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Uncertain Academic Careers: The Emergence and Behavioral Responses of Job Insecurity among Early-Career Faculty in Chinese Elite Universities

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Article

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Abstract

Amid intensified performance pressures, academic competition, and evaluation regimes, job insecurity has become an important issue in understanding early-career faculty experiences. Existing research has largely examined insecurity in relation to objectively unstable employment conditions, while paying less attention to how subjective job insecurity emerges among early-career faculty holding relatively secure positions and how it shapes their academic practices and career choices. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of the academic field and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, this study examines the formation and behavioral consequences of job insecurity among 35 early-career faculty members at Chinese elite universities. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using constant comparison and inductive analysis. The findings show that job insecurity initially emerges as persistent positional insecurity generated by competition within the academic field, as early-career faculty must continually demonstrate their academic worth to maintain and advance their positions.Unequal access to academic capital-including research projects, publications, networks, mentoring support, and research time-further produces cumulative resource insecurity. Moreover, insecurity extends beyond concerns about job retention to encompass academic status and professional identity, forming a progression from job continuity to career development and identity recognition. In response, early-career faculty adopt differentiated strategies, including rule compliance, resource accumulation, and field mobility, depending on their capital resources, perceived resource loss, and expectations of future returns. These findings develop a dynamic account of job insecurity as a process shaped by field structures, mediated by capital and resource conditions, and expressed through differentiated behavioral responses.

Introduction

Uncertainty has become a defining feature of contemporary work and professional life (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019; Raeder et al., 2019). Intensifying labor-market competition, organizational transformation, and the growing emphasis on performance-based governance have increasingly challenged the stability and predictability of career trajectories(Ortlieb, R., & Weiss, S.,2018;Lee, C., et al,2018). Higher education has not been immune to these developments. Competitive resource allocation, performance accountability, and market-oriented governance have increasingly shaped academic work through heightened demands for productivity, intensified competition, and formalized career evaluation systems (Clarke,et al, 2012; Decramer, A.,et al, 2012). Against this backdrop, job insecurity has emerged as an important lens through which to understand academic career experiences. Unlike employment instability, which primarily refers to objective conditions such as fixed-term contracts and non-standard employment(De Witte, H.,2005;Sverke et al., 2002), job insecurity concerns individuals' subjective perceptions of uncertainty regarding the continuity of their employment, opportunities for career advancement, and future career prospects. Thus, even when faculty members occupy relatively stable organizational positions, they may nevertheless experience substantial career insecurity as a result of performance evaluations, promotion competition, and pressures surrounding future professional development(Rogler, C. R. ,2019). Recent systematic reviews similarly suggest that early-career academics commonly experience job insecurity, persistent publication pressures, and tensions

surrounding academic values, resulting in career identities characterized by considerable uncertainty and ambivalence (Zhang & Gong, 2024).

Early-career faculty are situated at the intersection of intensive academic development and increasing career competition. This stage requires them to build academic identities, accumulate scholarly achievements, develop professional networks, and simultaneously meet demanding expectations for research productivity, teaching, promotion, and performance evaluation (Ansmann et al., 2014; Djerasimovic & Villani, 2020; Mula et al., 2022). Tenure-track systems, periodic evaluations, and research-oriented assessment further intensify these pressures, making career insecurity concern not only job retention but also professional standing, advancement opportunities, and long-term career development (Herschberg et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2024).This tension is particularly evident in Chinese elite universities. Although these institutions offer greater prestige, research resources, and academic opportunities, they also impose stringent performance standards and intense competition. The Double First-Class initiative, personnel reforms, and changing faculty evaluation systems have increasingly tied career development to research performance, grant acquisition, promotion, and periodic assessment (Xu, 2020; Liu et al., 2025). Thus, career insecurity may emerge even among faculty holding relatively stable and prestigious positions, suggesting that it cannot be understood solely through contractual or employment conditions.

Existing research leaves three gaps. First, studies of academic job insecurity have focused largely on objective employment conditions, with less attention to subjective insecurity among faculty in relatively stable positions (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023; Spina et al., 2022). Second, research has often examined performance evaluation, academic competition, and resource access as separate pressures, rather than explaining how they interact to produce insecurity. Third, existing studies have emphasized the psychological and career consequences of insecurity, while paying less attention to how faculty actively respond through resource accumulation, protection, reduced investment, or career withdrawal. To address these gaps, this study examines early-career faculty in Chinese elite universities through Bourdieu's theory of the academic field and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. By integrating structural and resource-based perspectives, it explores how career insecurity emerges and how it shapes faculty responses. The study addresses three research questions:

RQ1. What institutional rules, evaluation mechanisms, and competitive norms within the academic field of Chinese elite universities shape early-career faculty members' experiences of job insecurity?

