



# Practical Course Experience Promotes the Improvement of Graduate Students' Motivation for Public Service: The Chain Mediated Effect of Positive Psychological Capital and Social Emotional Ability

Shuangshuang Sun<sup>1</sup>, Jinshan He<sup>2</sup>, Kefa Zhao<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Graduate Work Department and Graduate School, Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing 100098, China

<sup>2</sup> School of Sociology and Psychology, Central University of Finance and Economics, Beijing 100098, China

DOI: 10.32629/jher.v5i4.2657

**Abstract:** Objective: To investigate the impact of practical course experience (PCE) on graduate students' motivation for public service (PSM), as well as the mediating role of positive psychological capital (PPC) and social emotional ability (SEA). Method: A questionnaire survey was conducted on 266 graduate students from a university in Beijing using the Delaware Social Emotional Ability Scale, Positive Psychological Capital Questionnaire, and Public Service Motivation Scale. Result: (1) After controlling for variables such as age and student cadre experience, the predictive effect of PCE on PSM was significant. (2) PCE can influence PSM through the individual mediation of PPC and the chain mediation of PPC and PCE. Conclusion: PPC and SEA play a chain mediated role between practical course experience and graduate public service motivation. This conclusion contributes to providing empirical support for promoting high-quality development of graduate education from the perspective of self-determination theory.

**Keywords:** practical course experience, positive psychological capital, social emotional ability, public service motivation, self-determination theory

## 1. Introduction

Graduate education plays an important role in cultivating innovative talents, improving innovation capabilities, serving economic and social development, and promoting the modernization of the national governance system and governance capacity. It is an important support for accelerating the construction of a high-quality education system and an innovative country. However, standing at a new starting point of education that is about to enter the workforce, the employment outlook of graduate students is undergoing complex and profound changes due to the impact of diverse information during the career and employment period [1]. Research has shown that the overall employment concept of Chinese graduates is characterized by a preference for personal and economic value, but a lack of emphasis on social value [2]. In addition, the employment space for master's degree students is also affected by the talent drain from economically developed regions, and there is still significant room for improvement in the proportion of employment going to underdeveloped areas in the central and western regions [3]. The graduate student group is an important driving force for innovation and development in China, and its role in assisting and driving the development of the central and western regions cannot be ignored. Based on this, how to guide the graduate student group to participate in the tide of social development and achieve both personal and social value is an important issue that needs to be explored in graduate education.

Current research has conducted multiple empirical studies from the perspective of public management, targeting youth, college students, and civil servants [4-6], and found that public service motivation is an important driving variable for individuals to participate in volunteer service or public management. Therefore, this study attempts to explore the formation mechanism and path of public service motivation among graduate students from the perspective of the formation of public service motivation, providing specific empirical support for promoting the reform of graduate practical education.

The motivation for public service refers to the public spirit that individuals possess in a specific cultural environment and management system, reflected in their inherent beliefs and potential consciousness of serving, dedicating, and sacrificing for public affairs [7]. Researchers have explored the formation factors of public service motivation from the perspective of influencing factors, such as personal characteristics, job characteristics, organizational environment, social environment, etc. [8]. The process theory of public service motivation also suggests that pre factors such as education, socialization, and life experience can also affect external behavioral performance [9]. Considering that graduate education is still primarily focused on school education, this study proposes hypothesis 1: Graduate practical course experience positively predicts public service motivation.

As a highly socialized type of motivation, the formation process of public service motivation is also one of the issues that researchers often pay attention to. The self-determination theory suggests that people's motivations for action may include both external motivations for material pursuits and internal motivations for seeking meaning. Due to the fundamental "dedication" attribute of public service motivation, we have reason to infer that internal motivation is the main driving factor of public service. The organic integration theory of self-determination holds that the need for autonomy is an important factor in triggering the internalization of external motivation, and the abundance of positive psychological capital will unconsciously guide them to follow higher-level life meanings; On the conscious level, it mainly relies on emotional identification with social services, that is, social emotional abilities. Therefore, we propose hypothesis 2: Positive psychological capital and social emotional ability play a chain mediating role in the predictive path of practical course experience on public service motivation. The research path model is as follows:

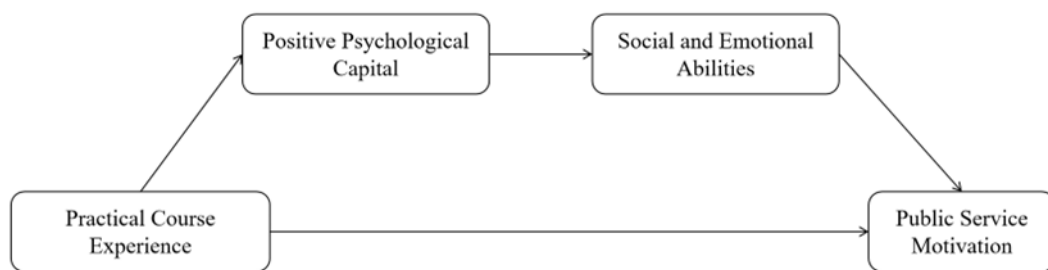


Figure 1. Chain mediation path model of practical course experience and public service motivation

## 2. Research Methods

### 2.1 Research Participants

The study used a random sampling survey method, with graduate students from a university in Beijing as the research subjects. Online survey questionnaires were distributed through administrative channels, and a total of 266 questionnaires were collected. 37 questionnaires that were not answered seriously (such as short response time or regular response) were excluded, and 229 valid questionnaires were retained, with an effective rate of 86.1%. This study has been approved by the Academic Committee of the School of Sociology and Psychology at Central University of Finance and Economics. It takes about 10 minutes to complete all questionnaire questions.

### 2.2 Research Tools

#### 2.2.1 Demographic Information

We use a self-designed demographic basic information survey form, which includes information such as gender, age, grade level, subject category, years of student leadership, and social practice experience.

#### 2.2.2 Social and Emotional Abilities

The Chinese version of the Delaware Social and Emotional Competence Scale (DSECS) was used to measure graduate students' social and emotional competence [10]. The scale consists of 12 items and includes four dimensions: responsible decision-making, social awareness, peer relationships, and self-management. The Likert 4-point scoring method was used, with "1" representing "not at all like me" and "4" representing "very much like me". In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the scale was 0.902, and the fitting index of confirmatory factor analysis was  $c^2=93.761$ ,  $d_f=54$ , CFI =0.955, TLI =0.945, RMSEA =0.057, The scale has good structural validity.

#### 2.2.3 Positive Psychological Capital

Adopting the Positive Psychological Capital Questionnaire developed by scholar Zhang to measure the psychological resources of graduate students[11]. The questionnaire consists of 26 questions, including four dimensions: self-efficacy, psychological resilience, hope, and optimism. The questionnaire uses a Likert 7-point scoring method, with "1" to "7" indicating "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the scale was 0.933, and the fitting index of confirmatory factor analysis was  $c^2=654.911$ ,  $d_f=293$ , CFI =0.860, TLI =0.845, RMSEA =0.073, The construct validity of the scale is acceptable.

#### 2.2.4 Motivation for Public Service

Adopting the Public Service Motivation Scale revised by Yang[12]. This scale consists of 6 dimensions and 18 questions, covering topics such as the attractiveness of policy-making, commitment to the public interest, empathy, self sacrifice, social recognition and reputation, and moral persistence. This scale adopts a Likert 5-point scoring system, where "1" represents "strongly disagree" and "5" represents "strongly agree". In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of the scale was 0.942, and the fitting

index of confirmatory factor analysis was  $c^2=242.669$ ,  $d_f = 127$ , CFI =0.923, TLI =0.907, RMSEA =0.063, The scale has good structural validity.

### 2.3 Data Processing

This study conducted data analysis using SPSS 27.0 and Mplus8.0 software. Firstly, SPSS is used for data cleaning and reverse scoring, followed by descriptive statistics, reliability and validity tests, and common method bias tests. Mplus is used for confirmatory factor analysis to test the fitting effect of the tool; Finally, the SPSS PROCESS macro program was used for hierarchical regression to validate the hypothesis model of this study.

