The Interplay Between Family Caring Attitudes, Teacher Caring Behaviour, and Psychological Well-Being Among College Students in China: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

This conceptual paper examines the intricate relationship between family caring attitudes, teacher caring behaviour, and psychological well-being among college students in China, with particular attention to the moderating effects of gender and age. Grounded in a comprehensive review of theoretical frameworks, including Self-Determination Theory, Attachment Theory, Family Systems Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, Social Communication Theory, and Noddings' Caring Education Theory. This paper develops a multidimensional conceptual framework that illuminates how caring dynamics within family and educational environments collectively influence students' psychological development. The framework conceptualises family caring attitudes as encompassing emotional support, communication, supportive environment, and conflict resolution, while teacher caring behaviour comprises emotional support, teacher-student relationships, academic support, and classroom organisation. These dimensions are theorised to affect students' psychological well-being across four key domains: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and personal growth. The paper further explores how these relationships may be moderated by gender and age, informed by evidence suggesting demographic variations in how students experience and benefit from caring environments. Formulated in the unique cultural context of Chinese higher education, this conceptual framework provides a foundation for future empirical research and the development of targeted interventions to enhance college students' psychological well-being through supportive family and educational environments.

Keywords: Family caring attitudes, Teacher caring behaviour, Psychological well-being, Chinese college students, Conceptual framework, Gender differences, Age moderation

INTRODUCTION

The psychological well-being of college students represents a growing concern for educational institutions worldwide, with particular challenges emerging in the Chinese context. Recent research has revealed concerning trends in the mental health of Chinese college students, with studies reporting that approximately 35%, 21%, and 11% of students from 108 Chinese universities experienced acute stress, depression, and anxiety, respectively (Ma et al., 2020). Comparing university students to general workers, Tan et al. (2021) found evidence suggesting higher levels of anxiety and depression symptoms among students. These findings align with global trends showing deteriorating mental health among student populations, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic (Liu et al., 2019).

While numerous factors contribute to college students' psychological well-being, supportive relationships within both family and educational environments have emerged as particularly significant influences (Chen et al., 2020). Family relationships provide foundational models for interpersonal relationships and emotional regulation, while teachers represent important adult figures who shape students' educational experiences and personal development (Longobardi et al., 2021). Understanding how these caring relationships collectively influence college students' psychological well-being within family and educational contexts is crucial. In this respect, the Chinese cultural context provides a unique backdrop for examining these relationships. In Chinese culture, family support extends beyond meeting material needs to include significant emotional and psychological support (Chen et al., 2020; Suleman et al., 2023). Chinese values emphasise emotional support as a fundamental component of family caring, including expressions of empathy, love, and care toward students. Higher levels of emotional support have been associated with improved psychological well-being, including reduced stress among students (Chan & Chui, 2020). Similarly, education holds tremendous cultural significance in China, with teachers traditionally accorded high status and respect (Wang et al., 2021). The Confucian saying "一日为师，终身为父" (once a teacher, always a father) reflects the elevated status and lasting influence attributed to teachers in Chinese culture (Li et al., 2023).

Despite growing recognition of the importance of both family and teacher influences on students' psychological development, research has often examined these factors separately, with limited attention to their interrelationships and combined effects. Furthermore, potential variations in how different demographic groups experience and benefit from caring

relationships have received insufficient attention. Gender differences in mental health outcomes are well-documented (Tan et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2021; Suleman, Iqbal & Niciza, 2025), but limited research has examined whether gender also influences how family caring attitudes and teacher caring behavior affect psychological well-being. Similarly, age-related developmental differences may impact how students experience and benefit from caring relationships; yet these potential moderating effects remain underexplored.

This conceptual paper addresses these gaps by developing an integrated framework that examines the interplay between family caring attitudes, teacher caring behaviour, and psychological well-being among college students in China, with attention to potential moderating effects of gender and age. Drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives—including Self-Determination Theory, Attachment Theory, Family Systems Theory, Social Cognitive Theory, Social Communication Theory, and Nodding' Caring Education Theory—the paper conceptualises caring relationships in both family and educational contexts as multidimensional constructs with complex influences on students' psychological development.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Theories Related to Psychological Well-Being

Subjective Well-Being Theory

Subjective Well-Being (SWB) theory, primarily developed by Ed Diener, conceptualises well-being as comprising cognitive and affective components. The cognitive component involves life satisfaction judgments, while the affective component encompasses positive emotions (joy, contentment) and the absence of negative emotions (anxiety, depression) (Diener et al., 2018). This theory provides a framework for understanding how college students evaluate their satisfaction with life and experience positive emotions in educational settings.

SWB theory posits that individuals' subjective evaluations of their life experiences significantly impact their psychological health, with implications for academic success, campus engagement, and overall adaptation to college life (Renshaw & Bolognino, 2016). Research has consistently demonstrated that higher levels of SWB correlate with better academic outcomes, lower dropout rates, and enhanced educational aspirations among college students (Upadyaya & Salmela-Aro, 2017).

Self-determination theory (SDT), a complementary perspective within the SWB framework, identifies three fundamental psychological needs that must be satisfied for optimal functioning:

autonomy (making independent choices), competence (mastering challenges), and relatedness (forming meaningful connections with others) (Ryan & Deci, 2017). For college students, satisfaction of these basic psychological needs significantly contributes to their subjective well-being, with evidence suggesting that supportive environments in both family and educational contexts facilitate need fulfilment (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

SWB theory provides a theoretical basis for understanding how family caring attitudes and teacher caring behaviours contribute to college students' psychological well-being by supporting their fundamental psychological needs and enhancing their subjective evaluations of life experiences. When families and teachers provide environments that support students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs, they contribute to students' subjective well-being through enhanced life satisfaction and positive emotional experiences.

