

# The Relationship Between Negotiable Fate and Life Satisfaction: The Serial Mediation by Self-Esteem and Positive Psychological Capital

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**Purpose:** Negotiable fate as a belief in coping with the difficulties and uncertainties of life has an impact on people's mental health. This study aims to understand the influence of negotiate fate on college students' life satisfaction and its underlying mechanism.

**Methods:** A cross-sectional study was conducted with the participation of 1523 students from six universities across China. The study aimed to measure the variables of negotiable fate, self-esteem, positive psychological capital, and life satisfaction of all participants. To investigate the effect of negotiable fate on college students' life satisfaction and the mediating roles of self-esteem and positive psychological capital in this relationship, a serial mediation effects model using Hayes' PROCESS was employed.

**Results:** The results suggest that negotiable fate has a positive predictive effect on college students' life satisfaction. The impact of negotiable fate on college students' life satisfaction was mediated by self-esteem and positive psychological capital, and the chained mediation of self-esteem and positive psychological capital.

**Conclusion:** To summarize, the belief of negotiable fate has practical significance for the enhancement of college student's mental health and quality of life, and the cultivation of college students' belief of negotiable fate can be actively promoted in the future to help them better cope with the uncertainties and challenges in their lives to improve their life satisfaction.

**Keywords:** negotiable fate, life satisfaction, self-esteem, positive psychological capital

## Introduction

As a way to cope with various uncertainties and challenges in life, humans have constructed theories of fate. In previous research on beliefs about fate, individuals' subjective agency and fate control were often positioned in opposition. Recognizing the determinism of fate in the current situation seemed to imply relinquishing individual subjective agency, which could potentially have negative effects on individuals.<sup>1,2</sup> However, within the negotiable fate, the relationship between individual subjective agency and the determinism of fate is redefined. The belief of negotiable fate emphasizes the individual's right to autonomous control and choice, not passively accepting fate in the face of life's difficulties and challenges, but actively using the resources available to achieve a more beneficial outcome through one's own efforts and decisions.<sup>3</sup> This belief finds vivid expression in ancient Chinese wisdom, as seen in proverbs such as "Do your best and leave the rest to fate", "Man proposes, but God disposes", and "Heaven bestows great responsibilities on individuals, first testing their determination". These proverbs entirely embody the core ideas of the negotiable fate.

In the contemporary fast-paced and high-pressure social environment, college students confront an array of challenges and pressures in their daily lives, spanning academic demands, interpersonal relationships, and uncertainties regarding their future development. These multifaceted challenges and pressures have an important impact on their mental well-being and life satisfaction.<sup>4,5</sup> Moreover, our comprehension and response to life's uncertainties and challenges will influence our mental health and behaviors.<sup>6</sup> Some western research findings suggested that the belief in fate's influence on individual life trajectories might lead to passive and withdrawn behaviors, accompanied by psychological states of

despondency and hopelessness.<sup>7</sup> However, in recent years, China's accelerated economic development and increased international influence, coupled with the remarkable creativity and vitality exhibited by its people, have rendered traditional Western beliefs about fate and control theories inadequate in explaining this phenomenon comprehensively. Negotiable fate refers to the belief that individuals can exert some control over their predestined fate through their own efforts, which is consistent with the concept of self-improvement through education and personal behavior advocated by Confucianism in the Chinese cultural background. Confucianism believes that every person's fate is not fixed. Through personal effort and integrity, people can shape their future. This emphasizes the possibility and ability of individuals to interact with fate, encouraging individual initiative within the framework of acknowledging greater, unseen forces. With the support of this belief, people might influence their fate through positive actions and strategies. Such a positive attitude and control ability can promote the improvement of life satisfaction.

The pursuit of happiness and the achievement of a fulfilling life have consistently been central themes in interdisciplinary research, and they are also acknowledged as fundamental objectives within the domain of psychology. Life satisfaction is formally defined as an individual's self-assessment of their life, predicated on internal benchmarks, encompassing a comprehensive cognitive evaluation of their life circumstances over an extended timeframe, and it is a subjective assessment of one's overall quality of life.<sup>8</sup> As a noteworthy positive psychological quality, life satisfaction is widely recognized as a pivotal metric for gauging the construct of "happiness". To elaborate, when individuals' appraisals reflect elevated levels of life satisfaction, they tend to encounter a heightened frequency of positive emotions and a commensurate reduction in negative emotions, thereby contributing to an associated increase in their overall sense of happiness.<sup>9</sup> Current research shows that the life satisfaction of college students is influenced by various factors, including but not limited to social support, psychological capital and self-esteem.<sup>10</sup> As an important capability for social development, the life satisfaction of college students has significant impact on their psychological well-being and physical health.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, in-depth research on life satisfaction in college students not only helps us better understand the mental state of this group, but also helps universities and society to establish more effective mental health intervention strategies.

