources (Lazarus, 1966). This study seeks to explore how academic PsyCap predicts perceived stress in high school adolescents, in order to provide evidence for future studies and programs that promote students' emotional and academic well-being.

International studies have shown the importance of PsyCap in educational contexts. In China, psychological distress is negatively related to academic PsyCap and positively related to perceived stress. Mediation analyses indicated that PsyCap partially mediated the relationship between perceived stress and psychological distress (Sun et al., 2022). In the UK, self-compassion, academic PsyCap, and social support were found to mediate the relationship between academic stress and psychological well-being (Poots & Cassidy, 2020). In Chile, a positive and significant relationship was found between academic PsyCap and

coping with academic stress. In addition, differences were identified between students from public and private universities and students with aboriginal and non-aboriginal heritage (Ramírez-Pérez, 2022).

In Ecuador, no recent studies were found that consider any of the study variables.

For all the above, the objective of this study is to examine whether there is a significant prediction of academic PsyCap (composed of: self-efficacy, hope, resilience and optimism) on perceived stress in Ecuadorian high school adolescents. From this approach, it is intended to generate relevant information for the implementation of educational strategies that promote the development of these psychological capacities and, therefore, improve the well-being and academic performance of students, in this way, prepare them to face demanding scenarios such as higher studies or work.

Method

Design

The study design is quantitative, non-experimental, with a cross-sectional explanatory scope whose objective was to explore a functional influence through the prediction of a criterion variable based on four predictors (Ato et al., 2013; Coolican, 2024)

Participants

Table 1 presents sociodemographic data relevant to our study. First, the mean age of the participants is shown, which is 13.41 years, with a standard deviation of 1.10, indicating that most of the participants are in a narrow age range around this average value. Regarding the distribution by sex, it is observed that 57% of the participants are women, while 43% are men. This suggests a fairly equal representation of gender in the sample, which is important to ensure adequate diversity when analyzing the results of the study.

Table 1

Sociodemographic data

Variable	f	%
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Age (Mean = 13.41; Desv. Est. = 1.10)		
Age		
10	6	2%
11	59	16%
12	135	36%
13	122	33%
14	37	10%
15	7	2%
16	5	1%
Sex		
Female	210	57
Male	161	43

Instruments

PsyCap Questionnaire in the Academic Field (PCQ-12): It was created by Luthans et al. (2007), adapted to Spanish by Martínez et al. (2021) and adapted to the Ecuadorian context in high school students by López-Guerra et al. (2023). It consists of 12 items divided into 4 dimensions, self-efficacy, hope, resilience and optimism, they are 7-point Likert scale (Strongly disagree = 0, Partially disagree = 1, Somewhat disagree = 2, Neither agree nor disagree = 3, Somewhat agree = 4, Partially agree = 5, Completely agree = 6) that are interpreted on a continuum in which higher scores mean that the person evaluated has a higher level of PsyCap academician. The respecified second-order 4-factor model showed the best fit to the data (CFI = .977, TLI = .970 NFI = .974, IFI = .980, AIC= 443,833, RMSEA = .064 [058, .070]), and this model remained invariant between sex, age, and public and private institutions. Internal consistency was adequate, with Alpha and Omega coefficients for the total scale ($\alpha = .941$, $\omega = .942$) and its four factors: self-efficacy ($\alpha = .869$, $\omega = .872$), hope ($\alpha = .888$, $\omega = .889$), resilience ($\alpha = .774$, $\omega = .785$) and optimism ($\alpha = .840$, $\omega = .840$). Finally, the PCQ-12 and its dimensions were correlated with academic engagement and satisfaction.

Cohen Perceived Stress Scale: It was created by Cohen et al. (1983) adapted to Spanish by Remor & Carrobles (2001), and adapted to the Ecuadorian context in high school students by Larzabal-Fernandez & Ramos-Noboa (2019). It consists of 13 items divided into 2 dimensions, perception of stress and coping with stress, they are on a 5-point

Likert scale (Never = 0; Almost never = 1; Occasionally = 2; Often = 3; Very often = 5), it is necessary to reverse the score of items 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 and 13. The exploratory factor analysis suggests a two-factor structure that explains 41.24% of the variance, these results are similar in other Ibero-American countries. Likewise, it obtains $\alpha = 0.805$ and $\alpha = 0.811$ indicating adequate reliability.

