

# **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIFFERENTIAL LEADERSHIP STYLE AND DEVIANT BEHAVIOR OF TEACHERS IN PRIVATE COLLEGES, CHINA**

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to understand the current differential leadership style, deviant behavior, and psychological capital of teachers in private colleges and the differences in demographic backgrounds. Using psychological capital as a mediator variable, the research explored the relationship between differential leadership style and deviant behavior of private college teachers. There were 351 questionnaires as the population sampling. Through descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA analysis, Pearson correlation analysis, and regression analysis. The differential leadership style of teachers was moderate, with a high level of psychological capital and a low level of deviant behavior. There were significant differences in the differential leadership style, deviant behavior, and psychological capital of college teachers with different demographic backgrounds. There were significant differences in differential leadership styles of teachers of different genders, ages, teaching age, and professional titles. There were significant differences in psychological capital of teachers of different genders, ages, educational backgrounds, and professional titles. There are significant differences in deviant behavior of teachers of different ages, teaching ages, educational backgrounds, and professional titles. Differential leadership style was significantly positively correlated with psychological capital of teachers. There was a significant negative correlation between teachers' differential leadership style and deviant behavior and psychological capital and deviant behavior. Using teacher psychological capital as a mediator variable, teacher differential leadership style significantly impacted deviant behavior.

**Keywords:** Private Colleges Teacher, Differential Leadership Style, Deviant Behavior, Psychological Capital

## **Introduction**

With the advent of the new century, although education reform worldwide is in full swing, the teacher shortage is becoming more serious, which will be an excellent challenge for the education sector (Feng, 2019). It is predicted that there will be a shortage of at least 2 million well-trained teachers with

teacher certificates in the United States in the future (Ge, 2022), so the long-term talent development and promotion mechanism in the education industry needs to be highly valued by the education development in the United States. In Fiedler's (1951) view, a positive outlook on life comes from pursuing goals and experiencing success after achieving them (Wang et al., 2019). Through the guidance of teachers' goals, the leadership behavior and quality of leaders became the key to measuring the value of teachers (Ma et al., 2022; Gadi et al., 2022).

With the increasing number of colleges, the position of private colleges in China's higher education system has become increasingly prominent (Hua, 2023). As a special type of university, it had its characteristics regarding school-running philosophy, teaching model, and teacher allocation. The private college teachers needed strong teaching methods and educational concepts to adapt to the changes in educational policies and social needs to improve their education and teaching level (Cheng, 2022). However, with the increased in private colleges, some teachers in private colleges had some deviant behaviors (Yu, 2021). For example, there were some problems, such as violating professional ethics, failing to perform teaching duties, abusing students, etc. This kind of deviant behavior seriously damaged students' rights and safety and even affected the reputation and development of the whole school. In private colleges, conducting in-depth research on the relationship between differential leadership styles, psychological capital, and teachers' deviant behaviors was necessary.

### **Research Objectives**

(1) To understand the current teachers perceived differential leadership styles, deviant behaviors, and psychological capital in private colleges.

(2) To analyze the differences in differential leadership styles, deviant behavior, and psychological capital of private college teachers with different demographic backgrounds (gender, age, teaching age, educational background, and professional titles).

(3) To determine the relationships between differential leadership style, deviant behavior, and psychological capital among private college teachers.

(4) To verify the mediating role of psychological capital between differential leadership style and deviant behavior of teachers in private colleges.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Research on Differential Leadership Style***

Among the many concepts of differential leadership style, the understanding of Jiang & Zhang (2010) was widely recognized. The differential leadership style they understood the characteristics of rule by man, which was a differential leadership style in which leaders divided employees into their employees and outsiders according to their relationship with employees, employee loyalty and

employees' abilities, and give differential treatment in three aspects: communication and care, tolerance and trust, and promotion and reward (Tian, 2013). Zhang & Cao (2019) mentioned that individual relationships were divided into family, acquaintances, and strangers.

Regarding the impact of differential leadership style, Guo (2019) pointed out that differential leadership style affected employee job satisfaction and triggered employee resistance behavior, such as deviant behavior. Different differential leadership styles would lead to declining staff work efficiency, lousy mood, and affect teamwork in the specific work scene.

There was also a differential leadership style similar to enterprise employees in colleges. Liu (2016) believed that differential leadership referred to allocating more resources and privileges by school leaders to trusted teachers to enhance the school's reputation and competitiveness. It might lead to significant attention and resource acquisition differences among different teachers.

