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Exploring the Interplay of Career Development, Self-Efficacy, and Transformational Leadership in China: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract
Career development is a critical component of both individual fulfillment and organizational effectiveness. This qualitative study investigates how self-efficacy and transformational leadership influence career development among professionals in various sectors across urban China, including education, healthcare, information technology, and business. Drawing on Bandura's self-efficacy theory and Bass's transformational leadership theory, the research employed semi-structured interviews with 20 professionals, selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevant leadership and career development experience. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which revealed four major themes: the role of self-efficacy in initiating and sustaining career efforts, the developmental impact of transformational leadership, the dynamic interaction between internal confidence and external support, and the influence of organizational context as both barrier and enabler. Participants reported that high self-efficacy enhanced their goal-setting, resilience, and willingness to pursue advancement opportunities. Simultaneously, transformational leaders played a significant role in boosting motivation, providing individualized feedback, and fostering a climate of trust and growth. Notably, the interaction between personal belief and leadership support was found to be mutually reinforcing, creating environments that promote sustained career progress. These findings underscore the importance of integrating psychological and relational dimensions into organizational development initiatives. The study offers practical implications for human resource development, including strategies to build employee self-efficacy and develop transformational leadership capacity. It also contributes to career development theory by emphasizing the synergy between internal and external drivers of professional growth. Future research is recommended to explore these dynamics across cultural and organizational contexts using longitudinal or mixed-method approaches.

Keywords: career development, self-efficacy, Transformational leadership,

I. Introduction

Career development has become very important for both organizations and individuals because it helps improve job skills, work performance, and job satisfaction (Greenhaus et al., 2010). In today's world, where technology is changing fast, businesses are connected globally, and job markets are always shifting people need to keep learning and improving their skills to stay successful. That's why it's important to understand what psychological and workplace factors affect how people grow in their careers.

One important psychological factor is self-efficacy. Bandura (1997) described self-efficacy as a person's belief in their own ability to carry out actions needed to achieve specific goals. Self-efficacy affects how people think, feel, stay motivated, and behave. People with high self-efficacy are more likely to set goals, bounce back from challenges, and take charge of their own career paths (Lent & Brown, 2013). In terms of career development, those who believe in themselves are more likely to aim high, keep going when things get tough, and look for ways to grow and learn (Betz & Hackett, 2006).

Along with personal effort and choices, leadership also plays an important role in guiding

people's career paths. One type of leadership that has received a lot of attention is transformational leadership.This leadership style centers on inspiring others, building a clear and strong vision, and offering personalized support (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leaders encourage their team members to go beyond their own interests to help the organization and grow as individuals (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013). This type of leadership is especially effective in increasing employee motivation, enhancing job performance, and supporting career advancement (Ng, 2017).

The link between self-efficacy and transformational leadership is an important area of study. Self-efficacy keeps individuals motivated and goal-focused from within, while transformational leadership offers external support and a clear vision to help direct those efforts toward career development (Tims et al., 2011). However, most existing studies use numbers and data (quantitative methods), which may miss the deeper, personal experiences of people as they build their careers within workplace structures. Therefore, there is dire need to explore career development qualitatively to explore deeper understanding about the lived experiences of individuals and to capture more insights and understanding about how people interpret and respond to both personal and environmental factors associated with career development (Savickas, 2013). For instance, the meaning of self-efficacy may be different for people of different culture, gender, and job experiences (Nauta, 2010).

Likewise, across organizational contexts or job roles the impact of transformational leadership may vary. By stressing on both the personal and organizational factors, researchers can uncover the complex interplay between personal characteristics and organizational factors that shape career development pathways.

This study addresses the gap by using a qualitative approach to explore how self-efficacy and transformational leadership interact to influence career development.

Through interviews with professionals from different fields, it looks at their personal experiences and how they make sense of their career journeys. The study is guided by the following research questions

1. How does self-efficacy influence career development behaviors and decisions?
2. What role does transformational leadership play in shaping employee career development?
3. How do self-efficacy and transformational leadership interact to affect career trajectories?