The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions

Barbara Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions offers a complementary perspective to SWB theory by explaining how positive emotions contribute to psychological well-being. Unlike traditional emotion theories focusing on negative emotions and their specific action tendencies, Fredrickson's theory proposes that positive emotions broaden individuals' thought-action repertoires and build enduring personal resources (Fredrickson, 2013).

According to this theory, while negative emotions narrow cognitive focus to address immediate threats, positive emotions expand attention, cognition, and action, enabling more creative and flexible thinking (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2018). This broadening effect facilitates the building of lasting resources—intellectual (knowledge, cognitive complexity), social (relationships, social support), physical (skills, health), and psychological (resilience, optimism)—that enhance long-term adaptation and well-being (Garland et al., 2010).

In educational contexts, the broaden-and-build theory helps explain how positive emotional experiences in family and classroom environments can promote cognitive flexibility, academic engagement, and psychological resilience among college students (Pekrun & Linnenbrink-Garcia, 2014). Students who experience positive emotions through supportive family interactions and caring teacher behaviours develop psychological resources to manage academic challenges effectively and maintain psychological well-being (Villavicencio & Bernardo, 2016).

This theory is particularly relevant to understanding how caring attitudes from family members and teachers might generate positive emotions in college students, broadening their cognitive capacities and building psychological resources that contribute to their overall well-being. Caring behaviours may create positive emotional experiences that, according to this theory, have long-term benefits beyond momentary hedonic pleasure.

Ryff's Model of Psychological Well-Being

Carol Ryff's multidimensional model of psychological well-being offers a eudaimonic perspective that complements the hedonic approach of SWB theory. While SWB focuses on happiness and life satisfaction, Ryff's model emphasizes optimal psychological functioning across six dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth (Ryff, 2014). This model provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the multiple facets of psychological well-being among college students.

Self-acceptance involves a positive evaluation of oneself and one's past experiences. This dimension reflects college students' ability to acknowledge strengths and limitations while maintaining a positive self-regard (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Positive relations with others encompass the capacity to form warm, trusting relationships and experience empathy and affection. This dimension is particularly relevant to understanding how family and teacher relationships influence students' psychological well-being (Keyes et al., 2002).

Autonomy refers to self-determination, independence, and internal regulation of behaviour. In college students, this dimension manifests as the ability to make independent decisions and resist social pressures, which is crucial during this developmental period (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Environmental mastery involves effectively managing one's life situations and the surrounding environment. For college students, this includes navigating academic demands, campus resources, and social relationships (Ryff, 2014).

Purpose in life encompasses having goals, intentions, and a sense of direction. This dimension is especially relevant for college students as they formulate career aspirations and life plans (Ryff & Singer, 2008). Personal growth involves continuous development and openness to new experiences, reflecting students' capacity to recognise their potential and improve over time (Keyes et al., 2002).

Ryff's model is particularly valuable for this conceptual framework as it provides a comprehensive perspective for understanding psychological well-being. This framework extends beyond mere happiness to include aspects of optimal functioning that are influenced by family and educational environments. The model's emphasis on positive relationships aligns with the focus on caring attitudes in family and educational contexts.

Theories Related to Family Caring Attitude

Family Systems Theory

Family Systems Theory, primarily developed by Murray Bowen, conceptualises the family as an interconnected emotional unit where changes in one component affect the entire system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This theory posits that families function as complex, interactive systems rather than collections of independent individuals, with each member's behaviour influencing and being influenced by others in reciprocal relationships (Broderick, 1993).

Key concepts from Family Systems Theory relevant to understanding family caring attitudes include homeostasis, differentiation of self, emotional triangles, and multigenerational transmission processes. Homeostasis refers to families' tendency to maintain stability and balance, with members adapting their behaviours to preserve the system's equilibrium. In the context of college students, family homeostasis may be disrupted when a student leaves home for university, requiring adjustments in family dynamics (Olson, 2000).

Differentiation of self refers to the capacity to develop a clear sense of identity while maintaining connections with family members. College students with higher levels of differentiation can balance independence with family attachment, potentially experiencing better psychological outcomes (Skowron et al., 2009). Emotional triangles occur when tension arises between two family members, and a third person is often drawn in to reduce anxiety. These dynamics can influence college students' psychological well-being, particularly when involved in parental conflicts (Bowen, 1978).

The multigenerational transmission process refers to transmitting behaviour patterns across generations, including caring attitudes and relationship styles. Students' experiences of care are shaped by patterns established in previous generations (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This concept helps explain how caring attitudes develop within families and are passed down through generations.

Family Systems Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how family caring attitudes develop within broader family dynamics and how these attitudes influence college students' psychological well-being. The theory emphasizes that students' experiences are embedded within family systems where support, communication, and conflict resolution patterns have developed over time and continue to influence their psychological functioning during college (Broderick, 1993).

Social Cognitive Theory

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), developed by Albert Bandura, explains human functioning as the product of dynamic interactions between personal, behavioural, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). This theory is particularly relevant to understanding how family caring attitudes develop and influence college students' psychological well-being through observational learning, modelling, and self-efficacy mechanisms.

According to SCT, individuals learn through direct experience and observing others' behaviours and consequences, a process known as observational learning (Bandura, 2001). Within families, children observe and internalise caregiving behaviours, communication patterns, and emotional regulation strategies demonstrated by parents and other family members. These observed behaviours shape their expectations about relationships and influence their psychological development (Schunk, 2012).

Self-efficacy, individuals' beliefs about their capabilities to perform specific tasks, is a central concept in SCT that mediates the relationship between family caring attitudes and psychological well-being (Bandura, 1997). When families provide consistent emotional support, constructive feedback, and appropriate challenges, they foster self-efficacy beliefs that promote resilience and psychological well-being in college students (Caprara et al., 2006).

SCT also emphasises reciprocal determinism, wherein personal factors (including cognitive and emotional processes), behaviour, and environmental influences interact bidirectionally (Bandura, 2001). This concept helps explain how family caring attitudes both influence and are influenced by students' psychological well-being in dynamic, reciprocal relationships (Schunk, 2012).