Research on Measurement of Differential Leadership Style. Liu (2017) revised the above scale and obtained a differential leadership scale suitable for the general workplace, which was investigated by taking care of communication, tolerating mistakes and promoting rewards. Furthermore, Jiang et al. (2014) adjusted the differential leadership style scale and developed an eight-dimensional differential leadership style scale. Subordinate to one's people, and foreign subordinates.

#### ***Research on Deviant Behavior***

In recent years of research, Wen (2020) thought that deviant behavior was the behaviors in which teachers deviate from or violate teachers' professional ethics when dealing with various relationships and problems. He (2022) believed that teacher deviant behavior was a condition of misconduct in the professional ethics of primary and secondary school teachers.

Research on the influencing factors of deviant behavior. Shi (2017) conducted a special investigation on constructing teachers' morality. It was found that the adverse effects of college teachers' deviant behaviors were mainly manifested in the following aspects: First, paid tutoring, corporal punishment, personal misconduct, education was unfair, moral corruption of students.

Research on the measurement of deviant behavior. Cheng & Chen (2019) designed the scale of primary school teachers' moral anomie, a representative research tool for primary school teachers' deviant behavior in recent years. It mainly investigated teachers' deviant behavior and defined it as a series of behaviors that didn't conform to or violate teachers' professional ethics in their professional activities, including teachers' professional misconduct, and dereliction of duty.

Liu (2020) summarized the manifestations of teacher deviant behavior from the perspective of the severity of behavioral consequences: he proposed dereliction of duty, inappropriate behavior, and dereliction of duty, and developed a questionnaire based on these three dimensions. In the same year, Skovholt & Trotter (2016) developed a questionnaire for measuring teachers' moral behavior. It included multiple dimensions such as teacher professional responsibility, teacher-student relationship,

protection of student rights, and teacher professional development.

### ***Research on Psychological Capital***

Based on the theory of positive psychology, psychological capital profoundly impacted organizational development (Luthans & Youssef, 2004). Seligman et al. (2005) explored the impact of positive emotional states on individual development, which sparked a research trend in positive psychology.

Based on different understandings of the connotation of psychological capital, existing research mainly defined psychological capital from three perspectives. Mikus & Teoh (2022) believed that psychological capital not only had relatively lasting and stable characteristics possessed by characteristics but also had the characteristics possessed by states that measures could intervene. Traits and states could be regarded as two different directions of psychological capital.

Research on the influencing factors of psychological capital. Then, Tian (2009) proposed that the factors related to emotional orientation, such as creativity and wisdom, and the abilities related to social orientation, such as emotional intelligence and gratitude, became the influencing factors of the new category of psychological capital. A summary of research on gender, age, teaching age, educational background, professional title, and educational variables of teacher psychological capital.

Research on measuring psychological capital. Jensen (2002) developed the Psychological Capital Evaluation Scale included hope, optimism, self-efficacy, and toughness. Based on this, the original four dimensions were expanded to five, and Pierce & Gardner (2004) added "integrity" to the measurement and developed the Positive Psychological Capital Evaluation Scale. The Psychological Toughness Scale developed by Connor & Davidson (2003) was used to measure individual psychological capital.

The Psychological Capital Scale by Luthans et al. (2007) covered four core psychological capital dimensions: hope, self-efficacy, toughness, and optimism emotions. Comprehensive evaluation enabled researchers to have a thorough understanding of an individual's level of psychological capital rather than just focusing on one aspect.

Tu & Liu (2021) put forward the dimensions of self-confidence, optimism, toughness and hope of psychological capital compiled by teachers. After that, Wu et al. (2012) compiled the Teacher Psychological Capital Scale, which included transactional psychological capital: hope, perseverance and optimism, and interpersonal psychological capital: self-confidence, emotional intelligence, altruism, self-modesty, and gratitude. Interpersonal and transactional psychological capital constitute local psychological capital with high reliability.

### ***Research on the Relationship between Differential Leadership Style, Deviant Behavior, and Psychological Capital of College Teachers***

Many studies explored the relationship between teachers' differential leadership styles and

psychological capital and found a positive correlation between them. Yang & Yan (2022) believed that teachers with a differential leadership style often exhibit higher levels of psychological capital. The differential leadership style emphasized authority and status, making teachers more confident and decisive in teaching. This confidence and decisiveness not only helped improve teachers' teaching effectiveness but also enhanced their psychological capital.