## 3. Research Results

### 3.1 Common method deviation test

Due to the fact that the research data are all self-reported by participants, there may be some common methodological bias issues. This study used Harman single factor test for exploratory factor analysis. The unrotated exploratory factor analysis results extracted 10 eigenvalues greater than 1. The variance explained by the first factor was 19.71%, which is below the critical threshold of 40%. Therefore, there is no significant common method bias in this study.

### 3.2 Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis

The descriptive data results are shown in Table 1. Among them, gender is not correlated with other variables, and age is only related to practical course experience and positive psychological capital; There is a correlation between the length of service and subjective economic status of student cadres and the variables examined in this study. Therefore, in the subsequent regression analysis process, age, years of student leadership, and subjective economic status will be included as control variables. In this study, there was a significant correlation between practical course experience, social emotional ability, positive psychological capital, and public service motivation, which provides preliminary support for regression analysis.

Table 1. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Correlation of Variables (N=229)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	1.73	0.44	1							
2. Age	23.88	1.21	-0.13	1						
3. SCY	2.96	3.02	-0.00	-0.07	1					
4. SES	4.76	1.66	0.04	-0.01	0.06	1				
5.PCE	2.84	1.99	-0.04	-0.17*	0.34***	0.03	1			
6.SEA	41.44	5.05	-0.05	0.01	0.18**	0.20**	0.16*	1		
7.PPC	131.91	19.92	0.04	0.15*	0.25**	0.24***	0.21**	0.60***	1	
8.PSM	73.41	9.02	-0.08	0.05	0.19**	0.18**	0.18**	0.46***	0.56***	1

Note 1: SCY means Student cadre years, SES means Subjective economic status, PCE means practical course experience, SEA means social and emotional abilities, PPC means positive psychological capital, PSM means public service motivation.

Note 2: \* p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\* p<0.001, the same applies below.

### 3.3 Statistical testing

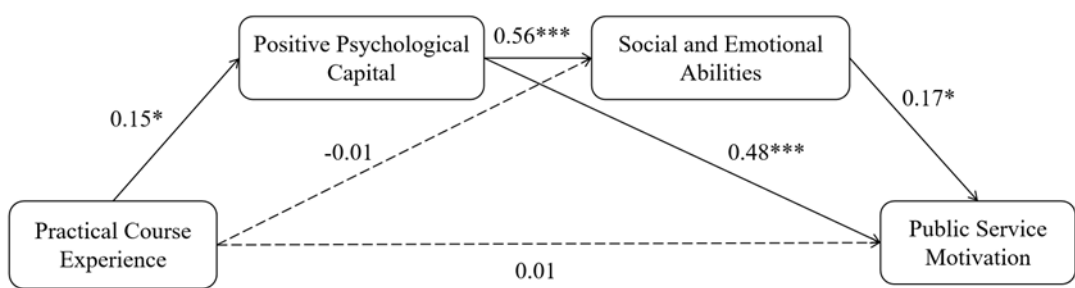
Main effect test. The relationship between practical course experience and public service motivation was tested using Mplus8.0. The regression model fitting results showed that the standardized regression coefficient of the model was 0.164, the 90% confidence interval was 0.048-0.071, the p-value was 0.017<0.05, and the main effect reached a significant level, CFI=0.924, TLI=0.910, RMSEA=0.06, This indicates that the model fits well and hypothesis 1 is validated.

Mediation effect test. The results of the chain mediation regression indicate that after controlling for age, years of student leadership, and subjective economic status, practical course experience can significantly predict graduate students' motivation for public service ( $b=0.27$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and the regression equation is significant ( $R^2 =0.19$ ,  $F =10.62$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). After adding mediator variables, the study found that positive psychological capital ( $R^2 =0.34$ ,  $F =19.01$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) can significantly predict social emotional ability. The direct effect of practical course experience on social emotional ability is not significant, while the indirect effect of positive psychological capital is significant; After adding the chain mediation variable, the direct effect of practical course experience on public service motivation is not limited, but the indirect effect of positive psychological capital and social emotional ability is significant, indicating that the chain mediation model in hypothesis 2 holds true and is a complete chain mediation effect. The regression model is shown in Table 2 and Figure 2.