RQ2. How does early-career faculty members' capital position shape their resource conditions and, in turn, contribute to experiences of job insecurity?

RQ3. How do early-career faculty members respond to job insecurity through resource-related coping strategies and career behaviors?

Literature review

Precarious academic careers in global higher education

Higher education systems worldwide have undergone substantial organizational and governance changes, with academic work increasingly shaped by marketization, performance accountability, competitive resource allocation, and employment flexibilization (Deem et al., 2007; Oliveira et al., 2025). Financial pressures, the decline of permanent positions, and the expansion of short-term, part-time, and fixed-term contracts have contributed to the precarization of academic work (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). Comparative evidence suggests that temporary employment, non-standard contracts, and career insecurity have become widespread features of academic careers, particularly among early-career academics (OECD, 2024; Pineda & Salazar Morales, 2024). Across different national contexts, academic employment insecurity is associated with economic restructuring, changing governance arrangements, and evolving employment practices, alongside heightened work pressures and constrained career development.

Academic insecurity, however, extends beyond contractual instability. Temporary and part-time academics may also experience disadvantages in organizational recognition, career development, and participation in academic decision-making (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). Insecurity therefore reflects both objective employment conditions and academics' perceptions of their professional position and future career prospects (Albayrak-Aydemir et al.,2023). Existing research consequently conceptualizes academic employment insecurity as multidimensional, encompassing employment protection, career development, organizational belonging, and academic participation.Despite these advances, research has focused primarily on objective employment conditions and non-standard employment. Less attention has been given to how early-career faculty in relatively stable organizational positions develop subjective experiences of job insecurity, particularly under conditions of intense competition, performance-based evaluation, and unequal access to academic resources. This gap is especially important in institutional contexts where formal employment stability coexists with substantial career uncertainty.

Factors of job insecurity among early-career faculty

Job insecurity among early-career faculty does not arise from isolated individual pressures but from the interaction of institutional demands, academic competition, resource constraints, and disadvantaged occupational positions (Ortlieb & Weiss, 2018). First, tenure-track systems institutionalize an "up-or-out" logic through time-limited appointments and quantified performance requirements. Research productivity, grant acquisition, teaching, and service may determine contract renewal or continued employment, making job security increasingly contingent on measurable academic performance (O'Connor et al., 2024).Second, the managerial restructuring of higher education and the expansion of flexible academic employment have intensified competition for stable positions. As permanent academic opportunities remain limited, early-career scholars must continuously demonstrate research excellence to secure employment and career advancement (Fochler et al., 2016). Performance-based governance therefore increases not only evaluation pressures but also the stakes of academic

competition.Third, unequal access to resources and departmental support can further reinforce career insecurity. Early-career faculty often have limited access to funding, mentoring, research facilities, and academic networks, constraining their capacity to meet promotion and tenure expectations (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). Conversely, stronger mentoring, networks, and research resources can facilitate collaboration and access to career opportunities, reducing uncertainty (Ansmann et al., 2014). Resource inequality may therefore produce differentiated experiences of insecurity (Acker & Haque, 2017).

Finally, occupational position and professional recognition shape how structural pressures are experienced. Early-career faculty often occupy relatively peripheral positions within academic hierarchies and have limited influence over institutional decision-making, making them more vulnerable to unequal evaluation and workplace disadvantage (Albayrak-Aydemir & Gleibs, 2023).Taken together, early-career faculty job insecurity emerges from the intersection of institutional evaluation regimes, academic competition, unequal resource access, and hierarchical occupational positions. It is therefore not reducible to contractual instability or individual perceptions alone, but reflects how structural conditions are experienced, interpreted, and translated into career responses.

Consequences of job insecurity among early-career faculty

Job insecurity affects not only how early-career faculty evaluate their current employment but also their academic identities, work engagement, psychological well-being, and career choices. Existing research broadly identifies three interrelated domains through which job insecurity generates adverse consequences for early-career academics: psychological well-being and academic identity, work-related behaviors, and long-term career development(Sverke, M., et al,2002).

At the psychological and identity level, prolonged job insecurity can deplete psychological resources, increasing anxiety, stress, burnout, and emotional exhaustion while undermining academic identity and professional belonging (Ylijoki & Ursin, 2013; Llosa-Fernández et al., 2018). Performance-oriented academic environments may further encourage early-career researchers to define their identities primarily through research productivity, creating tensions between research and teaching and experiences of identity insecurity or alienation (Mula et al., 2022). Such pressures may lead scholars to adopt different strategies, including adaptation, negotiation, and withdrawal (Zhang & Gong, 2024).