Some studies have found a negative correlation between the differential leadership style of teachers and deviant behavior. Specifically, teachers with differential leadership style often exhibit less deviant behavior. For example, Zhang (2022) had academic misconduct teacher deviant behavior. After analysis, this biased behavior might be related to the differential leadership style for S province private colleges. Liu (2016) found that a differential leadership style might lead to more teacher deviant behaviors, such as unfair behavior and counterproductive work behavior. There was a wealth of research on the impact of differential leadership style on the deviant behavior of teachers.

To reduce the college teachers' deviant behavior, researcher Wang (2018) thought that elements of psychological capital were self-efficacy, hope, tenacity and optimism, which play an intermediary role in preventing teachers' deviant behavior. Xu et al. (2023) proposed that teachers with positive psychological capital might have higher confidence in their abilities and performance. They believed they could complete tasks, thus reducing deviant behavior due to frustration or unfair treatment.

## **Methodology**

In this study, the teachers of three private colleges in S Province were tested and investigated by convenient sampling. It was known that the total number of teachers in three private colleges in S province was 4,777, with 1,879 teachers in Hunan International Economics University, 1,621 teachers in Changsha Medical College and 1,277 teachers in Xiangnan University as the research areas. According to Morgan Table, 356 college teachers were selected for formal tests, and the basic situation of teachers' gender, age, teaching age, educational background and professional title was classified. Finally, 351 valid questionnaires were collected and organized, with an effective response rate of 98.60%, meeting the statistical standardization requirements.

Differential Leadership Style Questionnaire. Jiang & Zhang (2010) developed difference-ordered leadership scale, which measures the deviation of superior leaders to different subordinate employees and had good reliability and validity. The questionnaire consists of 14 questions, including three dimensions: communication and care, promotion and reward, tolerance and trust.

Deviation Behavior Questionnaire. The college teacher deviant behavior questionnaire used in this study was derived from Zhang's (2014) teacher deviant behavior scale, which had obvious targeting for teachers with good reliability and validity. This questionnaire divided teacher deviant behavior into two dimensions: interpersonal deviation and behavioral deviation, with 22 questions.

Psychological Capital Questionnaire. This study uses the psychological capital questionnaire of Du & Jin (2021) as the research tool, which was revised according to the psychological capital scale developed by Luthans et al. (2007) and the characteristics of college teachers. This questionnaire consisted of 24 questions, including four dimensions: self-efficacy, hope, toughness, and optimism, and has been verified to have good reliability and validity.

## Results

### *Demographic Analysis of Questionnaire Participants*

In this questionnaire survey, the teachers at private colleges in S Province were taken as the research object, and 351 questionnaires were collected. The statistics of demographic backgrounds such as gender, age, teaching age, educational background and professional title. Among the gender, 187 male teachers account for 53.28%, and 164 female teachers account for 46.72%. Among the age variables, 86 people under 30 years old accounted for 24.50%, 130 people 31-40 years old accounted for 37.04%, 87 people 41-50 years old accounted for 24.78%, and 48 teachers aged over 50 accounted for 13.68%. Among the teaching ages, there were 62 people less than 3 years, accounting for 17.66%, 3-10 years 128 people, accounting for 36.47%; 11-20 years 107 people, accounted for 30.47%, and 54 people 21 years and above, accounting for 15.38%. Among the educational background, 117 undergraduates were, accounting for 33.34%, 176 master college teachers, accounting for 50.14%, and 58 doctoral college teachers, accounting for 16.52%. Among the professional title variables, 94 teaching assistants accounted for 26.78%, 138 lecturers accounted for 39.32%, 74 associate professors accounted for 21.08%, and 45 professors accounted for 12.82%.

### *Descriptive Statistics on the Levels of Differential Leadership Style, Deviant Behavior and Psychological Capital*

1) Using descriptive statistical analysis, examine the overall level of differential leadership style of teachers in private colleges. According to the analysis results in Table 1, it could be seen that the overall  $M=3.331$  for the differential leadership style of college teachers, indicating that the overall differential leadership style of college teachers was at a moderate level. Communication and care  $M=3.346$ , promotion reward  $M=3.316$ , tolerance and trust  $M=3.331$ , indicating an intermediate level in all dimensions. Therefore, the differential leadership style of teachers in private colleges in S Province was at a moderate level.