For this conceptual framework, SCT provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how caring attitudes within families are transmitted through modelling processes, how these

attitudes contribute to students' self-efficacy beliefs and psychological resources, and how these factors collectively influence psychological well-being among college students in China.

Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory, initially developed by John Bowlby and expanded by Mary Ainsworth, provides a framework for understanding how early relationships with caregivers influence psychological development and well-being throughout the lifespan (Bowlby, 1982). According to this theory, the quality of attachment relationships formed in early childhood creates internal working models of self and others that guide expectations, emotions, and behaviours in subsequent relationships (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

Secure attachment, characterized by consistent and responsive caregiving, promotes exploration, autonomy, and healthy emotional regulation. In contrast, insecure attachment patterns (anxious, avoidant, disorganized) develop when caregiving is inconsistent, rejecting, or frightening, potentially leading to difficulties in relationships and emotional regulation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Although attachment patterns are established early in life, they continue to influence psychological functioning throughout adolescence and adulthood, including during the college years (Mattanah et al., 2011). Secure attachment to parents predicts better adjustment to college, higher academic achievement, and greater psychological well-being among university students (Larose & Boivin, 1998).

Attachment theory is particularly relevant to the current conceptual framework as it provides a developmental perspective on how family caring attitudes contribute to forming secure attachment relationships, influencing college students' psychological well-being (Mattanah et al., 2011). Secure attachment facilitates the development of self-regulatory capacities, positive self-concept, and practical stress management skills that enhance psychological functioning during the transition to college and beyond (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Furthermore, attachment patterns influence students' relationships with teachers and peers in educational settings, potentially mediating the effects of teacher caring behaviour on psychological well-being (Riley, 2011). Students with secure attachment histories may be more receptive to teacher support and better able to utilise educational resources, enhancing the positive impact of teacher caring behaviour on their psychological well-being (Davis, 2003).

This helps explain connections between family and educational influences on students' psychological development.

Theories Related to Teacher Caring Behaviour

Social Communication Theory

Social Communication Theory encompasses various frameworks that examine how communication processes shape social interactions and relationships. In educational contexts, this theory helps explain how teacher-student communication patterns influence students' perceptions of teacher caring and, consequently, their psychological well-being (McCroskey & Teven, 1999).

Jason Teven's concept of perceived caring is particularly relevant within this theoretical framework. Teven and McCroskey (1997) conceptualised teacher caring as comprising three dimensions: empathy (understanding students' perspectives), understanding (recognising students' needs), and responsiveness (addressing those needs effectively). Students' perceptions of teacher caring significantly influence their motivation, engagement, and psychological well-being in educational settings (Mazer, 2012).

Social communication theory emphasizes that effective communication is essential for establishing caring relationships in educational contexts. Teachers demonstrate caring through their words, nonverbal behaviours, response patterns, and communication styles (Myers et al., 2014). These communication behaviours signal to students that teachers are genuinely concerned about their well-being and academic success, fostering trust and positive teacher-student relationships (Mazer, 2013).

The theory also highlights the importance of confirmation behaviours, communication that validates students as valuable individuals, in establishing caring teacher-student relationships (Ellis, 2000). When teachers confirm communication, such as recognising perspectives, responding to questions respectfully, and demonstrating interest in their ideas, students feel valued and supported, enhancing their psychological well-being (Goldman & Goodboy, 2014).

For this conceptual framework, Social Communication Theory provides a foundation for understanding how teachers communicate care through verbal and nonverbal behaviours, how students perceive these caring messages, and how these perceptions influence psychological well-being among college students in China.

160

Noddings' Caring Education Theory

Nel Noddings' Caring Education Theory offers a philosophical framework for understanding the ethical dimensions of caring in educational contexts. According to Noddings (2005), caring is fundamentally relational, involving both the one caring (teacher) and the cared-for (student) in a reciprocal relationship characterized by engrossment, motivational displacement, and recognition.

Engrossment involves the teacher's receptive attention to students' expressed needs, experiences, and perspectives. Motivational displacement occurs when the teacher temporarily sets aside personal concerns to prioritize students' needs. Recognition refers to students acknowledging the teacher's caring efforts and completing the caring encounter (Noddings, 2013).

Noddings identifies four key components of caring education: modelling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation. Modelling involves teachers demonstrating caring by establishing authentic relationships with students, showing them what it means to care through their actions. Dialogue refers to open, honest communication that allows teachers to understand students' needs and perspectives, fostering mutual understanding and trust. Practice involves students developing caring capacities by practising care in supportive environments, with guidance from caring teachers. Confirmation refers to teachers affirming and encouraging students' positive qualities and potential, fostering self-worth and identity development.

This theory emphasises that caring is not merely a set of behaviours but an ethical orientation permeating all aspects of educational practice. Authentic caring involves attending to students' academic needs while considering their emotional, social, and ethical development (Noddings, 2005).

For the current conceptual framework, Noddings' Caring Education Theory provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how teachers' caring behaviour extends beyond instructional support to encompass ethical relationships that contribute to students' holistic development and psychological well-being. The theory's emphasis on the relational nature of caring aligns with the framework's focus on teacher-student relationships as a key dimension of teacher caring behaviour.

Self-Determination Theory in Educational Contexts

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), when applied to educational contexts, provides a framework for understanding how teacher behaviours satisfy or thwart students' basic psychological needs, thereby influencing their motivation, engagement, and psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2020). According to SDT, three fundamental psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—must be satisfied for optimal functioning and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

In educational settings, teachers can support students' need for autonomy by providing meaningful choices, acknowledging perspectives, and explaining the relevance of learning activities (Reeve, 2016). Competence support involves providing clear expectations, optimal challenges, and constructive feedback that helps students develop mastery (Jang et al., 2010). Relatedness support entails establishing warm, caring relationships with students and fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom community (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009).

