

**Lost in Transition: The Dire Consequences for Academic Freedom and American
Expatriate Safety in Sino-US Colleges**

ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of transferring operational control from an American university to a Chinese branch on American expatriate professors, focusing on academic freedom and safety. The shift limits expatriate faculty decision-making involvement and exposes them to adverse educational administration, negatively affecting their academic freedom and safety. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, it reveals a decline in academic freedom and safety, tackling issues like toxic management, job dissatisfaction, and geopolitical challenges. The research highlights the importance of fostering organizational cultures that maintain American educational values—academic freedom, civil rights, DEI, and social justice—in global partnerships. It stresses the need for involvement from American accreditation bodies and professors' unions and proposes an integrative framework of organizational dynamics based on multiple capitals. The study calls for mixed-methods and longitudinal research to deeply understand these complex dynamics at the international higher education.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018, a leader from an American Professors' Union raised concerns over an American State University's decision to shift its China branch's operational oversight, spotlighting academic freedom and international collaboration issues. By July 1, 2019, this move, involving key roles like faculty hiring and promotion, became a reality.

During this shift, expatriate American professors and their global colleagues were sidelined in decision-making, forced to adhere to the Chinese administration's rules. This change has since deeply impacted their academic freedom and safety.

This research examines the major impacts of shifting control from a U.S. institution to its Chinese counterpart on expatriate educators. It aims to uncover the core reasons for these challenges and how the teachers have managed them.

American Universities in China

In the rapidly changing landscape of global higher education, many institutions from emerging and middle-income countries are eager to match the prestige of top Western universities. This drive often involves recruiting Western academics to enhance their quality and international reputation. This approach aligns with the benchmarks of respected ranking bodies like the Academic Ranking of World Universities by Shanghai Jiao Tong University and the Times Higher Education World University Rankings, which generally prefer Western institutions (Mohrman and Wang 2010).

Yet, this strategy, while boosting the institutions' stature and global reputation, introduces a myriad of challenges concerning cultural dynamics and power discrepancies. The importation of Western educational practices and benchmarks, despite its potential benefits in drawing students and competitive advantage, also surfaces issues related to the enforcement of Western

academic norms, leading to cultural and educational friction, particularly in the Chinese context (Mok and Cheung 2011, Yang 2020).

The challenges of integrating American academic practices in China, especially after shifting control to a Chinese branch campus, have been underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic. The Academic Freedom index's drop from 0.09 in 2019 to 0.07 by 2022 illustrates the growing authoritarian impact on American expatriate professors' academic freedoms (<https://academic-freedom-index.net/>) during the pandemic period.

This study focuses on the specific safety issues American expatriate professors face in China during and after the pandemic, within their new professional context. It explores the nature of these challenges, how the Chinese branch campus administration has responded, and the wider effects on faculty and the institution. Addressing these safety issues is crucial for the welfare of the expatriate faculty and the success (Austin et al. 2014, Duffy 2023, Kim 2016).

The guiding research question is, "How does transferring operational authority from an American college to its Chinese counterpart affect American expatriate professors' sense of workplace safety, and how have these professors adapted to changes in governance and management within Sino-US educational partnerships?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study delves into the complex safety issues at Sino-US academic institutions, examining how shifting operational control to international campuses affects various aspects of safety. Previous research shows the impact of safety awareness and climates on behavior (Christian et al. 2009) and examines the role of culture and external factors in creating safe work environments (Carayon et al. 2015). Safety culture, covering job safety, mental health, team

dynamics, and management, is key to enhancing workplace safety (Chib and Kanetkar 2014). Drawing on OHSAS, Total Worker Health®, and NIOSH guidelines, this study proposes a seven-dimensional framework to boost workplace well-being, advocating for a holistic approach to safety and welfare (Sorensen et al. 2018).

The complexity of workplace safety in academic contexts, particularly for American expatriate professors in international settings, has been less explored, highlighting challenges in academic freedom beyond US borders (Duffy 2023, Kim 2016).

Multiple Capital Theory as Multidimensionality of Workplace Safety

The multiple capital concept highlights that organizations rely on various resources beyond finances, underscoring diverse assets' significance for success (IIRC 2021). Originating from sociologists and economists' work, this notion has deepened in organizational studies over the 21st century. It identifies six critical capitals for value creation: financial, manufactured, human, intellectual, social, and natural capital, helping organizations leverage these for comprehensive and integrative reporting (Sun et al. 2022).

However, the IIRC framework, while detailed on financial aspects, misses the nuances of employee relations, like those of American professors in China. This study suggests a broader seven-capital model to encompass workplace safety dimensions: financial, organizational, social, career, psychological, physiological, and spiritual. This model enhances our grasp of workplace safety's multifaceted issues.

Financial Safety

It involves having a stable income or resources sufficient for essential needs such as housing, food, healthcare, and education, with security against immediate depletion. This

concept underscores the ability to maintain a certain lifestyle and financial stability, even amidst unexpected expenses or economic declines (Rine and LaBarre 2020).