Data Collection

The information necessary for this research was obtained through online surveys, using digital platforms that facilitated access and guaranteed the participation of a large and diverse sample. The instructions were clear and precise, to simplify the response process for participants and ensure the quality of the data collected.

Data Analysis

To evaluate the relationship between academic psychological capital (PsyCap) and perceived stress in Ecuadorian high school adolescents, a structural equation model (SEM) was used (Hair et al., 2019). This approach allowed us to examine the relationships between the dimensions of PsyCap (self-efficacy, hope, resilience and optimism) with the perception of stress and coping with stressors. The data were analyzed using the statistical software R (R Core Team, 2022), applying estimates using the maximum likelihood method. The normality of the variables was evaluated through the values of asymmetry and kurtosis, which were found within the acceptable range (± 2), justifying the use of parametric statistics. To determine the fit of the model, several fit indices were calculated: the comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), the square-mean approximation error (RMSEA) and the root of the standardized square residual (SRMR). A CFI and TLI greater than 0.90, along with an RMSEA and SRMR less than 0.08, indicate a good fit for the model. In addition, regression analyses were performed within the SEM model to identify significant predictors of coping and perceived stress. Those coefficients with p values less than 0.05 were considered significant.

Ethical aspects

Since the study addresses sensitive topics such as perceived stress, precautions were taken to avoid any psychological risk to the participants. In case participation in the study generated any discomfort, information was offered on accessing appropriate professional support. To protect the privacy and anonymity of the participants, the following procedures were implemented: Informed consent: Before starting the survey, participants received a detailed explanation about the objectives, procedures, benefits, and potential risks of the study and asked for their explicit consent to participate voluntarily; Data anonymization: The responses collected did not include personally identifiable information; Restricted access: The data was stored on a secure, password-protected platform, which was only accessible to the researchers responsible for the study. Ethical compliance: The ethical principles of scientific research were followed, respecting the rights of the participants and guaranteeing their withdrawal from the study at any time if they requested it, following Helsinki Declaration suggestions (World Medical Association [WMA], 2024).

Results

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the study variables, the values of skewness and kurtosis are within the normal range (± 2), which justifies the use of parametric statistics for inferential analyses (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2

Descriptive analysis of the study variables

Variables	Min	Max	M	SD	g1	g2
PsyCap	17	72	46.53	11.06	0.06	-0.26
Efficacy	2	18	11.42	3.45	-0.17	-0.29
Hope	2	24	15.62	4.42	-0.16	-0.14
Resilience	0	18	11.33	3.22	-0.29	0.41
Optimism	0	12	8.16	2.33	-0.44	0.33
Perception of stress	4	23	13.54	4.31	0.21	-0.32
Coping with stressors	7	28	17.04	4.29	0.24	-0.13
Subjective discomfort	12	45	27.96	7.40	0.10	-0.57

Note: g1: Skewness; g2: Kurtosis

Table 3 shows the correlation coefficients between the main variables of the study. It was observed that the perception of stress has significant negative correlations with academic PsyCap in general ($r = -0.11$, $p < 0.05$) and with its individual dimensions such as hope ($r = -0.12$, $p < 0.05$), resilience ($r = -0.15$, $p < 0.01$) and optimism ($r = -0.12$, $p < 0.05$). This indicates that higher levels of PsyCap are associated with a lower perception of stress.

On the other hand, coping with stressors showed significant positive correlations with academic PsyCap ($r = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$) and with its dimensions: hope ($r = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$), resilience ($r = 0.33$, $p < 0.01$) and optimism ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that these components of PsyCap are associated with more effective stress coping strategies.