By exploring these questions, the study aims to offer a deeper understanding of the personal and relational factors that influence career growth. It also hopes to give practical suggestions for organizations that want to create a workplace culture focused on development, empowerment, and lifelong learning.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study brings together two main ideas: self-efficacy, as explained by Albert Bandura (1997), and transformational leadership, as developed by Bernard Bass and colleagues (Bass, 1985; Bass & Riggio, 2006). These theories described that how motivation and support work together to explain career development and shape a person's career path.

Self-Efficacy Theory: Self-efficacy theory explained the core idea of Bandura's social cognitive theory that a person has the inner ability to plan, perform and to deal with future (Bandura, 1997). This belief is backed by four major sources 1) Mastery experiences (personal successes) personal success in past contributing to handle effectively the future challenges, 2) Vicarious experiences (watching others succeed) looking and observing success of others enhance personal motivation and chances of success, 3) Verbal persuasion (encouragement from others) Emotional and physical reactions effect self-confidence in performing a specific task (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016).self-efficacy is one of the most important element of career development, as self-efficacy promote personal motivation and make individual capable to make smart decisions and plan for the future challenges (Lent et al., 1994). Studies show that people with high career self-efficacy are more likely to take on difficult tasks, continue learning, and adjust successfully to career changes (Betz & Hackett, 2006). Self-efficacy also acts as a bridge between personal goals and actual career actions, encouraging individuals to take control of their career journeys in a proactive way (Lent & Brown, 2013).

Transformational Leadership Theory: Transformational leadership, developed by Bass (1985) and based on Burns' (1978) earlier work, describes leaders who inspire and uplift their followers to reach their full potential. Bass identified four key elements of transformational leadership, Idealized influence (acting as a role model), Inspirational motivation (encouraging a shared vision), Intellectual stimulation (promoting creativity and problem-solving) and Individualized consideration (providing personal support and attention). Together, these elements help create a positive and motivating environment that builds trust, increases engagement, and improves performance (Bass & Riggio, 2006).

In workplaces, transformational leadership supports employee growth by fostering psychological safety,

promoting independence, and helping individuals align their personal goals with the organization's vision (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013). Leaders who show transformational qualities often act as mentors giving feedback, encouragement, and chances to learn and grow. This style of leadership has been linked to higher levels of employee satisfaction, motivation, and commitment to advancing their careers (Ng, 2017; Tims et al., 2011).

Career Development: A Multi-Dimensional Construct, Career development is generally seen as a lifelong process of learning, working, adapting, and making decisions that move a person toward their own evolving goals and future plans (Super, 1980). It includes both personal factors, like motivation and self-image, and external influences, such as workplace culture and leadership. By bringing together self-efficacy and transformational leadership theories, we can better understand how individual effort and support from the organization work together to influence career growth.

Theories such as Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent et al., 1994) emphasize the connection between personal control and external conditions. SCCT explains that career decisions are shaped by three key factors: self-efficacy (belief in one's abilities), outcome expectations (beliefs about the results of actions), and personal goals. It also suggests that transformational leaders, by giving support and encouragement, can strengthen self-efficacy and positively influence career choices (Lent & Brown, 2013).

Theoretical Integration and Relevance: Combining self-efficacy and transformational leadership theories gives a more complete understanding of career development. Self-efficacy focuses on the inner mindset—how confidence and belief in oneself drive effort and persistence. On the other hand, transformational leadership looks at the outer environment—how leaders' support, encouragement, and vision help guide and strengthen that inner drive. Together, these theories show that both personal motivation and supportive relationships are key in shaping how careers grow and develop.

Moreover, the link between transformational leadership behaviors and the main sources of self-efficacy is especially important. For example, individualized consideration, where leaders offer personal support, reflects verbal encouragement and vicarious learning (learning by watching others), both of which help build self-efficacy. Similarly, intellectual stimulation, which encourages people to think critically and solve problems, supports mastery experiences—a key way to build confidence in one's abilities. In this way, transformational leaders play a key role in strengthening career self-efficacy, which leads to more adaptable, proactive career actions and improved performance.

This theoretical framework provides a solid foundation for the current qualitative study. It helps direct the exploration of participants' real-life experiences and supports the identification of key themes that show how self-efficacy, leadership, and career development are linked in practice.