Organizational Safety

This involves management promoting an inclusive and diverse workplace culture, where all feel valued and respected. It's about building an environment free from discrimination, harassment, and cultural insensitivity, emphasizing fairness, clear communication, and well-being support (Okechukwu et al. 2014). It also examines the impact of organizational structure and workflow on safety and health, analyzing how work processes and design affect employee well-being (Nuñez and Villanueva 2011).

Social (Relational) Safety

Social (relational) safety emphasizes respectful, positive connections in personal and professional spheres, aiming for environments without abuse, neglect, or exploitation, where individuals feel supported and valued. This approach enhances well-being through healthy relationships. In workplaces, a supportive social climate is key, improving morale and reducing stress, highlighting the role of positive interactions in productivity (Di Fabio et al. 2016). Organizations valuing these aspects not only boost employee well-being but also foster success and career resilience (Inoue et al. 2016).

Career (Human capital) Safety

Career safety is essential in human capital theory, focusing not just on job stability but also on professional growth and employability. Career capital, vis-à-vis career safety, involves non-financial resources crucial for job and market success (Brown, Hooley, and Wond 2020). An organization's dedication to fostering professional growth in a safe environment is key to keeping talent, boosting engagement, and increasing motivation (Grame, Staines, and Pate 1998). Within

human capital theory, career safety underscores the synergy between talent management and advancement opportunities, emphasizing the value of employee investment for organizational resilience in a dynamic job market.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety refers to the perceived safety for personal risk-taking in settings like workplaces, crucial for open expression, acknowledging errors, and asking questions without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson and Lei 2014). It supports mental and emotional health, aligning with the World Health Organization's mental health criteria: managing stress, recognizing abilities, and contributing to the community (WHO 2022). By fostering open dialogue and innovation, psychological safety boosts job satisfaction and performance. Research highlights the importance of developing a workplace culture that supports psychological health to improve employee satisfaction and address mental health issues (Newman, Donohue, and Eva 2017, Edmondson and Lei 2014).

Physical (Physiological) Safety

Physical and physiological safety at work is ensured through ergonomic and safety standards, aimed at protecting employees from physical hazards in their work and living environments. This includes access to healthcare and addressing emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic (Michaels and Wagner 2020). Following health and safety guidelines, ensuring safe equipment, and reducing injury risks are essential.

Spiritual Safety (Purpose and Meaning of Work):

Spiritual capital, part of intellectual capital, bolsters employees' resilience to ethical challenges by weaving morals, ethics, and cultural values into their professional lives, significantly shaping workplace opinions (Tischler, Biberman, and McKeage 2002, Duerr,

Zajonc, and Dana 2003). Research highlights how spiritual beliefs influence ethical decisions and purpose, guiding professional choices, enhancing job satisfaction and engagement, potentially reducing turnover rates (Naslmosavi and Jahanzeb 2017).

This study broadens the concept of safety beyond traditional elements to encompass psychological, social, career, financial, and spiritual aspects, inspired by multiple capital theory and the integrated reporting framework (IIRC 2021). It aims to enhance safety measures in international higher education through a comprehensive approach to workplace safety (Sorensen et al. 2018).

METHOD

Research Design

This study used qualitative research approach, focusing on interviews with faculty, especially American expatriate and international professors at a Chinese university, to explore the unique challenges they face after a shift in operational control to a Chinese partner. This method offers deep insights into the difficulties these academics encounter in a different cultural and administrative setting, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Creswell 2013). The qualitative case study, specifically, was selected for its strength in examining the detailed experiences and coping mechanisms of American expatriate professors amid Sino-US educational shifts (Stake, 1995). This method offers in-depth views on how leadership and operational shifts in a cross-cultural academic context affect these individuals, enhancing understanding of international collaboration impacts.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for this study was carefully designed to follow qualitative research protocols (Denzin and Lincoln 2005), employing various methods for a rich data set. Primarily, semi-structured interviews, supplemented by emails, online chats, and in-person discussions when feasible (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2002), formed the core of data gathering.

The research centered on a university with a notable international faculty, with American expatriates forming a large group. Out of 221 faculty, 72 were international, including 47 American expatriates. Post-administrative change, 52 international faculty were asked to join the study, using snowball sampling to widen the view on post-transition safety concerns (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017).

Insert Figure 1 about here.

The study expanded its scope by involving nine external specialists across various fields through snowball sampling, including HR staff, faculty from Sino-US universities, a job candidate, new hires, a China expert, a consulate officer, an American HQ insider, a local officer, and a counselor. Combining 22 interviews with expatriate professors and nine with external experts, it gathered 31 interviews for an in-depth view of how management changes affect expatriate educators.

Ethical standards, especially confidentiality and anonymity, were strictly followed, with authorization from an American University's IRB Office (# FWA00012551, IRB # 23-091505), ensuring participant trust.

Atlas.ti (version 24) was used to analyze qualitative data, applying artificial intelligence (AI) techniques for thorough, methodical analysis, which enhanced the study's precision.

RESULTS

Participant Demographics Overview

The study's participant demographics were diverse, consisting of 21 men, 7 women, and 3 of undisclosed gender, reflecting the college's varied population and augmented by nine external experts' views. Interview formats adapted to participants, with 14 conducted in-person and 17 online or via email.