Table 3

Correlation between study variables

Variables	PsyCap	Efficacy	Hope	Resilience	Optimism
Perception of stress	-0.11* [-0.21; -0.01]	-0.01 [-0.11; 0.09]	0.11* [-0.21; -0.01]	-0.12* [-0.22; -0.02]	-0.15** [-0.25; -0.05]
Coping with stressors	0.40** [0.31; 0.48]	0.34** [0.24; 0.42]	0.33** [0.24; 0.42]	0.35** [0.26; 0.44]	0.27** [0.17; 0.36]

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Table 4 presents the fit indices of the structural equation model. It is observed that the model shows an adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 543.470$, $df = 260$, $p < 0.001$). Although the chi-square test is significant, which could indicate a discrepancy between the model and the data, this result should be interpreted with caution due to the sensitivity of the statistic to the sample size. The incremental fit indices show satisfactory values: the CFI (0.947) and TLI (0.939) exceed the threshold of 0.90, indicating that the model adequately explains the variance of the data. On the other hand, the RMSEA (0.054, 90% CI [0.048; 0.061]) is within the acceptable range (< 0.08), which suggests a moderately low approximation error. Finally, the SRMR (0.059) is also within the recommended values, which reinforces the suitability of the model.

Table 4

Structural equation model fit indices

χ^2	gl	p	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
543.470	260	0.000	0.947	0.939	0.054 [0.048; 0.061]	0.059

Table 5 presents the regression coefficients obtained from the structural equation model, allowing the identification of significant predictors of coping with stress and perceived stress.

It was observed that self-efficacy (AFE) positively predicts stress perception (PES) with a significant regression coefficient ($\beta = 0.369$, $p = 0.014$), indicating that adolescents with higher self-efficacy may experience higher levels of perceived stress, possibly due to high self-imposed academic demand. In contrast, hope (ESP), resilience (RES), and optimism (OPT) were not significant predictors of perceived stress ($p > 0.05$), suggesting that these factors do not have a direct influence on the perception of stress in the sample studied.

Regarding coping with stressors (AFE), two significant predictors were identified. Self-efficacy showed a positive relationship with coping ($\beta = 0.297$, $p = 0.039$), indicating that students with higher self-efficacy tend to use more effective strategies to manage stress. Similarly, resilience was a significant predictor of coping ($\beta = 0.415$, $p = 0.007$), reinforcing the idea that resilience in the face of adversity is a key resource for stress regulation. In contrast, hope (ESP) and optimism (OPT) did not present significant associations with coping ($p > 0.05$), indicating that their impact on stress regulation could be indirect or depend on other mediating variables.

Table 5*Regressions of the structural equation model*

Regressions	β	IS	p
AEF $\rightarrow$ PES	0.369	0.139	0.014

ESP → PES	- 0.162	0.223	0.444
RES → PES	- 0.039	0.256	0.840
OPT → PES	- 0.329	0.182	0.084
AEF → AFE	0.297	0.102	0.039
ESP → AFE	- 0.022	0.160	0.912
RES → AFE	0.415	0.157	0.007
OPT → AFE	- 0.161	0.106	0.263

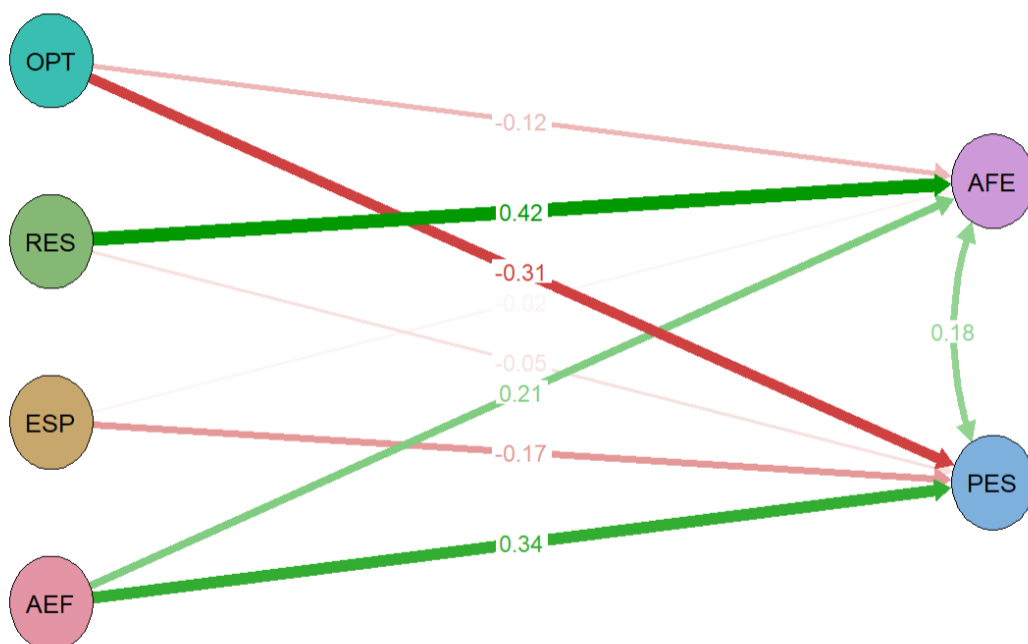
Note: AEF: Self-efficacy; ESP: Hope; RES: Resilience; OPT: Optimism; PES: Stress perception; AFE:

Coping with stressors

Figure 1 represents the proposed structural equation model, where the relationships between the PsyCap and its dimensions with perceived stress and coping with stressors are visualized.

Figure 1

Structural equation model



Note: AEF: Self-efficacy; ESP: Hope; RES: Resilience; OPT: Optimism; PES: Stress perception; AFE:

Coping with stressors

Discussion:

The findings of this study provide evidence on the influence of PsyCap on the perception and coping of stress in Ecuadorian high school adolescents. Self-efficacy and

20 resilience were found to be significant predictors of coping, while the PsyCap overall showed a less clear relationship with stress perception.

The finding that self-efficacy positively predicts stress perception is consistent with previous studies that have identified a relationship between self-efficacy and academic self-demand (Feldman & Kubota, 2015; Solberg et al., 1993). However, it contrasts with studies in China and the US that have reported an inverse relationship between self-efficacy and academic stress (Klassen & Usher, 2010; Pajares & Schunk, 2001; Putwain, 2019), suggesting that cultural context could influence the interpretation of self-efficacy as a protective or stressor.

Resilience, as a significant predictor of coping, is consistent with research in Chile and Spain (Ramírez-Pérez, 2020; Oriol et al., 2017; Niño Tezen et al., 2024), which have shown that students with greater resilience use more effective coping strategies in the face of challenging academic situations.

On the other hand, the lack of significant influence between hope and coping differs from studies in the UK, US, and Australia (Poots & Cassidy, 2020; Snyder et al., 2002; Marques et al., 2017), where hope has been identified as a key mediator between academic stress and emotional well-being. This discrepancy could be due to methodological or cultural differences in the measurement and conceptualization of hope.

The academic psychological capital (PsyCap) model is based on the positive psychological capital theory of Luthans et al. (2007), which proposes that self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism are key psychological resources that influence individuals' performance and well-being. In the educational context, these factors can modulate how students cope with academic challenges and perceive stress.

Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1997), is the belief in one's ability to achieve specific goals, which can increase persistence in the face of difficulties. Studies such as

those by Zajacova et al. (2005) have shown that self-efficacy significantly impacts motivation and academic success.

Resilience has been defined by Masten (2001) as the ability to recover from adverse experiences, facilitating adaptation in challenging environments. Research in educational settings (Martin & Marsh, 2009; Morales, 2008) have found that students with greater resilience tend to demonstrate better emotional regulation and greater problem-solving skills.

Hope and optimism have been studied as central factors in positive psychology. Snyder et al. (2002) conceptualizes hope as a combination of agency and planning to achieve goals, which can strengthen academic engagement. Seligman (2011) has shown that optimism is related to greater satisfaction and well-being in educational contexts.

The academic psychological capital (PsyCap) model is based on the positive psychological capital theory of Luthans et al. (2007), which proposes that self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism are key psychological resources that influence individuals' performance and well-being. In the educational context, these factors can modulate how students cope with academic challenges and perceive stress.

6 These elements of PsyCap can differentially influence the perception and coping with stress. While self-efficacy and resilience appear to play a protective role in stress regulation, hope and optimism can act as indirect moderators, promoting positive attitudes in the face of academic challenges.

Limitations and recommendations

30 The cross-cutting nature of the design prevents establishing causal relationships. Longitudinal studies are recommended to assess how the relationship between PsyCap and stress evolves over time. In addition, future research could include mediating variables such as social support or emotional regulation to better understand these mechanisms.

Conclusions

28 This study provides evidence that self-efficacy and resilience are key elements in coping
8 with academic stress in Ecuadorian adolescents. However, the relationship between PsyCap
and perceived stress was not as clear as expected. It is recommended to develop
34 intervention programs focused on strengthening these psychological resources to improve
the mental health and academic performance of students.

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