**Table 2. Chain mediation regression analysis**

regression equation		Overall fitting index			Significance of regression coefficient	
predicted variable	Predictive variables	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>F</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
PPC	PCE	0.44	0.19	10.63***	0.15	2.15*
	Age				0.17	2.75**
	SCY				0.27	3.94***
	SES				0.2	3.20**
SEA	PCE	0.58	0.34	19.01***	-0.01	-0.21
	PPC				0.56	9.16***
	Age				-0.06	-1.15
	SCY				0.03	0.46
PSM	SES	0.6	0.36	18.02***	0.08	1.48
	PCE				0.01	0.19
	PPC				0.48	6.88***
	SEA				0.17	2.51*
	Age				-0.03	-0.66
	SCY				0.01	0.05
	SES				0.03	0.51

Note: The regression coefficients have been standardized.



**Figure 2. Chain mediation effect of positive psychological capital and social emotional ability**

The results of the mediation effect analysis showed that the total effect of the model was 0.45, and the direct effect was 0.05 ( $t=0.19$ ,  $p=0.85$ ,  $LLCI=-0.47$ ,  $ULCI=0.57$ ), Not reaching a significant level; The indirect effect is 0.40 ( $LLCI=0.06$ ,  $ULCI=0.75$ ), of which the indirect effect of positive psychological capital is 0.34 ( $LLCI=0.08$ ,  $ULCI=0.65$ ), accounting for 86% of the total indirect effect. The indirect effects of each path are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3. Proportion of mediation effects in each pathway**

	Indirect effect value	Boot SE	95% CI	Relative intermediary effect
Total indirect effects	0.4	0.17	[0.06, 0.75]	88.89%
PCE→PPC→PSM	0.34	0.14	[0.08, 0.65]	75.56%
PCE→SEA→PSM	-0.01	0.05	[-0.12, 0.08]	-2.22%
PCE→PPC→SEA→PSM	0.07	0.04	[0.01, 0.16]	15.56%

## 4. Discussion

This study explores the role of practical curriculum experience in shaping graduate students' motivation for public service from the perspective of self-determination theory, and examines the individual and chain mediating effects of PPC and SEA. The results showed that PCE can positively predict graduate students' PSM which is consistent with similar previous studies, indicating that past practical experience can enable individuals to form proactive participation motivation.

From the perspective of self-determination theory, past practical experiences are highly likely to bring about comprehensive improvements in individuals' abilities, including both honor incentives and material rewards. This will

greatly enhance the PPC of the graduate student community and create a state of inner abundance. There is an ancient Chinese saying that goes, 'If you are poor, you will be good to yourself; if you are successful, you will be good to the world.' This expresses that when an individual's value is realized, they may be more inclined to pursue social value, and their identification and empathy with society will become deeper, thereby enhancing their social emotional ability and ultimately generating an intrinsic motivation to serve the public.

This study also found that the direct effect of PCE was no longer significant after adding a chain mediator variable, indicating that PCE does not directly affect the formation of PSM, but needs to be internalized as PPC and SEA. The formation of PSM is a complex and difficult process. If individuals can maintain positive psychological characteristics, then this group of graduate students will be more proactive in serving the public, seeking and practicing the meaning of life in their daily lives.

There are still some shortcomings in this study. Firstly, the cross-sectional study design used in this study makes it difficult to explore the causal relationships of variables in chronological order; Secondly, the small sample size is also a disadvantage of this study. Although the study has made every effort to collect representative samples from various disciplines, if there were a larger sample size, the conclusions of this study would be more convincing.

## 5. Conclusion

The conclusions drawn from this study are as follows: (1) Practical course experience contributes to the formation of graduate students' motivation for public service; (2) Positive psychological capital plays a mediating role in the relationship between practical course experience and public service motivation; (3) The chain mediation effect between positive psychological capital and social emotional ability is established.

## Acknowledgments

This study was funded by the "Theoretical Research Project on Party Building and Ideological and Political Work at Central University of Finance and Economics (DJW23010)".

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