The data covered multiple departments, with an emphasis on the Business College, representing over half of the institution's faculty and student population, contributing 17 participants. The liberal arts faculty contributed 14 interviews, mainly from the English and Communication departments, which are mandatory subjects for all students. Additionally, three American expatriates from the Science & Technology and Education colleges, as well as two former professors, discussed safety issues, including those related to COVID-19.

Insert Figure 2 about here.

Data Analysis Results

This part offers an in-depth qualitative investigation into the interconnectedness of seven safety dimensions with challenges such as toxic management and job dissatisfaction, all of which are intensified by geopolitical factors. Through the application of network analysis, this exploration reveals how different aspects of safety are linked to emerging issues, underscoring the significance of organizational culture in promoting inclusivity, respect, and overall well-being. It emphasizes the critical nature of workplace safety and the detrimental impact of

management behaviors and external influences on the safety and satisfaction of American expatriate professors in China.

Qualitative Data Code Analysis Result

The network analysis graph illustrates correlations between thematic safety codes and emergent issues within an organization. It explores the interrelationships between various dimensions of safety (organizational, psychological, relational, career, financial, spiritual, and physiological) and the emergent issues of toxic management, job dissatisfaction, and geopolitical factors.

 Insert Figure 3 about here.

This graph highlights organizational safety as the top theme, noted 99 times, emphasizing its key role in creating an inclusive and respectful culture. Psychological safety, with 90 mentions, points to the importance of a supportive setting for open communication. Relational safety, with 76 mentions, focuses on positive workplace relations. Career safety, noted 71 times, reflects on career development importance. Financial safety, cited 52 times, and spiritual safety, mentioned 51 times, address income stability and work's connection to personal values, respectively. Physiological safety, with 48 references, underlines protecting employees from physical harm.

Toxic management, noted 87 times, highlights its negative effect on safety culture. Job dissatisfaction, with 64 mentions, reveals discontent related to safety management in Sino-US academic partnerships. References to geopolitical & socioeconomic issues, 52 times, indicate

external impacts on workplace safety. An ‘others’ code, cited 45 times, may include unclassified but relevant safety concerns.

This analysis provides a comprehensive view of safety issues, combining internal and external factors affecting employee well-being and satisfaction.

Network Analysis Results by Thematic Code and Emergent Code

The network analysis graph illustrates correlations between thematic safety codes and emergent issues within an organization. It explores the interrelationships between seven safety dimensions and three emergent issues of toxic management, job dissatisfaction, and geopolitical factors.

Insert Figure 4 about here.

The analysis reveals strong connections between organizational safety and toxic management (41) and job dissatisfaction (42), highlighting how the organizational environment influences management actions and employee happiness. Geopolitical factors, though less evident (27), also affect perceptions of safety.

Psychological safety's link to toxic management (19) shows the negative impact of poor leadership on mental health, with moderate ties to job dissatisfaction (20) and strong links to geopolitical issues (38), indicating that external uncertainties can affect employees' mental states.

Social (relational) safety's strong tie to toxic management (43) points out the harm bad leadership can cause to workplace relations, affected by job dissatisfaction (35) and, to some

extent, geopolitical issues (19), emphasizing the role of internal and external factors in workplace cohesion.

Career safety is impacted by toxic management (18), job dissatisfaction (17), and geopolitical challenges (25), affecting career growth and security.

Financial safety shows fewer connections to emergent issues, suggesting a relative independence from broader challenges.

Spiritual safety's moderate relationship with toxic management (20) suggests leadership practices can influence employees' purpose and values, with lesser ties to job dissatisfaction (17) and geopolitical issues (11), mainly reflecting internal organizational dynamics.

Physiological safety, least linked to toxic management (15), has moderate ties to geopolitical issues (27), indicating potential physical risks from geopolitical tensions.

This highlights the complex interplay between safety dimensions and challenges, with significant overlaps between management practices, employee satisfaction, and the varying impact of geopolitical factors.

Consturing an Integraive Framework from Qualitative Data

The integraive framework organizational dynamics from qualitative data analysis in Figure 5 examines how American professors in China perceive safety and adjust to management changes post-transfer of control to a Chinese branch. The initial section maps out safety themes. It quantifies their code occurrence frequencies, with organizational concerns leading, followed by psychological and social facets, which influence mental well-being and social ties. Although career and financial aspects are less cited, they remain critical to expatriates' security. Spiritual and physical aspects, though rarer, complete the welfare picture.

Insert Figure 5 about here.

The model introduces three emergent challenges: toxic management, job dissatisfaction, and geopolitical/socioeconomic issues. Predominant among these, toxic management significantly sways expatriates' safety perceptions. It's marked by behaviors like intimidation and poor communication, which could erode morale and productivity. The absence of conflict resolution (29%), inadequate leadership (27%), an oblivious or apathetic administration (24%), and unaddressed cultural differences (18%) were notably criticized.

Job satisfaction is conceptualized as one's affective job response (Locke, 1969). Here, job dissatisfaction suggests that management changes might provoke unrest. Disquiet over justice, equity, diversity, and inclusivity (44%), along with well-being (27%), professional growth (22%), conflict (6%), and performance (1%), substantially sway job contentment.