When teachers engage in caring behaviours that satisfy these basic psychological needs, students experience greater autonomous motivation, engagement, and psychological well-being (Reeve, 2016). Conversely, controlling, inconsistent, or indifferent teacher behaviours may thwart need satisfaction, potentially undermining students' motivation and well-being (Haerens et al., 2015).

SDT's emphasis on need-supportive teaching aligns with the current conceptual framework's focus on teacher caring behaviour. This provides a theoretical basis for understanding how specific caring behaviours, such as emotional support, respect for student perspectives, and individualised academic assistance, contribute to psychological well-being among college students by satisfying their fundamental psychological needs.
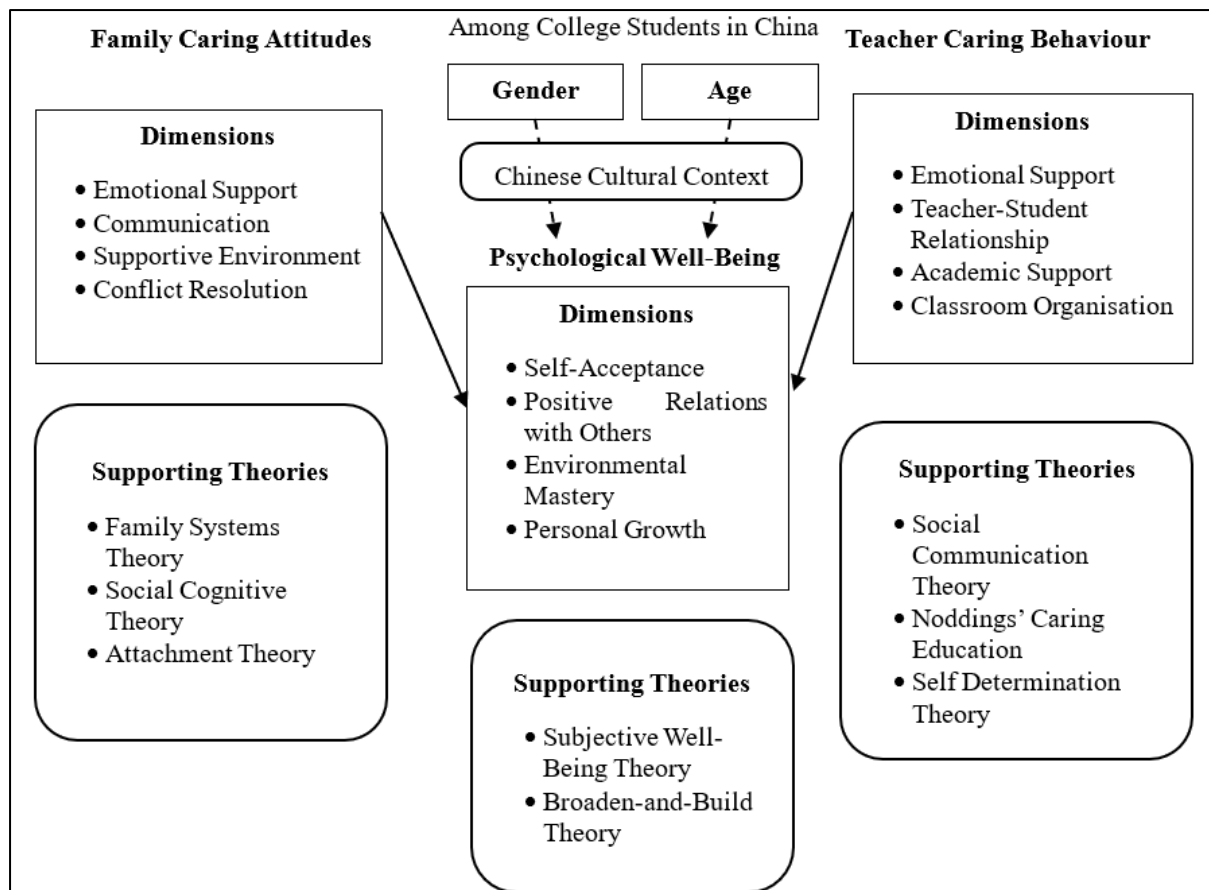
2.4 Integration of Theoretical Frameworks

Figure 1: *Theoretical Framework for Interplay Between Family Caring Attitudes, Teacher Caring Behaviour, and Psychological Well-Being Among College Students in China*

As illustrated in Figure 1 above, the theoretical frameworks discussed provide a comprehensive foundation for understanding the relationships between family caring attitudes, teacher caring behaviour, and psychological well-being among college students. These theories complement each other, offering multiple perspectives on the complex processes influencing students' psychological functioning in educational contexts.

The Subjective Well-Being Theory, the Broaden-and-Build Theory, and Ryff's Model provide complementary frameworks for conceptualising psychological well-being. These theories encompass hedonic aspects (positive emotions, life satisfaction) and eudaimonic dimensions (meaning, growth, positive relationships). These theories help explain the multifaceted nature of well-being outcomes that may be influenced by family and teacher caring.

Family Systems, Social Cognitive, and Attachment Theory offer perspectives on how family caring attitudes develop within systemic contexts, how they are transmitted through modelling and observational learning, and how they contribute to attachment patterns that influence

psychological development throughout the lifespan. These theories help explain how family caring attitudes might influence college students' psychological well-being.

Social Communication Theory, Noddings' Caring Education Theory, and Self-Determination Theory provide frameworks for understanding how teacher caring behaviour is communicated, functions within ethical relationships, and satisfies fundamental psychological needs. These theories help explain how teachers' caring behaviour might enhance college students' psychological well-being.

Together, these theoretical frameworks guide the development of the conceptual framework by illuminating the complex interplay between family and educational influences on students' psychological well-being. They suggest that family caring attitudes and teacher caring behaviour contribute to well-being through multiple pathways, including need satisfaction, positive emotion generation, secure attachment, effective communication, and ethical relationships characterised by engrossment and reciprocity.