II. Methodology

Research design: The study is guided by interpretivist perspective and followed a qualitative study design to explore the role of self-efficacy and transformational leadership in career development in the workplace. The qualitative research approach helps to better understand the real-life experiences and to obtained detailed information about the personal and social contributors of career development (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants and Sampling: a purposive sampling technique was adopted for selection of respondents. For the study purpose a total of twenty professionals from different fields like education, healthcare, IT, and business. Participants were selected Tsinghua University (Beijing)**,** Fudan University (Shanghai)**,** Zhejiang University (Hangzhou)**, and** Sun Yat-sen University (Guangzhou)**.** The participants were selected on the basis of their experience in their respective field. Each selected respondents had already on job in these sectors, had at least five years of work experience, and also had some exposure to leadership. This helped ensure that all participants could share meaningful insights about their career paths and their experiences with transformational leaders.

Data Collection: Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which allowed the researcher to ask the same key questions to all participants while also giving them the freedom to share more details about their experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). An interview guide was used to focus the conversation on topics such as career experiences, views on leadership, and how self-efficacy influenced their professional growth. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and was audio recorded with the participants' permission. All interviews were then transcribed word-for-word to ensure accuracy and completeness for the next stage of data analysis.

Data Analysis: To understand the information collected, the researcher used a method called thematic analysis, which helps find common ideas or patterns in people's responses. This method follows six clear steps, described by Braun and Clarke (2006), Reading the data carefully to get to know it well (data familiarization), marking important points (generation

of initial codes), grouping similar points into themes (searching for themes), reviewing and improving these themes (reviewing themes), clearly explaining what each theme means (defining and naming themes), and writing a full report based on the results (report writing). A software program called NVivo 12 was used to help organize and sort the data. This analysis helped the researcher spot patterns related to how people make career choices, how leadership affects them, and how much they believe in themselves.

Trustworthiness and Ethics: To make sure the findings were trustworthy, the study followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four key standards: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To strengthen the accuracy and quality of the research, strategies like member checking (letting participants review the findings), audit trails (keeping detailed records of the research process), and peer debriefing (discussing the process with fellow researchers) were used. The study also met ethical requirements. It received approval from the ethics review board of the hosting institution. Participants were clearly informed about their rights, their privacy was guaranteed, and written consent was taken before data collection. To keep their identities confidential, pseudonyms were used, and any personal information was removed during transcription.

III. RESULTS

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed four main themes showing how self-efficacy and transformational leadership work together to shape career growth. 1) self-efficacy motivates individuals to take career related actions, 2) transformational leadership helps people move forward in their careers, 3) the combination of self-belief and leadership support strengthens career progress and 4) workplace environments can either support or block career development.

Theme 1: Self-Efficacy as a Motivator for Career Action

Participants often emphasized that believing in themselves played a key role in setting and reaching their career goals. Many said that their confidence helped them go for promotions, continue their education, or even change career paths. One participant said, "I knew I had the potential, and that belief gave me the courage to apply for a managerial role, even when I lacked some experience."

This theme reflects Bandura's (1997) idea that people build self-confidence through mastery experiences (succeeding at tasks) and vicarious learning (watching others succeed). Many participants said their confidence came from earlier successes like leading projects or receiving positive feedback which gave them the motivation to keep moving forward in their careers.

Theme 2: Transformational Leadership and Career Growth

Transformational leadership was seen as a major influence on participants' career development. Many shared that inspiring and supportive leaders encouraged them to take on challenges and explore new opportunities. One participant said, "My supervisor challenged me to lead a new initiative. That experience opened up new possibilities I hadn't considered."

Leaders who showed individual attention and support, as described by Bass and Riggio (2006), were often seen as key mentors. These leaders gave helpful feedback, emotional encouragement, and opened doors to new roles. One participant shared, "I was ready to quit until my leader reminded me of my strengths and gave me a new role that better fit my skills." These actions were seen as crucial in helping participants grow professionally.

Theme 3: The Combined Power of Self-Efficacy and Leadership Support

A key finding was that self-confidence and leadership support strengthened each other. Many participants shared that when a transformational leader believed in them, it boosted their own self-belief. In return, this confidence helped them take on new challenges, work harder, and contribute more to their organizations. This theme showed a positive cycle where both leaders and employees helped build momentum for growth. As one participant said, "feeling seen and supported gave me the confidence to believe in myself, and that's when I really started pushing hard and reaching for my goals." This shows that self-efficacy and leadership don't just exist together they influence and support each other, helping people move forward in their careers.