Furthermore, geopolitical tensions between China and the USA (34%), cultural misunderstandings (26%), and nationalism (17%) are identified as significant expatriate challenges, with macro-economic concern (11%) and educational policy (11%) changes being substantial socioeconomic concerns.

This conceptual framework from empirical data illustrates the complex interplay between safety dimensions and emerging challenges, with the shift in control exacerbating governance issues and influencing the expatriates' varied perceptions of safety. These findings stress the importance of considering the effects of such transitions on American expatriate faculty members in China, particularly regarding organizational structure, leadership, and socio-political contexts.

Real Voices

The initial analysis reveals that aspects of safety, grounded in the multiple capitals framework, are closely linked to issues such as toxic leadership, employee dissatisfaction, and broader geopolitical and socioeconomic challenges. To gain a deeper understanding and highlight key insights, essential excerpts from the responses of interviewees are presented.

Organizational Safety. This sentence illustrates a breakdown in organizational safety, highlighting the absence of procedural fairness and transparency. The confrontation and unwarranted suspension, lacking valid justification, suggest toxic management practices that disregard due process and potentially contribute to job dissatisfaction among faculty members. It underscores the risks of arbitrary decision-making and its impact on the perceived security and trust within the institution.

... A disagreement over language policy with a local faculty member escalated into a heated confrontation, resulting in my suspension by Prestigious International University (PIU, pseudonym)'s China campus's HR, representing a local Vice Chancellor...with no valid bases in relevant document or evidence" (A male tenured business professor).

Psychological Safety: This captures the individual's perception of the lack of psychological safety due to workplace conflicts, aligning with the definition of psychological safety as the ability to express oneself without fear of negative consequences.

There's a disconnect between the faculty and administration. The administrators ignore faculty concerns and don't listen to suggestions. Even reporting to the US headquarters hasn't helped; they're too far away to understand the situation here. I'm isolated and feel helpless, leading to depression and sleep problems (A male business professor)

Social (Relational) Safety: This direct quote reflects the absence of social safety, emphasizing hostile social interactions that undermine the well-being of individuals.

...Walking to a campus town, a taxi driver started aggressively yelling at us (two female expatriate Americans professors) saying 'China doesn't need you foreigners here' and he spit on the ground. He circled around to give us another round of harassment before driving off (Female, College of Liberal Arts)

Career (Human Capital) Safety: This highlights concerns regarding career advancement and the perceived threats to one's professional growth, indicative of career safety concerns.

While tenure was a milestone, the absence of promotion is deeply frustrating (Male, College of Liberal Arts)

Financial Safety: These quotes relates to the uncertainties about financial stability and transactions, a core aspect of financial safety.

In the past, the HQ campus Payroll portal provided a detailed breakdown of salaries, taxes, and benefits. However, since the shift in HR authority to the China side in 2019, we've faced numerous challenges, especially in managing personnel and employee contract documents that indicate financial salary and benefits. The absence of further communication or follow-up remains a concern" (Female, College of Business)

Spiritual Safety: This quote encapsulates the idea of spiritual safety, where an individual seeks alignment with their values and beliefs in their professional environment.

I've been through a lot here, but that was the last straw. I decided to quit my part-time gig...Spiritually, it's a moment for patience and sticking to what you believe is right (Male, a former professor at PIU, also worked at another Sino-Foreign University in China.)

Physical Safety: This indicates concerns over physical safety in the workplace environment.

Jesus, this (a brick) just fell like 3 feet away from me. I thought somebody threw something at me (from the top of general education building) (Male, College of Liberal Arts, July 07, 2022)

Toxic Management: These quote directly associates with toxic management, describing the negative impact of leadership on the work environment.

To address these deep-rooted problems, PIU needs a complete administrative overhaul. Leadership should focus on transparency, academic integrity, and proper engagement with all stakeholders. External oversight might be necessary to dismantle the existing power structures that have led to these issues (An HQ insider who operates the Occupy PIU movement on campus)

Job Dissatisfaction: The quote expresses deep dissatisfaction with job conditions and treatment by the organization.

(PIU administration, HR) used to complain ‘jokingly’... My husband nearly died from lymphoma in his whole spine. They treated us like sh*t... So that's just one of the many reasons I am glad I no longer work for PIU. (The University) has no scruples and no empathy (Female Liberal Art College Professor who left the PIU after COVID-19)

Geopolitical & Socioeconomic Issues: These remarks highlight how China's political frameworks and socioeconomic circumstances influence international higher education collaborations, shedding light on the wider geopolitical and socioeconomic challenges that shape the experiences and safety perceptions of American expatriate college professors.

The shift in China's leadership has seen an unmistakable trend towards more authoritarian governance. Under the current regime, the educational policies have witnessed radical transformations. Steps like banning private tutoring and downsizing private English education have been taken. The most striking impact, however, has been the tightening grip on foreign educators. This heightened control and the shift towards nationalistic educational policies have compelled many foreign professionals to leave China, citing concerns over personal safety and professional autonomy (An international specialist on China politics and economics, having spent over 15 years living in Beijing)

DISCUSSION

The exit of American expatriates and shifts in China partnerships underline risks to joint ventures, notably affecting higher education and professors' worries (SCMP 2024). Research at a Sino-US University, showing a shift in control from the U.S. to China, uncovers intricate

international academic dynamics (Duffy 2023). This study's results offer insights into both the hurdles and prospects of global higher education partnerships.