This integrated theoretical foundation informs the development of the conceptual framework, providing a basis for understanding how family-caring attitudes and teacher-caring behaviour collectively influence psychological well-being among college students in China and how these relationships may be moderated by gender and age.

Dimensions of Key Constructs

Psychological Well-Being

Psychological well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing various aspects of optimal psychological functioning beyond the absence of psychological distress. Contemporary research has expanded to include positive aspects of psychological functioning, including life satisfaction, positive emotions, personal growth, purpose in life, and positive relationships (Diener et al., 2018; Ryff, 2014).

This conceptual framework focuses on four key components of psychological well-being relevant to college students' experiences: self-acceptance, positive relations with others, environmental mastery, and personal growth.

a. Self-Acceptance

Self-acceptance involves having a positive attitude toward oneself, acknowledging and accepting multiple aspects of the self, and feeling positively about past life experiences (Ryff,

2014). For college students, self-acceptance is crucial as they navigate identity development and face academic and social evaluations that may challenge their self-concept (Candra et al., 2023).

Research suggests that self-acceptance is positively associated with academic achievement, motivation, and overall psychological adjustment among college students (Bingöl & Batik, 2019). Students with higher levels of self-acceptance demonstrate greater resilience in the face of academic setbacks and more adaptive coping strategies when confronted with challenges (MacInnes, 2003).

Conversely, low self-acceptance has been linked to psychological distress, including symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as maladaptive perfectionism among college students (Candra et al., 2023). Several factors influence the development of self-acceptance, including early family experiences, cultural values, educational environments, and social feedback (Kabadayi & Yuksel, 2021).

b. Positive Relations with Others

Positive relations with others encompass the capacity to form warm, trusting relationships characterized by empathy, intimacy, and mutual care (Ryff, 2014). This dimension is particularly relevant for college students as they establish new social connections and navigate changing relationships with family members (López et al., 2018).

Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of positive relationships for college students' psychological well-being and academic success. Studies show that students with strong social connections report higher levels of life satisfaction, positive affect, and resilience than their less socially integrated peers (Balvaneda, 2021; Shah et al., 2020).

Within family contexts, positive relationships with parents and siblings provide emotional support, guidance, and a secure base that facilitates successful adaptation to college (Borelli et al., 2020). Similarly, positive relationships with peers in college settings contribute significantly to students' psychological adjustment and academic engagement (Flett et al., 2019).

Positive teacher-student relationships also play a crucial role in promoting psychological well-being among college students. Students who perceive their instructors as caring, responsive, and respectful report greater academic motivation, engagement, and psychological well-being (Koenen et al., 2019).

c. Environmental Mastery

Environmental mastery involves effectively managing one's life and surrounding environment, using available opportunities, and creating contexts suitable to personal needs and values (Ryff, 2014). For college students, environmental mastery encompasses navigating campus resources, managing academic responsibilities, organising daily activities, and adapting to new living arrangements (Shah et al., 2020).

Research has shown that environmental mastery is positively associated with academic achievement, retention, and overall psychological adjustment among college students (Aldawsari et al., 2018). Students with higher levels of environmental mastery demonstrate greater capacity to balance academic demands with other life domains and more effectively utilise available support resources (Rusmana & Rahman, 2019).

The transition to college presents particular challenges for environmental mastery, as students must simultaneously adapt to new physical, academic, and social environments (Selian et al., 2020). Various factors influence the development of environmental mastery, including prior experiences with independence, executive functioning skills, institutional support structures, and cultural factors (Aldawsari et al., 2018).

d. Personal Growth

Personal growth encompasses continuous development, openness to new experiences, and realization of one's potential over time (Ryff, 2014). This dimension is particularly significant for college students, as higher education aims to impart knowledge and skills and foster personal development and self-actualization (Shah et al., 2020).

Research has demonstrated that personal growth is associated with academic motivation, engagement, and achievement among college students (Liu et al., 2019). Students who approach their education with a growth mindset and view challenges as opportunities for development tend to persist through difficulties and demonstrate greater psychological resilience (Marrero-Quevedo et al., 2019).

Personal growth is influenced by various factors, including educational environments that challenge and support students, exposure to diverse perspectives, opportunities for reflection, and feedback that promotes development rather than merely evaluating performance (He et al., 2018).

Research suggests that personal growth initiatives—intentional and proactive engagement in self-improvement—are positively associated with psychological well-being and negatively associated with psychological distress among college students (Marrero-Quevedo et al., 2019).

Psychological Well-Being in Chinese Cultural Context

Psychological well-being is influenced by cultural contexts, including values, norms, and societal expectations (Joshanloo, 2014). In Chinese cultural contexts, several traditions, including Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, as well as recent socioeconomic transformations (Chen et al., 2013), have influenced conceptions of well-being.

Confucian philosophy emphasises harmony in social relationships, filial piety, educational achievement, and self-cultivation as central to well-being (Li, 2017). These values may influence Chinese college students' psychological well-being by prioritizing familial relationships, academic success, and social harmony (Joshanloo, 2014).

Research examining psychological well-being among Chinese college students has identified several culturally specific factors. Yang (2022) found that family harmony, respect, and support were vital for Chinese young adults' psychological well-being. Similarly, Desrianty et al. (2021) demonstrated that family functioning significantly influenced psychological well-being among Asian students.

The rapid socioeconomic changes in contemporary China have created a unique context for college students' psychological well-being, with traditional values coexisting alongside emerging individualistic orientations (Chen et al., 2013).