At the behavioral level, job insecurity may reduce work engagement and organizational commitment by consuming cognitive and psychological resources (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018). To protect limited resources, early-career faculty may prioritize low-risk and short-term research projects, reduce teaching investment, or shift effort toward quantifiable research outputs (Chen, 2015; Van Hootegem et al., 2019). Prolonged insecurity may also encourage longer working hours, blurred work–life boundaries, and continued job-search activities (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023).

At the career level, job insecurity can reshape career decision-making, weaken organizational attachment, and increase turnover and mobility intentions. Perceived employment threats may reduce discretionary organizational behaviors through psychological contract breach and perceived injustice

(Piccoli et al., 2017), while repeated performance assessments can encourage short-term mobility and limit sustained scholarly development within a single institution (Sarrico, 2022). Early-career academics may therefore respond through adaptation, negotiation, adjustment, or withdrawal (Zhang & Gong, 2024).

Overall, job insecurity extends beyond concerns about employment continuity. It can simultaneously affect psychological resources and academic identity, reshape everyday academic behavior, and influence longer-term career trajectories. It should therefore be understood as a condition that shapes how early-career faculty invest in their work, engage with academic organizations, and envision their future careers.

Research on early-career faculty in the Chinese context and research gaps

The academic profession in Chinese universities is shaped by a distinctive institutional context in which performance-based evaluation, the Double First-Class initiative, personnel reforms, and intensified academic competition have transformed promotion, resource allocation, and career development (Liu et al., 2019). For early-career faculty, publication in international journals, research funding, high-level talent programs, and promotion-related performance indicators have increasingly become important determinants of career development (Zhao et al., 2026). These changes have reshaped both academic work and career trajectories.

The growing adoption of tenure-track and performance-based appointment systems, particularly in leading research universities, has further weakened the assumption of stable academic employment. Career continuity and permanent appointment are increasingly linked to periodic evaluations, fixed-term contracts, and research productivity. Early-career faculty therefore work under conditions of high performance demands, intense competition, and uncertainty regarding career continuity and advancement.

Although existing research has examined academic identity, career pressure, work–life challenges, burnout, and turnover intentions among Chinese early-career faculty (Li et al., 2013), relatively little attention has been paid directly to job insecurity. Previous studies have identified academic evaluation, unequal resource distribution, individual academic capital, and institutional performance pressures as important influences on career development, but these factors are often examined separately. Consequently, an integrated explanation is still lacking of how institutional rules, competitive structures, resource inequalities, and academic positions interact to produce subjective experiences of job insecurity. This study addresses this gap by examining how these structural conditions are translated into early-career faculty members' perceptions of employment continuity and future career prospects.

Theoretical framework

Bourdieu's theory of the academic field conceptualizes academic activity as embedded in a structured social space governed by specific rules, power relations, and logics of competition. Actors occupy relational positions according to the volume and composition of their capital and compete for resources

recognized as valuable within the field (Bourdieu, 1986, 1988). Economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital shape actors' opportunities to secure resources, maintain positions, and achieve upward mobility. Because the value of capital is defined by field-specific rules, individual practices are shaped by both existing capital and position and by the institutional expectations and power relations of the field. The framework of field–capital–position–practice therefore provides a structural lens for understanding how academic conditions shape occupational perceptions and behavioral strategies.

Conservation of Resources (COR) theory explains stress and behavior through the dynamics of resource acquisition, preservation, and loss. Individuals are motivated to obtain, retain, and protect valued resources, including time, energy, social relationships, status, identity, self-esteem, and social support (Hobfoll, 1989, 2001). Stress occurs when valued resources are threatened, lost, or invested without adequate returns. Because resources are dynamic, resource abundance may generate a "gain spiral," whereas resource scarcity may produce a "loss spiral" (Hobfoll et al., 2018). Under conditions of resource threat, individuals may therefore conserve existing resources, seek additional resources, or reduce investment in activities perceived as risky. COR thus provides a micro-level perspective for explaining how structural pressures are translated into perceived resource threats and subsequent behavioral responses.

Drawing on the complementary strengths of Bourdieu and COR, this study develops a four-layer framework: field structure→capital and position→resource perceptions→job insecurity and behavioral responses (Figure 1).

The first layer, field structure, captures institutional evaluation, promotion systems, research-performance requirements, academic competition, and hierarchical differentiation. These structures define valued academic outcomes and shape access to career opportunities and resources.

The second layer, capital and position, concerns early-career faculty members' academic credentials, scholarly achievements, research projects, networks, reputation, and institutional resources, as well as their relational positions within the academic hierarchy. The alignment or mismatch between field expectations and individual capital shapes their access to opportunities and relative career positions.

The third layer, resource perceptions, draws on COR to explain how faculty interpret their access to and potential loss of valued resources, including time, research funding, social support, promotion opportunities, academic recognition, and future career prospects. This layer captures the process through which structural conditions become subjectively experienced as resource threats.