Theoretical Implication

Organizational studies increasingly recognize the need for a framework that fully addresses the experiences of marginalized employees globally such as expatriated individuals, driven by workforce diversity and complex international business activities. The suggested theoretical model integrates organizational health and toxicity (OHT), multiple capitals, and job satisfaction.

 Insert Figure 6 about here.

In essence, this model posits that a variety of organizational assets, from financial to social capital, are vital for a positive workplace and employee growth (Sun et al. 2022, IIRC 2021). Organizational health reflects the ethical and cultural climate, influencing employee well-being (Newman, Donohue, and Eva 2017). A deficit in one capital, like psychological safety, could degrade organizational health (Edmondson and Lei 2014). Job satisfaction gauges how well multiple capitals are used and the state of organizational health, reflecting employees' happiness and the work environment's quality (Brown, Hooley, and Wond 2020). Moreover, external geopolitical and socioeconomic conditions impact organizational dynamics and staff contentment (Inoue et al. 2016).

This theoretical framework might elucidate the complex interplay between organizational resources, workplace health, and employee job satisfaction, essential for managing and engaging personnel in the global higher education partnership settings. .

Practical Implications

Studying American expatriate professors in China highlights how organizational dynamics, management, and geopolitics affect safety and job satisfaction. This research advocates for an inclusive culture, psychological safety, and career growth to mitigate toxic management and geopolitical strain.

To maintain American educational ideals like academic freedom and social justice abroad, U.S. institutions must form partnerships protecting these values and ensure regular, thorough compliance checks by accreditation bodies and American professors and teachers' union. Embedding these principles in governance and curricula of joint ventures is crucial (Carroll 2024, Austin et al. 2014).

Regular exchanges and workshops with global partners are also recommended to foster respect and maintain these values in collaborative efforts (Edmondson and Lei 2014).

Limitations and Future Research

This study acknowledges limitations due to its specific context and reliance on qualitative data, which may not reflect the full spectrum of global academic settings (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). The particular geopolitical and socioeconomic conditions of the research site may also limit the findings' broader relevance.

Future research could benefit from a mixed-methods approach, blending quantitative with qualitative insights for a more comprehensive view of international academic partnerships (Creswell 2013). Longitudinal research is suggested to observe the enduring effects of management and geopolitical changes on expatriate educators' well-being and safety perceptions (Umphress et al. 2021).

Such studies would deepen our understanding of academic freedom, workplace safety, and job satisfaction, and how varied organizational cultures affect them. Expanding research to different cultural and institutional contexts could yield a more detailed analysis of the impact of organizational culture and how to counteract negative management practices.

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FIGURES

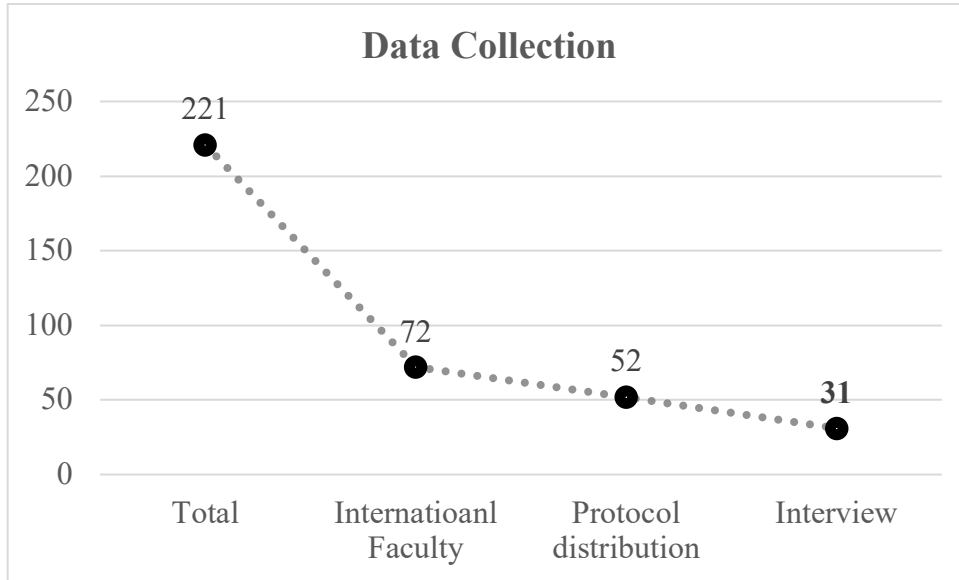


Figure 1. Qualitive Data Collection.