Family Caring Attitude

Family caring attitude encompasses the emotional climate, communication patterns, supportive behaviours, and conflict resolution strategies within families that collectively create an environment of care, nurturing, and support for family members (Johnson, 2019). This conceptual framework focuses on four key dimensions: emotional support, communication, supportive environment, and conflict resolution.

a. Emotional Support

Emotional support within families involves providing comfort, encouragement, validation, and affection that communicates care and concern for family members' emotional well-being (Xu

et al., 2019). This dimension has been consistently associated with positive psychological outcomes, particularly during transitional periods such as the college years (Reuger et al., 2022).

Bowman et al. (2019) found that emotional support within social networks was positively associated with college adjustment and negatively associated with psychological distress. The closeness of relationships, rather than their quantity, predicted the level of emotional support perceived by students.

Studies examining the biological correlates of family emotional support have provided additional evidence for its significance. Newhart (2019) found that emerging adults displayed lower cortisol levels when working with family members than alone, suggesting that families function as "safe havens" that reduce physiological stress responses.

Gender differences in perceptions of family emotional support have been documented. Soltani Benavandi et al. (2019) found that female college students rated their emotional connections with parents more positively and perceived parents as more significant sources of emotional support than male students. In Chinese cultural contexts, where family relationships are traditionally emphasised and filial piety is valued, emotional support from family members may be crucial for psychological well-being (Nair et al., 2024).

b. Communication

Family communication encompasses verbal and nonverbal interaction patterns through which family members exchange information, express emotions, coordinate meanings, and maintain relationships (Hessel & Dworkin, 2018). This dimension influences psychological well-being by facilitating understanding, conveying support, and enabling problem-solving within family systems (Bartoszuk et al., 2021).

Research examining communication between college students and their parents has revealed complex relationships with psychological outcomes. Bartoszuk et al. (2021) found that regular phone conversations with parents were associated with closer, more intimate relationships, potentially buffering against loneliness during college transitions.

The transition to college often necessitates adjustments in communication patterns within families. Altermatt (2019) suggests neither pattern is inherently better for psychological well-being; instead, the alignment between communication frequency and individual needs for autonomy and support appears most important for positive psychological outcomes.

Parental communication styles have been associated with various psychological outcomes. Research by Bongyoga and Risnawaty (2021) found that overly involved or intrusive parental communication was associated with reduced autonomy and self-efficacy among college students. Conversely, supportive communication characterised by respect for autonomy, responsiveness to needs, and appropriate information-sharing was associated with better psychological adjustment (Moon-Seo et al., 2021). In Chinese culture, family communication patterns may be influenced by traditional values emphasising filial piety, respect for authority, and maintaining harmony (Mason & Carr, 2021).

c. Supportive Environment

A supportive family environment encompasses the overall climate, resources, and conditions that enable family members to develop and thrive (Cheung et al., 2019). This dimension involves practical assistance, resource provision, encouragement of growth, and creating conditions conducive to well-being and achievement (Kuppens & Ceulemans, 2019).

Research has demonstrated that family cohesiveness significantly influences the transition to college. Cheung et al. (2019) found that students from highly cohesive families perceived the transition to college as less stressful than those from less cohesive families.

Parenting styles contribute significantly to the creation of supportive family environments. Chen (2022) found that authoritarian parenting was associated with more intrusive parental involvement than authoritative parenting. Similarly, Bartoszuk et al. (2021) found that students from families with authoritarian parents sought parental advice more frequently than those with authoritative parents. Moreover, Stavrulak et al. (2021) found that female first-year college students with stricter parents reported more negative outcomes impeding their academic development. In Chinese cultural contexts, supportive family environments may be influenced by collective values emphasising family obligations, educational achievement, and social harmony (Chen, 2022).

d. Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution within families encompasses the strategies, processes, and skills through which family members address disagreements, manage tensions, and repair relationships following conflicts (Haj-Yahia et al., 2019). This dimension is crucial during transitional periods such as the college years, when changing roles and relationships may generate new sources of conflict within family systems (Jenkins et al., 2021).

Research has demonstrated associations between family conflict resolution approaches and psychological outcomes among young adults. Haj-Yahia et al. (2019) found that inter-parental conflict influenced students' self-efficacy for conflict management and perceptions of control over upsetting situations. The psychological impact of family conflict may be particularly significant during the college transition. Research suggests that students can better engage in career exploration and commit to educational goals when not burdened by guilt, anxiety, or regret stemming from unresolved family conflicts.

Attachment histories influence individuals' approaches to conflict resolution and psychological responses to conflict. According to Haj-Yahia et al. (2019), emerging adults with secure attachment histories may be better able to rely on others' dependability in challenging situations and maintain control over their social environments. In Chinese cultural contexts, where harmony in relationships is traditionally valued, conflict resolution may be influenced by concerns about maintaining face, respecting hierarchical relationships, and preserving group cohesion (Influs et al., 2018).

Teacher Caring Behaviour

Teacher caring behaviour encompasses the attitudes, actions, and relationships through which educators demonstrate genuine concern for students' well-being, development, and success (Kyriacou, 2018). This conceptual framework focuses on four dimensions: emotional support, teacher-student relationships, academic support, and classroom organisation.

a. Emotional Support

Emotional support from teachers involves demonstrating empathy, respect, and concern for students' emotional well-being through behaviours that communicate understanding, validation, and encouragement (Martin & Collie, 2019). This dimension has been consistently associated with positive psychological outcomes among students across educational levels (Sun et al., 2021).

Research by Zheng (2022) conceptualised emotional support as an interpersonal approach taken by educators to make students feel supported and cared for. This approach addresses students' emotional and social needs, accommodates family concerns, and provides additional assistance. In addition, Pennings and Hollenstein (2020) found that college students who felt emotionally supported by their teachers experienced greater emotional and attitudinal stability, facilitating effective learning and psychological adjustment.