The fourth layer, job insecurity and behavioral responses, focuses on the emergence of job insecurity and subsequent responses, including resource accumulation, resource protection, reduced investment, and turnover or career withdrawal.

Accordingly, job insecurity is conceptualized as a dynamic process: field structure→capital and position→resource perceptions→job insecurity→behavioral responses→resource accumulation and

field position. This integrated framework connects macro-level institutional structures, meso-level academic positions, and micro-level resource perceptions and behaviors. It therefore moves beyond contract-centered or purely psychological explanations by conceptualizing job insecurity as an emergent process shaped by academic structures, capital inequalities, resource dynamics, and individual agency.

Research methodology

Research design

Qualitative research is a research paradigm that employs the researcher as the primary research instrument to explore social phenomena holistically in natural settings, using multiple data collection methods. It typically adopts an inductive approach to data analysis and emphasizes interaction with research participants to gain a deep understanding of the meaning behind their behaviors, thereby achieving interpretive understanding. This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the underlying causes of job insecurity among early-career faculty at elite universities in China. It focuses on their lived experiences and subjective perceptions, aiming to reveal the authentic experiences and internal logic of their real-life situations.

Participants

Participants in this study were early-career faculty members holding doctoral degrees. A criterion-based sampling method was employed to select participants (Heppner, 2004). The inclusion criteria for this study were as follows: First, participants were required to be aged 35 years or younger, consistent with the general definition of youth in China, to reflect the local context. Second, participants had fewer than six years of teaching experience at the university level and were employed under a “tenure-track or out” policy. Third, participants were affiliated with universities designated as part of China’s “Double First-Class” initiative. Case selection in this study followed the principle of purposive sampling. During the sampling process, factors such as disciplinary background, gender, academic rank, and years of teaching experience were taken into consideration. In total, 35 eligible early-career faculty members participated in the study. The participants represented diverse backgrounds in terms of gender, discipline, academic rank, and marital and parental status, with an average teaching experience of 3.5 years. Based on differences in their perceptions of job stability, career development prospects, evaluation outcomes, and expectations regarding future career trajectories, the experience of job insecurity among participants were categorized into three types: high, moderate, and relatively low job insecurity. Overall, the early-career faculty members interviewed reported relatively high levels of job insecurity and considerable uncertainty regarding their career stability and future academic development. The basic demographic information of the interviewees is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Participants’ information

Variable	Category	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	20	57.1
	Female	15	42.9
Discipline	Social Science	10	28.6
	Humanities	7	20.0
	Science	7	20.0
	Engineering	11	31.4
Age	≤30 years	10	28.6
	31-33 years	17	48.6
	34-35 years	8	22.8
Year of Work	Less than 1 year	8	22.8
	2-3 years	15	42.9
	4-6 years	12	34.3
Title	Assistant Professor	19	54.3
	Associate Professor	16	45.7
Personal Life Circumstances	Single	18	51.4
	Married without Children	10	28.6
	Married with Children	7	20.0

Data collection

Ethical approval was obtained from the university's ethics committee prior to the study. Participants were informed of the study and its ethical considerations, and all information was kept confidential and used solely for research purposes. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Tencent Meeting between October 2024 and December 2025. Each interview lasted 45–60 minutes, with some participants completing a second interview. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. Drawing on the biographical method (Chamberlayne & Rustin, 2002), participants described their experiences of job insecurity, including its antecedents, consequences, and changes over time. Interviews were conducted in Mandarin by the first author, an early-career faculty member at a Chinese university. The shared language and cultural background facilitated communication and an empathetic researcher–participant relationship. Participants were also asked to retrospectively describe changes in perceived job insecurity across the six stages (T1–T6) of the 3+3 appointment period. These accounts were used to reconstruct developmental trajectories rather than to generate quantitative measures. Participants linked changes in insecurity to key events, including annual performance evaluations, promotion assessments, and academic resource allocation. Based on these accounts, the study

constructed developmental trajectory curves illustrating the fluctuations and critical-event effects of job insecurity across the appointment period (Figure 2). These trajectories provide process-oriented evidence of how institutional conditions and individual perceptions interact to shape job insecurity over time.

After each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and cross-checked against the recordings to ensure accuracy. The transcripts were then translated into English. A back-translation technique was used to ensure the accuracy of the Chinese-to-English translation of interview excerpts (Chen & Boore, 2010).Finally, to protect participant privacy, all identifiable information in the interview transcripts and notes was removed, and each participant was assigned a unique code. In the coding scheme, H represents Humanities, S Social Sciences, P Natural Sciences, and E Engineering; M indicates male and F female. Codes were assigned sequentially based on the order of interviews—for example, S1-F denotes that the first participant interviewed is a female early-career faculty member in the Social Sciences.