**Table 1:** Descriptive Statistical of Differential Leadership Style of Teachers

Dimension	N	M	SD	Interpretation
Communication and care	351	3.346	1.118	Moderate
Promotion and reward	351	3.316	1.142	Moderate
Tolerance and trust	351	3.331	1.298	Moderate
Differential leadership style	351	3.331	1.134	Moderate

2) Using descriptive statistical analysis, examine the overall level of deviant behavior of teachers in private colleges. According to the analysis results in Table 2, it could be seen that the overall deviation behavior of college teachers was  $M=2.080$ , interpersonal deviation was  $M=2.037$ , and behavior deviation was  $M=2.123$ , which indicates that the overall deviation behavior of teachers and its dimensions were low. Therefore, the level of deviant behavior of teachers in private colleges in S province was relatively low.

**Table 2:** Descriptive Statistical of Deviant Behavior of Teachers

Dimension	N	M	SD	Interpretation
Interpersonal deviation	351	2.037	0.616	Low
Behavioral deviation	351	2.123	0.695	Low
Deviant behavior	351	2.080	0.628	Low

3) Using descriptive statistical analysis, the overall level of psychological capital of teachers in private colleges was relatively high. According to the analysis results in Table 3, the overall psychological capital of college teachers was  $M=4.075$ , indicating a relatively high level of psychological capital of teachers. Self-efficacy  $M=4.178$ , hope  $M=4.002$ , toughness  $M=4.005$ , optimism  $M=4.116$ , indicating a high level of proficiency in all dimensions. Therefore, the psychological capital level of teachers in private colleges in S province was relatively high.

**Table 3:** Descriptive Statistical of Psychological Capital of Teachers

Dimension	N	M	SD	Interpretation
Self-efficacy	351	4.178	0.592	High
Hope	351	4.002	0.572	High
Toughness	351	4.005	0.587	High
Optimism	351	4.116	0.610	High
Psychological capital	351	4.075	0.462	High

***Differences Analysis on the Levels of Differential Leadership Style, Deviant Behavior and Psychological Capital***

There were significant differences in the differential leadership style, deviant behavior, and psychological capital of college teachers with different demographic backgrounds. There were significant differences in differential leadership styles of teachers of different genders, ages, teaching age, and professional titles. There were significant differences in psychological capital of teachers of different genders, ages, educational backgrounds, and professional titles. There are significant differences in deviant behavior of teachers of different ages, teaching ages, educational backgrounds, and professional titles.

### ***Correlation Analysis among Three Main Variables***

There was a significant positive correlation between differential leadership style and the psychological capital of teachers in private colleges. There was a significant negative correlation between differential leadership style and deviant behavior of teachers in private colleges. There was a significant negative correlation between psychological capital and the deviant behavior of teachers in private colleges. The overall relevant situation was shown in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Correlation between Psychological Capital and Deviant Behavior of Teachers

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M	DV1	DV2	DV
M1	1							
M2	.664**	1						
M3	.400**	.367**	1					
M4	.501**	.594**	.386**	1				
M	.818**	.834**	.686**	.796**	1			
DV1	-.392**	-.299**	-.367**	-.481**	-.493**	1		
DV2	-.442**	-.272**	-.433**	-.480**	-.521**	.835**	1	
DV	-.437**	-.297**	-.419**	-.501**	-.530**	.953**	.963**	1

Note: \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\*p<.001

M1: Self-efficacy, M2: Hope, M3: Toughness, M4: Optimism, M: Overall psychological capital  
 DV1: Interpersonal deviation, DV2: Behavioral deviation, DV: Overall deviant behavior