Emotional support involves verbal and nonverbal communication. Myers et al. (2014) emphasised that teachers demonstrate caring through their words, nonverbal behaviours, response patterns, and communication styles. In Chinese cultural contexts, expressions of emotional support may be influenced by traditional educational values emphasising academic achievement, respect for authority, and maintenance of appropriate teacher-student boundaries (Junhui et al., 2023).

b. Teacher-Student Relationships

Teacher-student relationships encompass the quality of interpersonal connections between teachers and students, characterized by trust, respect, and positive regard (Harper, 2018). This dimension provides the relational foundation through which educational objectives are pursued and caring is communicated (Pöysä et al., 2019).

Research has consistently demonstrated the importance of positive teacher-student relationships for students' academic and psychological outcomes. Hofkens et al. (2023) identified various indicators of strong teacher-student relationships, including care, immediacy, credibility, simplicity, approval, praise, empathy, compassion, engagement, hope, and self-esteem. Several studies have examined the characteristics of teachers who establish positive relationships with students. Sakineh and Ali (2020) found that friendly, sympathetic, and social teachers who demonstrated passion for their careers and encouraged student autonomy had more engaged students.

The concept of "care" as a foundation for teacher-student relationships has received increasing attention in educational research. Ahmad et al. (2019) noted that caring has become a critical element of practical education, while Sakineh and Ali (2020) defined caring as demonstrating emotional engagement and initiative in interactions with students.

The benefits of positive teacher-student relationships extend beyond immediate classroom dynamics to influence broader educational and psychological outcomes. Walker and Graham (2021) identified several student-related skills stimulated by caring teachers, including engagement, self-confidence, well-being, feeling valued, and achievement. In Chinese cultural contexts, Confucian traditions may influence teacher-student relationships by emphasising respect for teachers as authority figures and sources of wisdom (Weizheng, 2019).

c. Academic Support

Academic support involves providing guidance, feedback, and resources that facilitate students' learning and achievement within educational contexts (Hayat et al., 2020). This dimension demonstrates care through commitment to students' intellectual development and academic success (Gustems-Carnicer et al., 2019). Research by Hayat et al. (2020) conceptualised academic support as teachers' demonstrated interest in what students have learned, how much they have learned, and how they could learn more.

The provision of constructive feedback constitutes an important component of academic support. Gustems-Carnicer et al. (2019) described "appraisal assistance" as comments, judgments, and assessments of students' performance offered by teachers, along with suggestions and ideas for improvement. Furthermore, Briggs (2020) found that teacher support predicted academic achievement, student satisfaction, and psychological adjustment. In Chinese educational contexts, academic support may be critical given traditional emphasis on educational achievement and examination performance (Chan & Hume, 2019).

d. Classroom Organisation

Classroom organisation refers to creating and maintaining structured, predictable, supportive learning environments that facilitate education and development (Howe et al., 2019). This dimension demonstrates care through attention to environmental conditions that enable student success and well-being (Yu & Singh, 2018).

Research has demonstrated that classroom organisation influences students' academic and psychological outcomes. For instance, Schildkamp et al. (2020) found that increased teacher-student relationships contributed to more pleasant learning environments, as students receiving gentle instruction were more likely to develop self-control.

The approach to instruction represents an important aspect of classroom organisation. Finkelstein et al. (2021) contrasted learner-centred approaches, which emphasise student participation and critical thinking, with teacher-centred approaches, which place teachers at the centre of the educational process.

Fairness in classroom management represents another aspect of classroom organisation that communicates care. Howe et al. (2019) found that students who perceived their professors as fair felt more comfortable in the classroom and demonstrated greater motivation to participate and learn. In Chinese educational contexts, classroom organisation may be influenced by traditional values emphasising order, discipline, and respect for authority (Yu & Singh, 2018).

Teacher Caring Behaviour in Chinese Cultural Context

Cultural contexts influence teacher caring behaviour, shaping expectations, expressions, and care interpretations in teacher-student relationships. Several traditional and contemporary influences in Chinese cultural contexts shape conceptualisations and manifestations of teacher caring behaviour (Zhao et al., 2020).

Confucian philosophy has traditionally influenced Chinese educational values, emphasising respect for teachers as authority figures and sources of wisdom (Wang et al., 2021). The concept of "关心" (guan xin - caring) in Chinese culture encompasses both concern for students' well-being and guidance of their development (Wang & Hall, 2019).

Contemporary Chinese educational reforms have introduced changes in teacher caring conceptualisations, emphasising student-centred approaches, emotional support, and attention to psychological well-being (Zhao et al., 2020).

Several studies have documented the influence of collectivistic cultural values on teacher caring behaviour. Sun et al. (2021) found that Chinese teachers often expressed care through attention to group harmony, collective achievement, and individual development within social contexts.

The rapid social and economic changes in contemporary China have created dynamic educational contexts where traditional and modern influences coexist and interact (Wang et al., 2021).

Gender and Age Differences in Psychological Well-Being

Research examining gender and age differences in psychological well-being has yielded complex and sometimes contradictory findings, suggesting the influence of multiple factors, including developmental processes, sociocultural contexts, and methodological variations.

a. Gender Differences in Psychological Well-Being

Studies examining gender differences in psychological well-being among college students have produced inconsistent findings. Some research documents significant differences, while other studies find no substantial variation between male and female students.

Research by Barbayannis et al. (2022) found no significant gender differences in psychological well-being during adolescence. Similarly, Islam et al. (2021) reported no significant differences between male and female college students on measures of psychological well-being.

In contrast, Yu and Chae (2020) found that female college students scored higher than males in terms of psychological well-being. However, Marler et al. (2021) reported no significant mean differences in psychological well-being between male and female college students.

Research examining specific domains of psychological well-being has revealed more nuanced patterns of gender differences. Matud et al. (2019) found that both sexes benefited from having self-concepts incorporating both masculine-instrumental and feminine-expressive characteristics.

Several factors may contribute to the inconsistent findings regarding gender differences in psychological well-being. These include variations in conceptualisation and measurement of well-being, differences in sample characteristics and cultural contexts, and the influence of moderating variables (Diener et al., 2018).