Research findings

Interview analysis showed that early-career faculty members' job insecurity is not simply a consequence of unstable employment but develops through capital competition, positional comparison, and resource pressures within the academic field. Faculty must continuously accumulate valued academic capital—including publications, research projects, promotion credentials, and academic reputation—to maintain or improve their positions, while investing time, effort, and social relationships to protect existing resources. Job insecurity therefore emerges dynamically as structural competition is translated into perceived resource threats that shape subsequent career behaviors.

"I have to keep proving myself": Academic competition and persistent positional insecurity

Academic careers have become increasingly competitive and risk-laden, with differences in academic capital and field position shaping early-career scholars' perceptions of their prospects for professional success (Mangset & Orupabo, 2025). For early-career faculty, job insecurity is not experienced primarily as a direct fear of "losing my current job." Rather, it often takes the form of uncertainty about whether their academic position can be sustained, whether their contributions will continue to be recognized, and whether they can advance within the academic hierarchy. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the academic field is a competitive space structured by unequal distributions of capital, power relations, and hierarchical positions. University entry therefore does not end competition but initiates an ongoing process of evaluation, comparison, and selection. Early-career faculty must continuously accumulate and demonstrate forms of academic capital valued by the field; insufficient accumulation may generate concerns about relative positional decline and marginalization.

The interviews indicate that "proving oneself" becomes an enduring professional task after entering the university. As one participant explained:

“You have to keep proving yourself. You need publications, you need projects, and your teaching cannot have problems either. If you don't produce anything in a given year, the leaders will ask about it and keep pushing you. What I’m really afraid of is not having nothing now, but not having anything in the future.” (S1-F)

Another participant similarly observed:

“Meeting those requirements does not mean you can feel secure, because everyone else is moving forward, and the requirements keep getting higher.” (P8-M)

These accounts suggest that career security depends not simply on meeting formal requirements but on maintaining competitiveness within an evolving academic environment. The competitive structure of the field also cultivates strong awareness of relative position. Faculty evaluate not only “how much I have accomplished,” but also “what others have achieved” and “whether I am falling behind.” As one participant noted:

“Sometimes I’m really exhausted, but I don’t dare to stop. If you stop, others won’t. They keep publishing papers and getting projects. If you don’t, the gap starts to show.” (E9-M)

This illustrates that job insecurity is experienced less as a static concern over employment status than as a dynamic concern over one’s position relative to others.

Such positional awareness is closely connected to the accumulation of academic capital. Publications, research projects, prestigious titles, awards, and scholarly influence function not only as formal indicators of performance but also as resources through which faculty establish and consolidate their positions in the academic field. Because field positions are relational, early-career faculty whose academic capital is still developing may be particularly sensitive to falling behind their peers. One participant explained:

“What I’m actually most afraid of is not that I’m not doing well, but that other people are progressing faster than I am. You may feel that you have worked really hard this year, but when you see people of the same age publishing one paper after another and getting project after project, you still start wondering whether you are falling behind.” (E17-F)

This finding is consistent with previous research showing that early academic careers are characterized by substantial career uncertainty, shaped by research engagement, academic networks, career competition, and unequal access to academic capital (Ortlieb & Weiss, 2018; O’Connor et al., 2024; Mangset & Orupabo, 2025). Our findings further show that such uncertainty extends beyond assessments of present performance to expectations about future opportunities. As one participant stated:

“When we first joined the university, there weren’t obvious differences among us. But after a few years, some people keep getting more projects, while others keep publishing better papers. If you don’t have

anything substantial to show for yourself, you gradually feel that you are being left behind, and you may even face the risk of being eliminated." (S5-M)

Thus, early-career faculty may experience pronounced job insecurity even when their current employment remains formally stable. The underlying concern is whether they can sustain their academic position amid continuous competition and changing standards.

From a field-structural perspective, therefore, job insecurity cannot be explained solely by individual resilience or career adaptability. It emerges through the interaction between competitive evaluation, relational comparison, and unequal academic capital. The academic field transforms the imperative to "remain competitive" into an ongoing professional responsibility, gradually internalizing "keeping proving oneself" as a logic of academic survival. Job insecurity consequently extends beyond the conventional question of "whether I will lose my job" to encompass the broader question of "whether I can sustain my academic position." It is therefore characterized by persistent, relational, and positional dimensions.

"The fewer resources you have, the more vulnerable you become": Unequal academic capital and cumulative resource insecurity

Differences in doctoral training, academic preparation, research achievements, supervisory support, collaborative networks, and institutional platforms mean that early-career faculty enter the academic field with unequal resource and capital endowments. These initial disparities can translate into different levels of career insecurity. As Bourdieu (1988) argues, actors in the academic field do not compete from equivalent resource positions; differences in cultural, social, and symbolic capital shape both the positions they occupy and the opportunities available for advancement.