The concept of negotiable fate emphasizes that "accepting fate" does not equate to "surrendering". Even within the confines of fate, individuals with a stronger belief in a negotiable fate can harness their own resources, face reality with an optimistic mindset, center their efforts on problem-solving, and endeavor to achieve their goals to the fullest extent possible.<sup>12</sup> This proactive approach can potentially yield a positive impact on life satisfaction. Therefore, an in-depth understanding and exploration of the relationship between the negotiable fate and college students' life satisfaction based on the Chinese cultural context and its intrinsic mechanism are of great practical significance in promoting the positive construction of college students' psychological resources and the enhancement of their life satisfaction.

## The Present Study

Self-esteem encompasses an individual's positive self-evaluation, involving cognitive awareness, emotional assessment, and self-acceptance.<sup>13</sup> It serves as a positive predictor of life satisfaction<sup>14</sup> and exhibits a bidirectional relationship with an individual's physical and psychological health as well as self-perception.<sup>15</sup> In other words, high self-esteem is associated with improved mental health and increased life satisfaction, whereas negative stimuli, self-perception, and emotional experiences may influence self-esteem. In situations where individuals acknowledge the influence of fate on their personal lives, negotiable fate implies the capacity to proactively influence outcomes. While individuals may encounter severe obstacles in pursuing their goals, holding a strong negotiable fate belief helps individuals respond positively to unpleasant stimuli and facilitates the selection of adaptive coping strategies.<sup>16</sup> Adaptive coping strategies allow individuals to exercise a degree of personal control over the situations they encounter or their emotional states, to resolve problems and achieve goals positively, or by adjusting their cognitive perceptions of events to regulate their emotional acceptance of life's adversities.<sup>17</sup> Conversely, avoidance coping strategies may offer temporary relief but often lack long-term social adaptability and can potentially exacerbate an individual's distress. Confronting the uncontrollability of the current situation can lead to negative emotions, subsequently impacting an individual's psychological well-being.<sup>18</sup> The belief in negotiable fate encourages individuals to believe that they have the opportunity and ability to

choose and shape their own lives and fate. Such beliefs can enhance individuals' self-confidence and make it easier for them to cope with life's challenges and difficulties, thus contributing to self-esteem.

According to the expansion-construction theory, more frequent experiences of positive influences and more positive evaluations of themselves and their current life situations will facilitate the construction of positive psychological resources. Individuals with elevated psychological capital tend to exhibit emotional stability, comprehensive self-awareness, and a rational attribution of success and failure, thereby leading to heightened levels of life satisfaction.<sup>19</sup> A study revealed that those who hold the belief in negotiable fate do not easily give up when faced with obstacles and difficulties in corporate development, and are more inclined to lead organizational members in extensive knowledge searching using existing resources.<sup>20</sup> Acknowledgment of the negotiable fate by management not only fosters innovative behavior within the organization but also serves as a positive predictor of its performance. Therefore, we hypothesize that negotiable fate may influence life satisfaction by mediating positive psychological capital.

Prior research demonstrates a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and positive psychological capital.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, when individuals tend towards negotiating with fate, the reevaluation of the constraints imposed by fate in a favorable light fosters the acceptance of life events and amplifies positive self-assessment, potentially leading to an increase in their self-esteem levels. Such a mindset enables a more lucid comprehension of their current reality, the establishment of achievable goals, and the proactive mobilization of social resources to exercise their agency. This process contributes to the cultivation of positive psychological capital and ultimately optimizes the achievement of personal objectives within the confines of existing constraints, which may result in heightened life satisfaction.

In conclusion, based on the above research, the present study constructed a serial mediation model, and the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. The negotiable fate can positively predict college students' life satisfaction.

H2. The impact of the negotiable fate on life satisfaction can be mediated by self-esteem.

H3. The impact of the negotiable fate on life satisfaction can be mediated by positive psychological capital.

H4. Self-esteem and Positive psychological capital play a chain mediating role in the influence of the negotiable fate on life satisfaction.

## Materials and Methods

### Participants

This study used a convenient sampling method and conducted an anonymous questionnaire survey on 1523 students from six universities in China. Among the participants, including 303 (19.89%) male students and 1220 (80.11%) female students. All participants provided informed consent before the formal survey, clearly informing them of their right to stop the investigation at any time and the anonymity of the study.