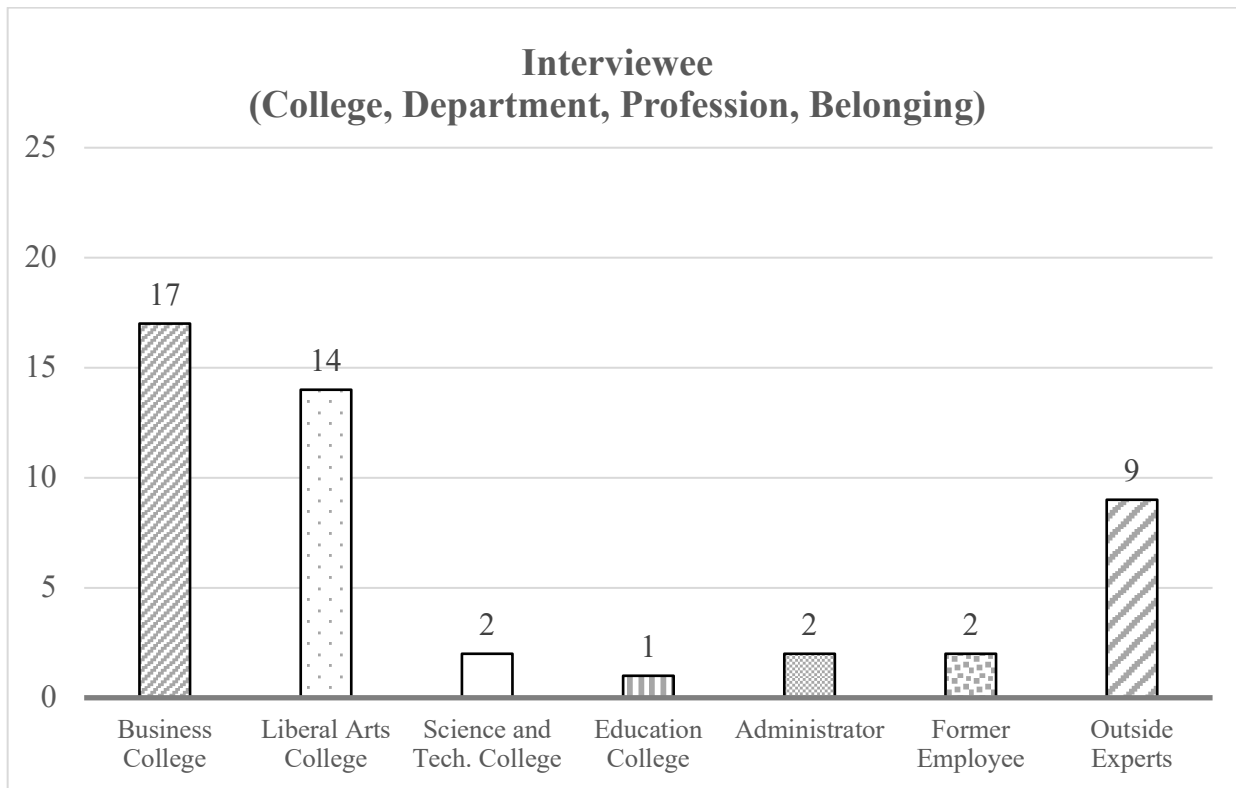


Figure 2. Interviewee Characteristics (College, Department, Profession, and Belongings)