Interviewees recognized that although early-career faculty are subject to similar performance requirements, they do not possess equivalent foundations for meeting them. One participant explained:

"The assessment criteria look the same for everyone, but things are actually very different when you try to meet them. Some people have a team, a supervisor, and a foundation of existing projects, so many things come more easily. For someone like me, who has to build everything up from scratch, even if I put in the same amount of time, I may still not achieve the same results as they do" (E22-M).

Another participant similarly emphasized:

"The most obvious difference is resources. Some people come in with projects, collaborative teams, and someone to guide them. If you have none of that, you have to figure everything out on your own. At the beginning, the difference may not seem significant, but after a few years, you realize that the gap keeps getting bigger" (S19-F).

These disparities extend beyond visible resources such as funding, projects, and research teams to include academic networks, collaboration opportunities, supervisory support, and discretionary research time. Academic social capital can provide early-career scholars with professional information,

collaboration opportunities, and support networks, while research engagement and academic networks have also been associated with lower academic career insecurity (Schaer, 2021; Ortlieb & Weiss, 2018). Thus, resources support not only career advancement but also more secure expectations about future career trajectories.

More importantly, initial resource differences may develop into cumulative advantages and disadvantages. As one participant observed:

“Those who already have projects are more likely to get the next project. Once you have a previous project, you have publications, data, and a team. When you apply again, you have much more to work with” (E21-F).

For early-career faculty, an unsuccessful grant application, rejected publication, or missed promotion opportunity may therefore have consequences beyond the immediate loss. Such setbacks can constrain subsequent access to resources, whereas prior achievements may facilitate further accumulation. Recent research similarly suggests that higher research productivity can provide scholars with additional work-related resources, generating cumulative career benefits (Mudrak et al., 2026).

This process is consistent with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. Hobfoll (2001) argues that resource loss generates stress and that individuals with fewer resources are particularly vulnerable to further loss, creating potential loss cycles. Conversely, existing resources can facilitate the acquisition of additional resources. For early-career faculty, projects, publications, research teams, academic networks, and research time are therefore interconnected rather than isolated assets. A strong resource base can generate further collaborations, funding, publications, and recognition, whereas a weak resource base may require substantially greater effort to obtain comparable opportunities.

One participant captured this constrained trajectory:

“At first, you may simply be a little slower than others. But eventually, you realize that other people have more and more resources, while you are still starting from zero. It’s not that you don’t want to work hard; it’s that, in many situations, you simply have fewer options” (E24-M).

Taken together, resource insecurity is not simply a temporary shortage of resources but a cumulative and relational process. Unequal academic capital shapes initial resource access; resource access influences subsequent opportunities for accumulation; and repeated differences in resource acquisition progressively shape perceptions of future career prospects. The feeling of having “fewer options” therefore reflects not only objective resource scarcity but also a perceived decline in one’s capacity to acquire, retain, and convert academic resources. Cumulative resource inequality thus provides an important mechanism through which unequal positions in the academic field are translated into persistent job insecurity.

“What I really fear is not unemployment, but having no future”: The deepening of job insecurity into academic career insecurity

What early-career faculty members are truly concerned about is not simply whether they have a job, but whether they can remain on an academic career trajectory, establish a stable academic identity, and retain a recognizable position within the university system several years from now. Job insecurity, therefore, should not be understood merely as a static psychological perception concerning one's current employment status. Rather, as individuals continuously assess their future career possibilities, it gradually expands into a more enduring uncertainty about the continuity of their academic careers, opportunities for advancement, and sense of professional belonging. Previous research has shown that early academic careers are characterized by pronounced career insecurity, as early-career scholars must not only navigate intense performance competition but also continually demonstrate their capacity and legitimacy to remain within the academic profession (Ortlieb & Weiss, 2018). The interviews in the present study further reveal a pronounced temporal dimension to this insecurity: early-career faculty do not necessarily believe that they will lose their jobs in the immediate future, but they continually question what lies ahead. As participants asked: "What if I still can't get a project this year?" (S20-F); "What if I keep failing to publish enough papers to meet the requirements?" (H14-M); and "What if I reach the age for applying for associate professorship but still don't have enough publications or achievements to qualify for promotion?" (E19-F). Accordingly, the focus of job insecurity gradually shifts from "whether I can keep my current position" to "how far I can go in my academic career," unfolding progressively across three levels: job continuity, academic position, and professional identity.

Job Continuity: "Can I Stay?"