Theme 4: How Workplace Environments Help or Hinder Career Growth

While some participants talked about good experiences, others faced challenges in their workplaces, like not having mentors, dealing with strict management structures, or working with unsupportive bosses. Even so, people who believed in themselves often found smart ways to keep moving forward. One person shared, "Although my workplace didn't offer formal development programs, I proactively pursued online courses and built my professional network independently." On the other hand, supportive workplaces with training opportunities, an inclusive culture, and inspiring leaders helped participants grow more quickly in their careers. Some mentioned that leadership programs or open-door policies made it easier to get advice and set clear career goals.

Sub-Themes and Deeper Insights.

Besides the main themes, a few important sub-themes also appeared. One was about gender dynamics some female participants said they saw very few women in leadership roles, which made it harder for them to picture themselves in those positions. Another sub-theme was emotional regulation. Participants with higher self-confidence were more likely to stay strong and bounce back when they faced rejection or setbacks.

The interviews also showed that having a supportive leader didn't always lead to career growth. Some participants said that support from a leader only helped when it matched their own goals and when they felt ready. As one participant explained, "My leader believed in me before I believed in myself. It took time to raise to their expectations but their trust fueled my growth."

Summary of Findings

Overall, the study shows that self-confidence (self-efficacy) plays a key role in career growth especially when supported by transformational leadership. When people believe in themselves and also get support from their leaders, it builds a strong base for career growth. However, the workplace environment its culture and structure can either support or hold back this progress. These findings show that both personal factors (like self-confidence) and leadership support are important when looking at how careers develop.

IV. Discussion

This study helps explain how self-efficacy, transformational leadership, and career growth are connected. The results show that both personal traits and outside influences play a key role in shaping someone's career journey. This section discusses the main themes from the findings, linking them to earlier research and highlighting what they mean for both theory and practical use.

Self-Efficacy and Career Proactivity: The idea that self-efficacy encourages people to take charge of their careers supports. The participants shared self-belief encouraged them to set goals, keep trying, and seek out opportunities. Similarly, Lent and Brown's (2013) viewed that self-efficacy plays a key role in career decisions and achieving goals. Mastery experiences and learning by watching others had a strong effect on building self-efficacy, which supports Bandura's explanation of how self-belief grows. These experiences helped participants feel more confident and believe in their ability to succeed. Schunk and DiBenedetto (2016) found similar results, showing that repeated success is important for developing confidence that supports career growth. Participants also shared that encouragement and emotional support from mentors at the time of stress can enhanced self-efficacy. These responses are in line with Bandura's (1997) findings that verbal encouragement **and** emotional support are the key sources of improving self-efficacy and self-confidence, highlighting the importance of a positive and supportive environment in promoting career development and resilience.

Transformational Leadership as a Developmental Catalyst: The results showed that transformational leadership is important for helping people grow in their careers. Participants often talked about leaders who gave clear guidance, encouragement, and personal support traits that match the definition of transformational leadership by Bass and Riggio (2006). Most helpful were the leaders' focus on individual needs and their efforts to encourage new ways of thinking, which helped boost participants' confidence and skills. This supports Ng's (2017) findings that transformational leadership improves career outcomes by increasing employees' motivation and commitment to their organization. Transformational leaders often serve as role models and mentors, helping employees develop a growth mindset (Avolio & Yammarino, 2013). They also create a supportive environment where employees feel safe to learn and try new things. This feeling of psychological safety being able to speak up or take risks without fear of negative consequences—is strongly linked to leadership behavior (Edmondson, 1999). Such environments encourage employees to take career-related risks, which helps them grow and move forward in their careers.

Interaction between Self-Efficacy and Leadership: One important finding of this study is how self-efficacy and leadership affect each other. Participants described a cycle where transformational leaders helped build their confidence, and in turn, that confidence led them to take more initiative and trust their leaders more. This two-way relationship supports Tims et al. (2011), who found that transformational leadership increases daily work engagement by boosting self-efficacy. The link between self-belief and external support highlights the need to view career development in a more complete way. Both Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2005) and Social Cognitive Career Theory (Lent et al., 1994) stress that career growth happens through a mix of personal efforts and the opportunities available in the surrounding environment.