### ***Regression Analysis among Three Main Variables***

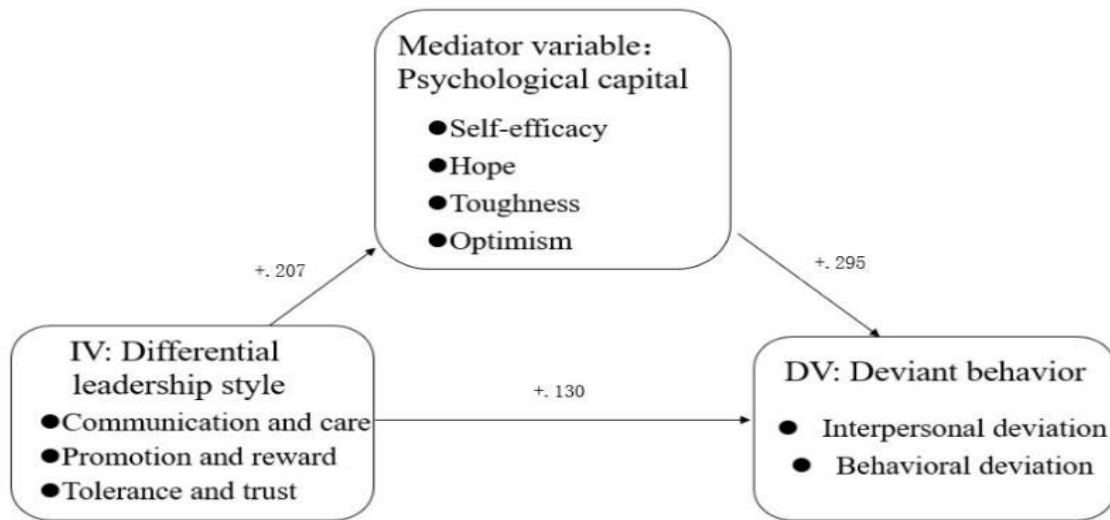
In the regression equation model with differential leadership style as the independent variable, psychological capital as the mediator variable and deviant behavior as the dependent variable, the regression model included differential leadership style ( $t=-3.031$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and psychological capital ( $t=-9.133$ ,  $p < .01$ ) as predictors ( $F=74.335$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Compared with model 1, it was evident that upon introducing total psychological capital, the predictive impact of overall differential leadership style on total deviant behavior decreased from  $-7.289$  to  $-3.031$ . However, the psychological capital partially mediated the relationship between differential leadership style and deviant behavior.

**Table 5:** Regression Analysis of Teacher's Differential Leadership Style and Deviant Behavior Mediated by Psychological Capital

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T	F	P	R	R <sup>2</sup>	adj R <sup>2</sup>
		B	SE	Beta						
1	(Constant)	2.751	.097		28.303					
	Differential leadership style overall	-.201	.028	-.363	-7.289	53.132	.000	.363	.132	.130
2	(Constant)	4.909	.252		19.445					
	Differential leadership style overall	-.085	.028	-.153	-3.031	74.335	.000	.547	.299	.295
	Overall psychological capital	-.625	.069	-.460	-9.113					



Figure 1 presented the schematic diagram of regression analysis results based on the regression and mediating function among these three main variables.



**Figure 1:** Schematic Diagram of Regression Analysis Results

## Discussion

### *Current Differential Leadership Style, Deviant Behavior, and Psychological Capital among Teachers in Private Colleges*

The research results showed that the differential leadership style of teachers in private colleges was at a moderate level, which was basically consistent with previous research results. In private colleges, differential leadership styles might be more common (Lin, 2021). The level of deviant behavior was low. In private colleges, teachers might have less behavior, which might be related to higher moral standards, professional responsibility and team spirit. The level of psychological capital was high. In private colleges, teachers might have this kind of psychological state, which might be related to factors such as their love for the profession, their investment in education and their concern for students.

### *Differences in Differential Leadership Styles among Teachers in Private Colleges with Different Demographic Backgrounds*

The comparison of gender differences found that male and female teachers had differences in personality traits, work styles, and differential leadership styles. This result was consistent with the research results of Jiang & Zhang (2010), which all reflected gender differences and male teachers might be more inclined to adopt differential leadership style, which was related to their roles and expectations in society. Female teachers might place more emphasis on teamwork and communication and tend to adopt an equal and democratic differential leadership style. Older teachers had more management experience and leadership abilities, making them more likely to adopt a differential

leadership style. This study analyzed that older teachers might be more familiar with the operation of differential leadership style and have more opportunities to practice this style. However, teachers with a short teaching age might still be in the adaptation and learning stage and have relatively less understanding and practical experience of differential leadership styles. In specific teaching and research work, highly educated teachers might have more professional knowledge and skills, which was helpful in adopting a differential leadership style in teaching. Professors had more power and resources, which made them more likely to adopt a differential leadership style in teaching.

#### ***Differences in Deviant Behaviors of Teachers in Private Colleges with Different Demographic Backgrounds***

This study analyzed that this might be because there was no significant difference between male and female teachers in terms of work requirements, stress, and environment. Hence, the incidence of deviant behavior was relatively stable (Zhang, 2014). As the increase of age, teachers gradually accumulate more teaching and management experience and could better control their behaviors. New teachers and teachers with certain teaching ages might need to adapt further and adjust their teaching strategies, which might lead to some deviant behaviors. Low-educated teachers might need to enhance further their professional knowledge and skills, which could lead to some deviant behaviors. In order to reduce the incidence of deviant behavior, colleges should pay attention to the vocational training and development of teachers, improve their professional quality and moral concept, and strengthen the management mechanism and cultural atmosphere construction of schools to create a good teaching environment (Wang, 2016).