### Measurement

The Negotiable Fate Scale was originally developed by Chaturvedi et al.<sup>3</sup> In this study, we used the Chinese version of the negotiable fate scale.<sup>22</sup> This version of the scale has demonstrated good reliability and validity. The scale consists of 6 items, rated on a 6-point scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating a higher level of negotiable fate perspective. In this study, the Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for this scale was 0.87.

The Chinese version Life Satisfaction Scale was designed to assess the level of life satisfaction.<sup>23</sup> This scale consists of 5 items that are rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (did not apply to me at all) to 3 (applied to me very much). The total score ranges from 7 to 35. Higher scores represent higher levels of life satisfaction. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient of the scale in this study was 0.89.

The Chinese version of the Self-Esteem Scale (SES) was used, which consists of 10 items and rating on 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).<sup>24</sup> Considering the differences between Chinese and Western

cultures, question 8 was changed to positive scoring, with entries 3, 5, 9, and 10 being negatively scored.<sup>25</sup> The higher the score, the higher the individual's self-esteem level. The Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient for this scale in this study was 0.84.

Participants' Positive Psychological Capital was assessed using the Positive Psychological Capital Scale,<sup>26</sup> which contains 4 dimensions of self-efficacy, resilience, hope and optimism, with 26 entries. A 7-point scale was used, ranging from 1 (not at all compliant) to 7 (fully compliant), with entries 8, 10, 12, 14, and 25 being reverse scored. Higher scores indicate higher levels of psychological capital in each dimension or overall. The scale Cronbach's  $\alpha$  coefficient in this study was 0.92.

## Data Analysis

SPSS 25.0 and SPSS macro program PROCESS were used to analyze the data in this study. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to calculate the mean and standard deviation of each variable and to obtain variable characteristics. Pearson product-difference correlation analysis was used to test the relationship between the variables. Based on Bootstrap methodology and using model 6 according to the SPSS macro program PROCESS tested for serial mediation effects. This method generated 95% confidence intervals (CI) of the indirect effects. Bootstrapped 95% CI not straddling zero were considered statistically significant.

## Results

### Preliminary Analyses

The results of descriptive statistics and Pearson correlations of the study variables are displayed in Table 1. The results of the correlation analysis show that there is a significant positive correlation between the four variables: negotiable fate, self-esteem, positive psychological capital, and life satisfaction. The results found that skewness and kurtosis values ranged from  $-0.64$  to  $1.03$ . The VIF values were  $1.28$ – $2.09$ , the tolerance values were  $0.48$ – $0.78$ , which suggested that there was no multi-collinearity issue.

### Serial Mediation Analysis

The results of the regression analysis (Table 2) showed that a positive direct effect of negotiable fate on life satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Negotiable fate significantly and positively predicted self-esteem ( $\beta = 0.21$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Negotiable fate ( $\beta = 0.20$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and self-esteem ( $\beta = 0.93$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) was also found to be a positive predictor of positive psychological capital. When self-esteem and positive psychological capital act as the mediators were included in the analysis, negotiable fate was still significantly and positively predicted life satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.16$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), self-esteem positive predicted life satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.30$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), and positive psychological capital significantly positively predicted life satisfaction ( $\beta = 0.59$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

The present study was based on Bootstrap methodology and tested for serial mediation effects using model 6 according to the SPSS macro program PROCESS provided by Hayes, and 95% confidence intervals were estimated separately by 5000 repeated samplings.<sup>27</sup> The results of the serial effect test (Figure 1, Table 3) showed that the mediation effect value was 0.296, accounting for 65.34%. Specifically, the mediating effect contains three paths of indirect effects: indirect effect from negotiable fate  $\rightarrow$  self-esteem  $\rightarrow$  life satisfaction (effect value 0.063), the percentage of total effect relative to 13.91%; indirect effect from negotiable fate  $\rightarrow$  positive psychological capital  $\rightarrow$  life satisfaction (effect value 0.118), the percentage

**Table 1** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Study Variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Negotiable fate	4.56	0.90	–			
2. Self-esteem	2.93	0.50	0.38***	–		
3. Positive psychological capital	4.45	0.78	0.46***	0.69***	–	
4. Life satisfaction.	3.80	1.20	0.34***	0.43***	0.52***	–

Note: \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ .

**Table 2** Regression Paths of the Conceptual Serial Mediation Model

Predictors		Life Satisfaction	Self-Esteem	Positive Psychological capital	Life Satisfaction
Negotiable fate	$\beta$	0.45	0.21	0.20	0.16
	t	14.12***	15.91***	12.18***	4.83***
Self-esteem	$\beta$			0.93	0.30
	t			31.39***	4.19**
Positive psychological capital	$\beta$				0.59
	t				12.20***
$R^2$		0.12	0.14	0.52	0.29
F		199.49***	252.98***	829.40***	209.60***

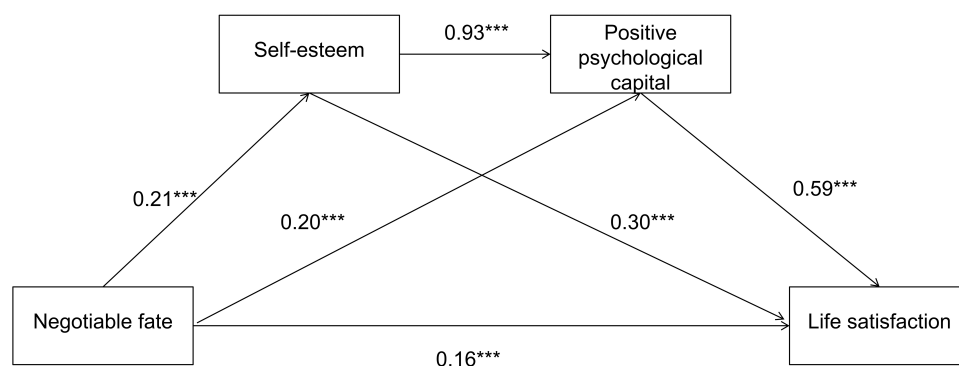
Notes: \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001.

of total effect relative to 26.05%; indirect effect from negotiable fate  $\rightarrow$  self-esteem  $\rightarrow$  positive psychological capital  $\rightarrow$  life satisfaction (effect value 0.115), the percentage of total effect relative to 25.39%. The 95% confidence intervals for all three indirect effects did not contain zero, indicating that all three indirect effects reached a significant level.

## Discussion

In traditional Chinese culture, fate is considered to be related to personal choices and actions, and even if there is an element of predestination, personal choices and efforts will still exert an influence on one's future to a certain extent. The concept of negotiable fate is compatible with the values and beliefs conveyed in traditional Chinese culture, which will have a non-negligible impact on the personal development and lives of college students. Negotiable fate emphasizes that although individuals are constrained by factors such as current environment, social conditions and inherent genetic characteristics, they still possess a certain degree of autonomy and agency. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of the influence of this subjective cognitive factor on college students' life satisfaction and its psychological mechanism within the context of Chinese culture holds significant practical significance for nurturing positive psychological qualities and pursuing a happy life among college students.

The results of the study show that negotiable fate has a significant positive predictive effect on Chinese college student's life satisfaction. The need for a sense of personal control is a fundamental human need, and the absence of this sense of control can lead to a range of psychological and behavioral issues.<sup>28,29</sup> People who encounter obstacles in fulfilling this basic need for a sense of control may develop a fate belief that blames fate for the constraints they face.<sup>30,31</sup> Such a belief is not a negative compliance, but advocates improving personal fate through personal efforts, which complements the Chinese traditional culture that emphasizes self-improvement. This belief further encourages them to maintain a positive view of themselves because they believe that even if they cannot overcome these limitations, they can



**Figure 1** Mediating roles of self-esteem and positive psychological capital between negotiable fate and life satisfaction.\*\*\*P<0.001.

Table 3 Standardized Indirect Effects

Path	Effect	Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI
Negotiable fate → self-esteem → life satisfaction	0.063	0.030	0.096
Negotiable fate → positive psychological capital → life satisfaction	0.118	0.087	0.155
Negotiable fate → self-esteem → positive psychological capital → life satisfaction	0.115	0.091	0.143
Total indirect effect	0.296	0.248	0.348
Total	0.453	0.390	0.516

still “manage” their fate in different ways, even including various superstitious practices.<sup>32</sup> Studies have shown that this belief helps individuals to adopt integrated strategies to enhance their sense of control and satisfaction with life, especially more significant when facing uncertainty or adversity.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Western individualistic cultures place more emphasis on the belief in individual autonomy and control. Therefore, individuals are often expected to fully determine their own destiny through their own actions. Life satisfaction may be closely linked to personal achievements and autonomy, rather than the negotiability of fate. According to the perspective of social cognitive psychology, beliefs serve as important drivers of behavior. Through positive choices and actions, individuals can influence the trajectory of their future to some extent. In the context of Chinese culture, having a highly negotiable fate can motivate individuals to interpret and accept unexpected outcomes positively. It enables them to maintain optimism and confidence while pursuing their goals, and they are more likely to make adventurous decisions.<sup>34</sup> This, to some extent, satisfies individuals’ sense of control over life events, enhances their confidence and initiative in pursuing goals, and their likelihood of experiencing higher levels of life satisfaction.