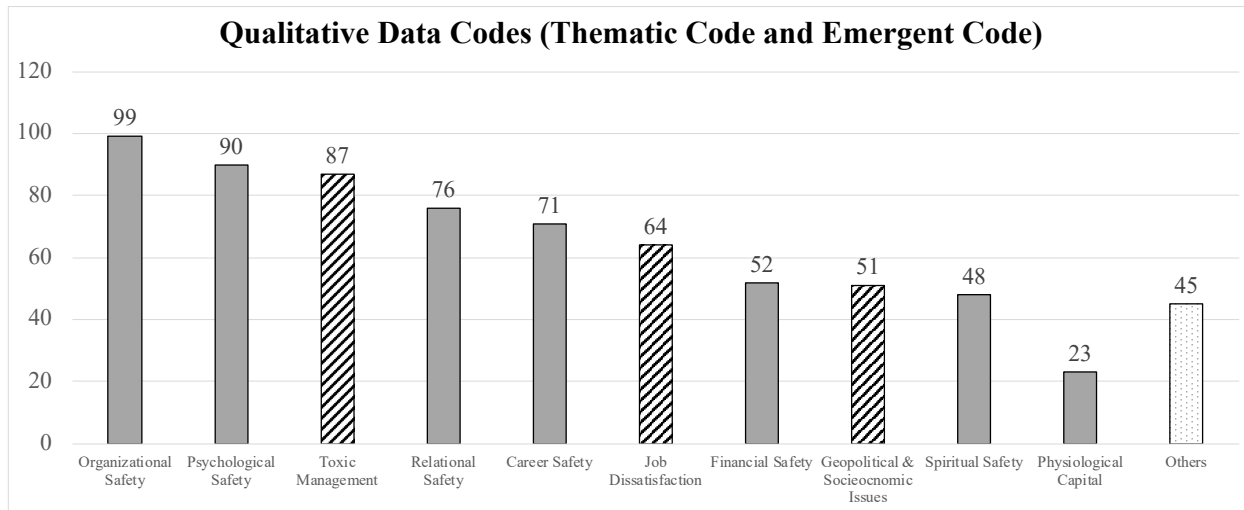


Figure 3. Qualitative Data Code Analyses Results

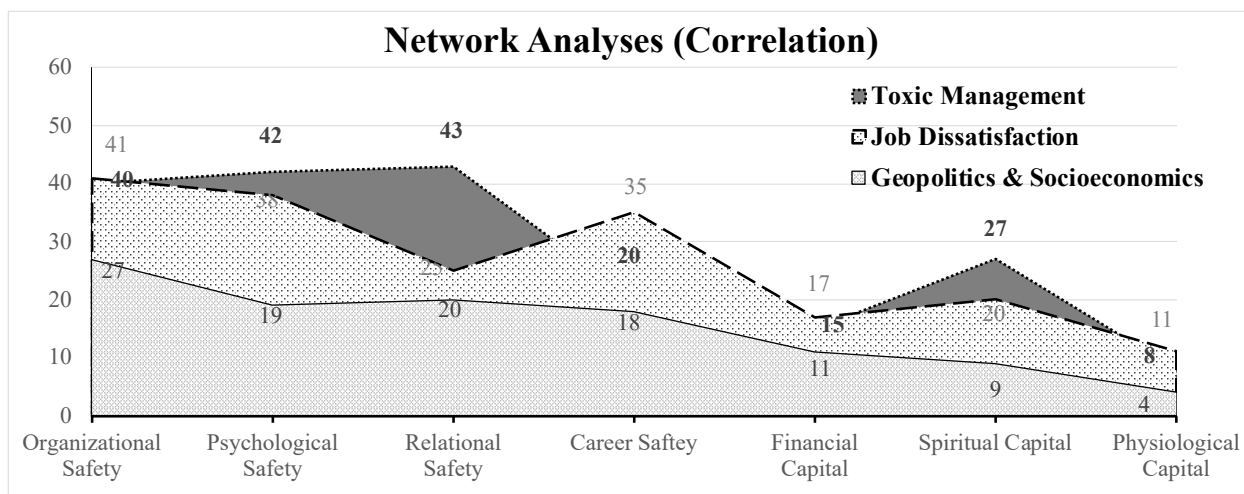


Figure 4. Network Analysis by Thematic Code and Emergent Code

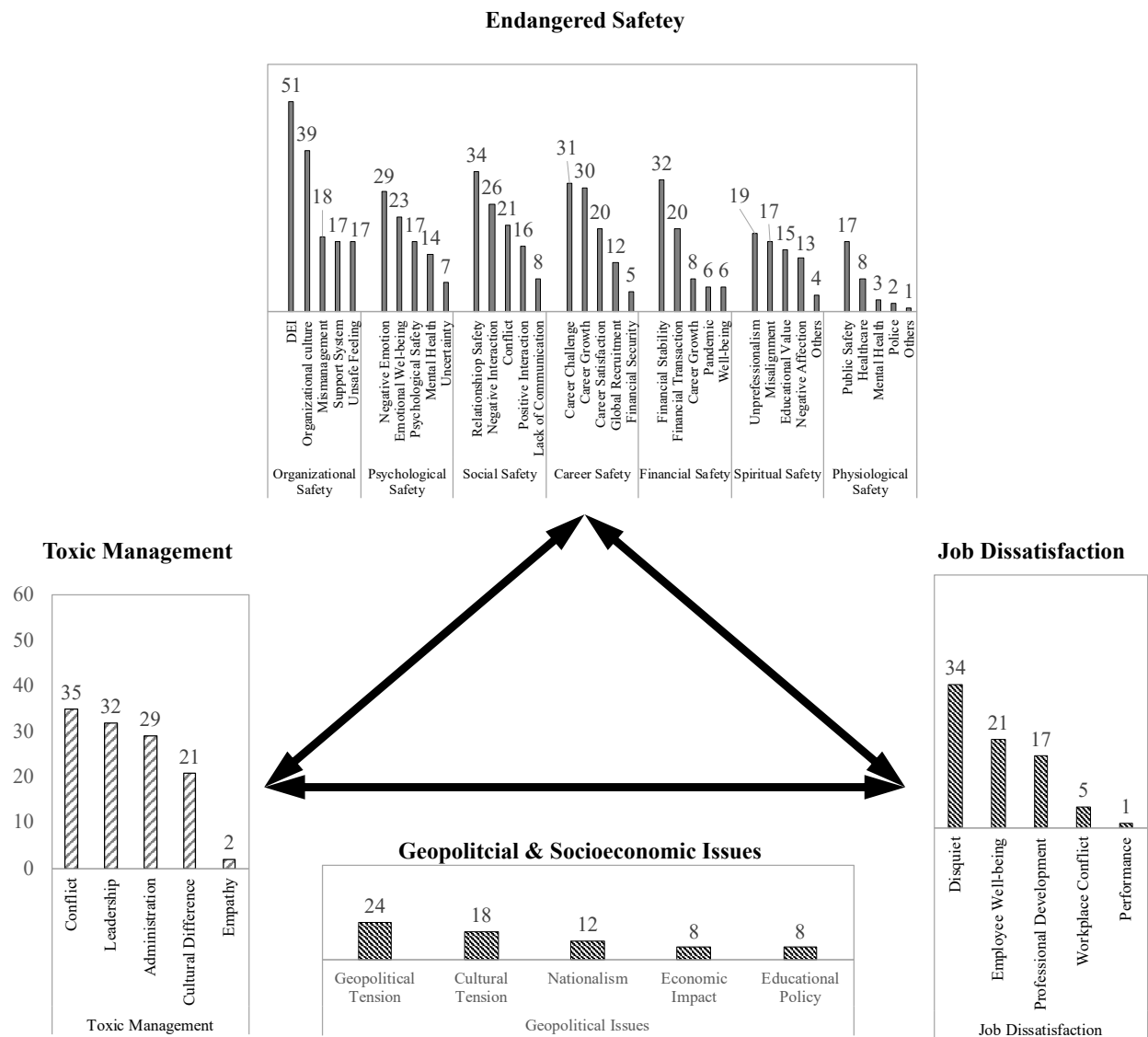


Figure 5. Integrative Framework of Organizational Dynamics from Qualitative Data Analysis.