#### ***Differences in Psychological Capital of Teachers in Private Colleges with Different Demographic Backgrounds***

Luthans (2007), Zhang et al. (2010), and Wu et al. (2012) also showed that the psychological capital level of male teachers was higher than that of female teachers, which might be related to the role and expectation of male teachers in society, and usually needs to bear more responsibilities and pressures, so higher psychological capital was needed to meet these challenges. Because young teachers were still in the stage of adaptation and learning and had higher expectations and pressures on career development, they needed more psychological capital to cope with it. The increase in teaching age has brought about the accumulation of teaching and management experience, it has also brought higher career development expectations and pressure. The educational background had a positive role in promoting teachers' psychological capital, and it also showed that teachers with higher psychological capital have a higher probability of having a higher educational background. Because teachers with senior titles usually have higher academic status and resources. At the same time, they bear more responsibilities and pressures, so they need higher psychological capital to cope with them.

***Relationship between Differential Leadership Style, Deviant Behavior, and Psychological Capital among Teachers In Private Colleges***

The main reason for the significant negative correlation between psychological capital and deviant behavior of teachers in private colleges was that teachers with high psychological capital usually had higher self-efficacy and self-confidence and could better cope with the challenges and pressures in teaching and management (Cheng & Chen, 2019). If teachers had higher psychological capital, they were more likely to face difficulties and challenges in their work actively, thus reducing the incidence of deviant behaviors. Therefore, there was a negative correlation between psychological capital and deviant behavior. This psychological state might lead to negative work attitudes and deviant behaviors. Psychological capital enhances teachers' self-efficacy and confidence, thereby helping them better cope with challenges and pressures in their work. If the psychological capital of teachers is low, they might be more susceptible to work pressure and setbacks, leading to deviant behavior.

**Conclusions**

1) The differential leadership style of teachers was at a moderate level, with a high level of psychological capital and a low level of deviant behavior.

2) There were significant differences between different genders of college teachers' differential leadership style, male teachers' differential leadership style was higher than female teachers. There were significant differences in different ages, and the differential leadership styles of college teachers of higher ages were higher than those of college teachers of lower ages. There was a significant difference in different teaching ages, and the teachers with higher teaching ages had higher differential leadership style. There was no significant difference in different educational backgrounds. There were significant differences in different titles, and the differential leadership style of college teachers with professional titles was higher than that of teaching assistants and lecturers.

3) There was no significant difference in the overall deviation behavior of college teachers between different genders. There were significant differences in different ages, and the deviation behavior of teachers under 30 years old and 31-40 years old was higher than that of teachers 41-50 years old and over 50 years old. There were significant differences in the whole deviation behavior of college teachers with different teaching ages. The deviation behavior of college teachers with less than 3 years, 3-10 years and 11-20 years was higher than that of teachers with 21 years and above, and the deviation behavior of college teachers with 3-10 years was higher than that of teachers with 11-20 years. The deviation behavior of college teachers with bachelor's degrees was higher than that of teachers with master's degrees and doctor's degrees, and the deviation behavior of teachers with master's degrees was higher than that of teachers with doctor's degrees. And the deviation behavior of teaching assistants and lecturers was higher than that of associate professors and professors.

4) There were significant differences in the psychological capital of teachers of different genders, and the psychological capital of male teachers was higher than that of female teachers. There were significant differences in different ages, and the psychological capital level of college teachers under 30 years old was the weakest. There was no significant difference in different teaching ages. There were significant differences in different educational backgrounds. The psychological capital of college teachers with doctoral degrees was higher than that of teachers with bachelor's degrees or below and master's degrees. The psychological capital of college teachers with professional titles was higher than that of teaching assistants and lecturers, and that of college teachers with associate professional titles was higher than that of teaching assistants and lecturers.

5) There was a significant positive correlation between differential leadership style and the psychological capital of teachers in private colleges. There was a significant negative correlation between differential leadership style and deviant behavior of teachers in private colleges. There was a significant negative correlation between psychological capital and the deviant behavior of teachers in private colleges. The psychological capital of teachers in private colleges served as a mediator variable, and the differential leadership style of teachers had a significant impact on deviant behavior.

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