In Chinese cultural contexts, traditional gender norms have historically prescribed different roles and expectations for males and females (Yang, 2022). However, contemporary Chinese society has experienced significant changes in gender relations, with increasing educational and professional opportunities for women and evolving gender attitudes (Liu et al., 2019).

b. Age Differences in Psychological Well-Being

Research examining age differences in psychological well-being among college students has focused primarily on developmental changes during the college years and comparisons between traditional-age and non-traditional-age students.

A study by Liu et al. (2019) found significant variations in psychological well-being across academic years. First and second-year students typically reported higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, while third and final-year students demonstrated notably better psychological health.

Rezvan et al. (2017) found that late adolescents experienced more mental health issues compared to their early adolescent counterparts, challenging assumptions about linear improvements in psychological well-being with increasing age.

Research on college student development has identified several factors that may contribute to age differences in psychological well-being. These include cognitive maturation, identity development, changes in social relationships, increasing autonomy, and accumulation of coping resources during college (Arnett, 2000).

In Chinese cultural contexts, age is traditionally associated with increasing wisdom, respect, and social status (Chen et al., 2013). However, contemporary Chinese society has experienced rapid social and economic changes that may create generational differences in values, opportunities, and challenges, with implications for psychological well-being across age groups (Liu et al., 2019).
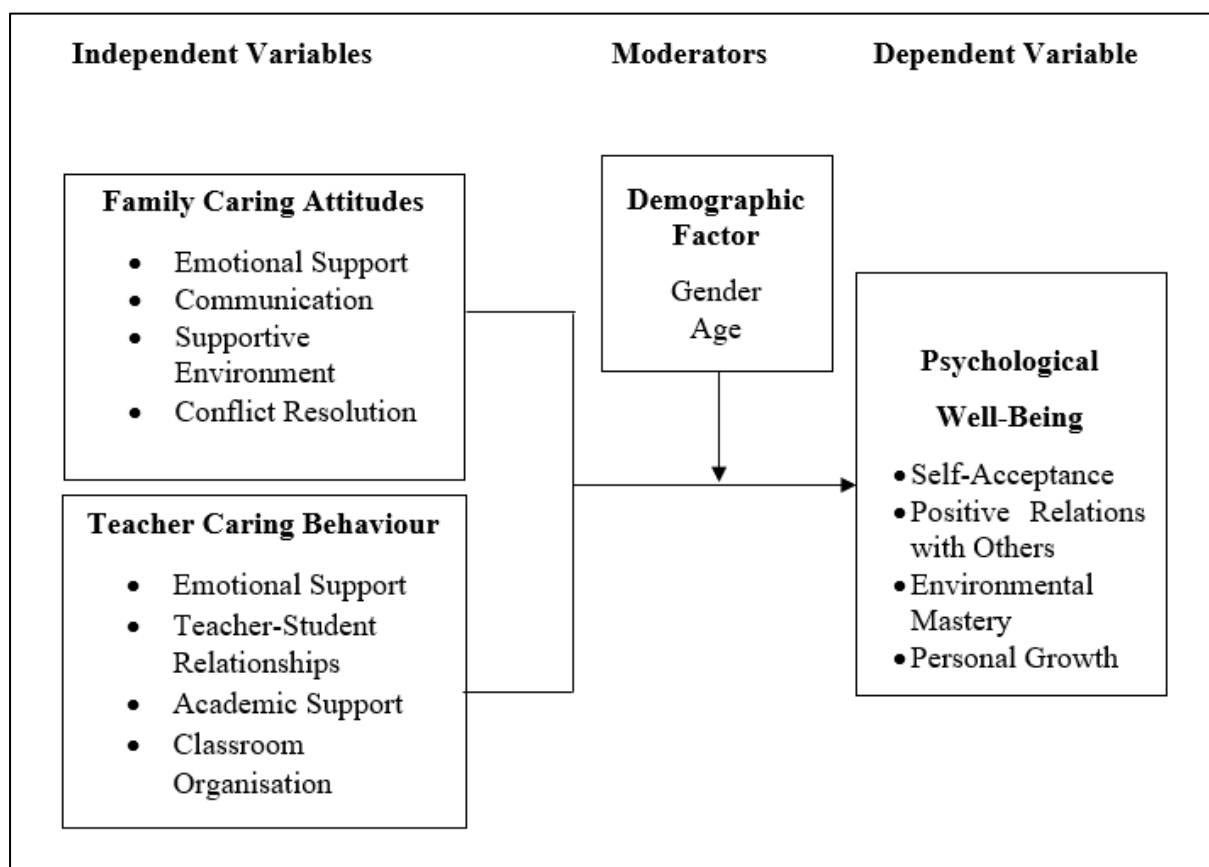
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 2: *Conceptual Framework for the Interplay Between Family Caring Attitudes, Teacher Caring Behaviour, and Psychological Well-Being Among College Students in China: A Conceptual Framework* *(Source: Author)*

As shown in Figure 2 above, the conceptual framework for this study integrates theoretical perspectives and empirical research, which have been reviewed in previous sections. It illustrates proposed relationships between family caring attitudes, teacher caring behaviour, and psychological well-being among college students in China, with gender and age as potential moderating variables. This framework provides a conceptual foundation for

understanding how caring in family and educational contexts collectively influences students' psychological development.

CONCLUSION

This conceptual paper has developed an integrated framework for understanding the interplay between family caring attitudes, teacher caring behaviour, and psychological well-being among college students in China, with attention to potential moderating effects of gender and age. Drawing on multiple theoretical perspectives and empirical research, the framework conceptualises how caring relationships in family and educational contexts collectively influence students' psychological development. By illuminating the complex interplay between family and educational influences on college students' psychological well-being, with attention to demographic variations, this conceptual framework contributes to understanding how caring relationships across contexts collectively shape students' development during the important transition of college education in Chinese cultural settings.

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