First, early-career faculty experience insecurity concerning the continuity of their current positions—whether they can remain in the institution. Obtaining a university position does not necessarily translate into genuine occupational stability. Contractual evaluations, contract renewal, and annual performance requirements continually tie job security to the demonstration of sustained performance. As S13-M explained:

"I'm not really worried that I won't have a job next year. What I worry about is what happens a few years from now if I keep failing to meet the requirements."

Similarly, E32-M noted:

"The university gives you a position, but that doesn't mean the position is secure. You still have to keep proving that you are worth keeping."

These accounts indicate that job insecurity among early-career faculty initially takes the form of concern over job continuity, but this concern differs from conventional fears of unemployment. Instead, it reflects a form of conditional security: the position exists for the time being, but its continuity depends on the individual's ability to repeatedly satisfy organizational performance standards. The current academic position thus becomes a resource that must be continuously demonstrated, justified, and maintained.

Academic Position: "Can I Continue to Advance?"

Second, as the interviews progressed, a deeper form of insecurity emerged concerning academic position—whether individuals can continue to advance within the academic field. Even when early-career faculty satisfy basic contractual requirements and temporarily secure their positions, they may still experience substantial insecurity arising from concerns about promotion, research funding, academic reputation, and opportunities for professional development. Faculty members continually compare themselves with peers and use these comparisons to assess their relative positions within the academic field. When colleagues of similar age progressively obtain grants, publish high-level research, or receive promotions while their own development remains comparatively slow, an ostensibly secure position may be reinterpreted as increasingly insecure. As E11-F observed:

“The most obvious pressure comes from watching colleagues who joined at the same time as me. When one after another starts getting projects and being promoted, you begin to wonder whether you are falling behind.”

Thus, the concern has shifted beyond “Do I have a job?” to whether the current position can be converted into future academic capital and a more advantageous professional position. From this perspective, job security does not necessarily equate to career security. A position acquires greater long-term security only when individuals are able to continuously accumulate academic capital, improve their position within the academic field, and secure opportunities for further development.

Academic Identity: “Am I a Scholar Who Can Be Recognized?”

Finally, insecurity may extend to the level of academic identity—whether individuals can become scholars who are recognized and valued by their academic peers. This represents a deeper manifestation of the expansion of job insecurity into academic career insecurity. When research achievements repeatedly fall short of expectations and academic development remains stalled over time, concerns about positions and promotion can gradually become internalized as doubts about one’s academic capabilities and professional identity. Faculty members begin to ask not only “Will the university keep me?” but also “Am I really suited to an academic career?” and “Can I become a scholar who is recognized by my peers?”

One participant reflected:

“At first, I was anxious about whether I could pass the performance assessment. Later, I became even more anxious about whether I could actually produce something worthwhile. If you go several years without any particularly strong achievements, you start wondering whether your research ability is really inadequate” (H8-F).

Another participant similarly stated:

“Although I’m a university teacher, sometimes I feel that I’m simply completing tasks rather than truly becoming a scholar” (S7-F).

This shift indicates that academic career insecurity moves beyond external threats to employment and promotion and enters the domain of internal uncertainty surrounding professional identity. Read and Leathwood (2018) argue that insecurity in academic careers affects not only how scholars understand their current work but also how they imagine future career possibilities, making “the future” itself an object that must be continuously pursued and constructed. For early-career faculty, sustained performance competition means that the future can no longer be taken for granted as a natural extension of the present. Instead, it becomes an outcome that must be continually earned through publications, research projects, promotion, and academic recognition.

Taken together, these findings reveal a three-layered temporal structure of job insecurity among early-career faculty: anxiety over “whether I can stay,” concerning job continuity; anxiety over “whether I can advance,” concerning academic position; and anxiety over “whether I can become a recognized scholar,” concerning academic identity. This progression reflects the temporal extension of job insecurity from the current position to the future academic trajectory, while also highlighting the distinctive nature of career security within the academic field. Holding an academic position is merely the starting point of academic career security rather than its endpoint; sustained security depends on the continuing confirmation of one’s future academic position and professional identity.

“I can only follow the rules”: Differentiated behavioral responses to job insecurity

Job insecurity does not remain confined to psychological perceptions; it also shapes early-career faculty members’ academic practices and career choices. The interviews show that faculty members respond differently to uncertainty surrounding job continuity, promotion, and future career development. Their responses vary according to perceived resource threats, existing capital positions, expectations of future returns, and perceived capacity for action. Overall, these responses follow three differentiated pathways: rule compliance and resource protection, resource acquisition and intensified investment, and career mobility or field transition.