The study found that self-esteem plays a mediating role in the relationship between negotiable fate and life satisfaction. Individuals holding a high negotiable fate belief emphasize that even under the circumstances and boundaries set by fate, individuals tend to cope positively, focusing on problem-solving and mobilizing social resources to achieve their goals, maximizing gains and minimizing losses.<sup>35</sup> Negotiable fate encourages individuals to believe that they have the ability to shape their own lives and future, and this positive belief prompts individuals to view themselves and their future positively, which contributes to increased self-confidence reducing self-doubt and anxiety, enabling them to cope more positively and optimistically in the face of difficulties, and thus enhancing self-esteem. Cross-cultural research evidence indicates that compared to Western countries, Asian countries like China and India have higher levels of negotiable fate beliefs.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, when individuals hold higher levels of negotiable fate, their expectations for the future are more optimistic, accompanied by positive emotional experiences, and they also exhibit higher levels of self-esteem.<sup>37</sup>

The positive psychological capital mediated the association between negotiate fate and life satisfaction. When facing various difficulties and challenges in life, simply believing that individuals can overcome all obstacles to achieve their goals may not be adaptive. In such situations, individuals often feel demoralized and frustrated by the many difficulties, which may even cause them to show passivity and withdrawal, as well as negative emotions. While individuals with a strong negotiable fate are better able to accept the unchangeable control exerted by external factors by considering that outcomes are jointly determined by themselves and uncontrollable external factors, it enables them to maintain confidence in their subjective agency and personal effectiveness, enhancing self-efficacy and boosting positive psychological capital.<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile self-efficacy, resilience, hope and optimism, as important components of positive psychological capital, facilitate individuals to cope positively with adversity so that they can better recover from setbacks, face life positively and optimistically, and increase life satisfaction.<sup>39,40</sup>

Our study found that negotiable fate can influence college students’ life satisfaction through a serial mediation effect of self-esteem and positive psychological capital. Compensatory Control suggests that when individuals are in uncontrollable environments, their sense of control is threatened, and that uncertainty and a sense of the unknown induce anxiety, prompting the individual’s psychological system to regain a sense of control and structure through alternative means.<sup>41,42</sup> As a positive and effective compensatory mechanism, negotiable fate helps individuals to maintain their subjectivity agency by achieving adaptation to a restricted environment through positive self-regulation and favorable evaluation of the environment. Self-esteem is associated with subjective well-being and positive emotions.<sup>43</sup> Positive emotional



experiences contribute to the construction of psychological resources, thereby increasing an individual's level of psychological capital.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the negotiable fate encourages individuals to maintain confidence in their goals under limited resources, enhance self-esteem, build positive psychological capital, and establish the belief that positive efforts can still lead to desirable outcomes even have many difficulties, thus continuously improving life satisfaction. These findings reveal the multifaceted interactions of cognitive perspectives and psychological resources with college students' life satisfaction.

## Conclusion

This study investigated the mechanism of the influence of the negotiable fate on college students' life satisfaction from the perspective of positive psychology. On the one hand, the findings of this study indicate that the negotiable fate, as a positive fate belief, has a significant positive impact on self-esteem, positive psychological capital, life satisfaction. On the other hand, the serial mediation model provides an explanatory orientation for the mechanism of the influence of the negotiable fate on the life satisfaction of college students. On this basis, this study aims to further comprehend the concept of negotiable fate from a theoretical perspective and, at the same time, provide scientific references on cultivating correct fate beliefs and improving the life satisfaction of college students from a practical perspective.

At the same time, we found some research deficiencies that need to be further improved in future research. Firstly, there may be limitations within our research sample. The sample of college students in our study comes from specific universities and is limited in number, which restricts the representativeness of the research results. Future studies could attempt to expand the sample range to enhance the universality and external validity of the results. Secondly, the survey data in this study are derived from self-reports, which could be influenced by the subjectivity of the respondents and effects of social expectations. Future research will need to use more objective measurement criteria to measure relevant variables. Lastly, the cross-sectional design used in this study makes it difficult to display any potential causal relationships between variables. Future surveys can further use longitudinal research methods and experimental designs to more accurately assess the relationship between the negotiable fate view and life satisfaction.

## Data Sharing Statement

The datasets used during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

## Ethics Statement

All participants in the study provided informed consent, and all the methods and research procedures were conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Wuhan Sports University.

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## Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this work.

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