 *DEI: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusiveness

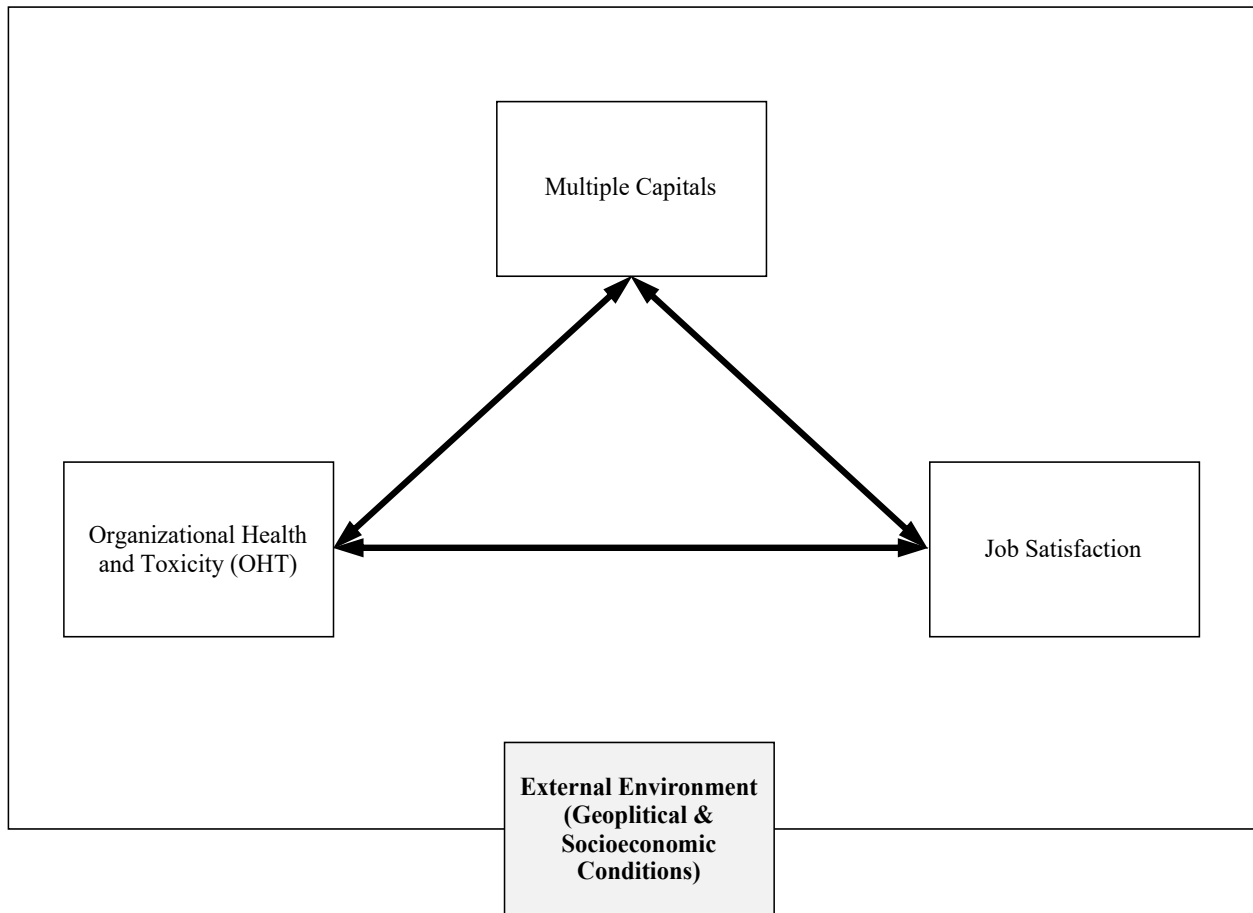


Figure 6. Theoretical Model of Organizational Dynamics: Assessing the Interplay of Multiple Capitals, Organizational Health and Toxicity, Job Satisfaction, and External Influences