Barriers and Resilience: While many participants shared about the role of supportive environments for career growth, some also shared about the challenges to career growth like they talked about unsupportive leaders, strict hierarchies, and limited chances to promotion. In these cases, strong self-efficacy often helped them push through the obstacles, supporting Betz and Hackett's (2006) findings on how self-belief

helps people stay persistent during setbacks. This ability to recover from difficulties also reflects psychological capital especially confidence and optimism which helps people cope with tough situations (Luthans et al., 2007). So, even without transformational leadership, personal strengths like self-efficacy can still drive career growth.

V. Conclusion

This study used a qualitative method to explore how self-efficacy, transformational leadership, and career development are linked. The findings show that self-efficacy is an important factor in shaping career decisions, staying committed, and taking proactive steps. Participants with high self-efficacy were more able to face challenges, take initiative, and work toward meaningful career goals. These results support Bandura's (1997) view that self-efficacy is a key psychological resource for career growth. Transformational leadership was identified as a key external factor that helps support career growth by building a trusting, encouraging, and growth-focused environment. Leaders who inspire, challenge, and guide their team members' help boost their confidence and belief in their own abilities. The study also found a strong two-way connection between self-efficacy and transformational leadership people with high self-efficacy not only gained from supportive leaders but also took more initiative in planning and advancing their careers. Combining personal self-belief with support from leaders gives a more complete picture of how careers grow. It shows that both individual effort and help from the environment are important for career success. This balanced view supports Social Cognitive Career Theory and Career Construction Theory, which both highlight the need to consider both the person and their surroundings in understanding career development. Overall, this study contributes to theory by linking personal and organizational views on career development. It also offers practical advice for organizations aiming to improve leadership practices and help individuals build the skills needed for long-term career growth.

Theoretical Implications

This study expands on existing theory by showing how personal factors and organizational support work together in career development. While earlier research often looked at self-efficacy and leadership as separate topics, this study shows they are closely linked. This insight can help improve Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) and Career Construction Theory by highlighting the combined effect of personal motivation and external support. The findings also underline the growing importance of transformational leadership. As careers become more flexible and self-driven, leaders who promote adaptability and lifelong learning play an even more important role.

Practical Implications

From a practical point of view, this study gives helpful advice to organizations. A main goal should be to build employees' belief in their abilities, supported by training, mentoring, and practical experiences that increase their confidence. At the same time, developing transformational leadership skills in managers can help create a positive and growth-oriented workplace. Human Resource Development (HRD) programs should include training on self-efficacy, such as how to give constructive feedback, set clear goals, and model successful behavior. Leadership development should focus on emotional intelligence, active listening, and personalized support core aspects of transformational leadership (Goleman, 2000).

VI. Recommendations

Based on the findings, several suggestions can help improve career development in organizations. The companies should invest in leadership training that builds transformational leadership qualities like giving personal support, encouraging new ideas, and inspiring team members. These leadership traits help create a positive and motivating workplace. Organizations should offer programs to boost employee self-confidence. This can be done through mentoring, constructive feedback, and skill-building workshops. The human resources departments should create clear career development plans that connect employees' personal goals with the organization's overall mission, helping both individuals and the company grow together.

Schools, universities, and professional organizations should include leadership and self-confidence (self-efficacy) training in their courses and workshops. This will better prepare individuals for career growth. Future research should explore how these ideas work in different cultures or types of organizations, and use mixed-methods or long-term studies to gain deeper insights. Lastly, organizations need to remove systemic barriers that block career progress. This is essential for creating fair and inclusive opportunities for everyone, regardless of background

VII. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although this study provides useful insights, it has some limitations. The small sample size and the specific context may limit how well the findings apply

to other cultures or organizations. To build on this work, future studies could use long-term (longitudinal) or mixed-methods approaches to better understand cause-and-effect relationships and make the results more widely applicable. It would also be valuable to examine how organizational culture and gender influence the relationship between leadership, self-efficacy, and career development.

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