First, for early-career faculty occupying relatively disadvantaged positions within the academic field, job insecurity tends to trigger rule-oriented resource protection. When faculty perceive that unsuccessful performance assessments, failed grant applications, or insufficient research outputs may threaten promotion and career continuity, their attention shifts from “What is academically valuable?” to “What can best reduce my career risk?” As E29-F explained:

“At the beginning, I would still choose topics that I was genuinely interested in. But later I realized that time is limited. If something takes several years to produce results, the risk is too high for me. So now I first look at what the university recognizes and what counts toward promotion. I need to meet those requirements first.”

This shift indicates that job insecurity changes how faculty evaluate the risks and returns of academic activities. Those with limited capital and organizational support may lack the resources required for long-term and uncertain academic exploration. They therefore prioritize activities that can be more

directly converted into promotion credentials, performance evaluations, and employment-related resources, such as recognized publications, projects with clear evaluation criteria, and research topics with shorter output cycles. Organizational rules consequently function not only as evaluation standards but also as a “safety boundary” for containing career risks. As H2-F stated:

“A lot of the time now, I don’t ask myself whether I want to do something. I first ask whether it will count and whether it will be recognized. I can’t afford to gamble with my job.”

Thus, “following the rules” does not necessarily indicate the complete loss of academic autonomy. Rather, under conditions of uncertainty, autonomy may increasingly give way to risk controllability. This is consistent with research showing that job insecurity can elicit job-preservation strategies aimed at protecting valued employment resources (Shoss et al., 2023).

Second, faculty with relatively stronger research foundations, academic networks, and project resources may respond through resource acquisition and intensified investment. Rather than reducing effort, they may increase research engagement, expand collaborations, seek additional funding, and accelerate publication in order to strengthen their academic positions. S3-M explained:

“The more unstable things feel, the more you cannot stop. Only if you keep having projects and publications can other people see your value.”

Here, insecurity becomes a stimulus for continued resource investment. Faculty seek to transform existing resources—time, expertise, networks, and projects—into additional publications, funding, recognition, and reputation, which can subsequently generate further career opportunities. This reflects a process of “exchanging resources for resources,” in which existing capital provides the capacity to respond proactively to perceived threats. Research similarly suggests that job insecurity may encourage proactive coping strategies such as job crafting (Urbanaviciute et al., 2021). The relationship between insecurity and work investment is therefore not necessarily linear but depends on individuals’ resource foundations and perceived capacity for further action.

Finally, when faculty experience persistent resource scarcity, limited promotion opportunities, or declining professional identification, continued investment may become increasingly costly. When they perceive that further effort within the existing academic field is unlikely to produce commensurate returns, their strategy may shift from “increasing investment” to “seeking resources elsewhere.” Career mobility can then become a means of protecting resources and reconstructing career prospects.

S6-M offered a particularly illustrative account:

“You can spend a huge amount of time on research and still fail to meet the requirements for promotion. If there were an opportunity that allowed me to face less assessment pressure while offering more stable income and development prospects, I would seriously consider it. It’s not that I no longer want to do academic work; I just don’t want to remain in a situation where I never know what next year will look like.”

This account suggests that mobility is not necessarily withdrawal from academic work but may represent a resource-restructuring strategy. From a COR perspective, leaving may help prevent further resource depletion and facilitate the reconstruction of a more sustainable resource portfolio. From a Bourdieusian perspective, moving across institutional or occupational fields represents a repositioning strategy when the existing field configuration no longer offers a viable pathway for maintaining or improving one's position.

Taken together, job insecurity produces differentiated rather than uniform behavioral responses. Faculty with fewer resources may prioritize rule compliance and resource protection; those with stronger resource foundations may pursue intensified resource accumulation; and those who perceive diminishing returns from continued investment may consider career mobility or field transition. The key determinant is therefore not job insecurity alone, but its interaction with perceived resource threats, existing capital positions, expected returns, and perceived action possibilities. This differentiated pattern demonstrates how structural insecurity within the academic field is translated into individual career strategies through resource dynamics and positional conditions.

Conclusions

Drawing on interviews with 35 early-career faculty members at Chinese elite universities, this study examined the formation and behavioral responses to job insecurity through Bourdieu's theory of the academic field and Conservation of Resources (COR) theory. The findings suggest that job insecurity extends beyond concerns about unemployment or contract termination. It develops through the interaction of academic competition, positional differences, and perceived resource threats.

First, job insecurity has a positional dimension. In an academic field characterized by continuous evaluation and comparison, early-career faculty must demonstrate their academic value through publications, research projects, promotion, and reputation. Thus, career security is associated not only with retaining a position but also with maintaining or improving one's relative position within the field.

Second, job insecurity is shaped by cumulative resource dynamics. Differences in academic capital and social resources may influence subsequent opportunities for resource acquisition. Faculty with greater resources may be better positioned to obtain additional resources, whereas those with fewer resources may face greater difficulties in responding to resource loss, contributing to differentiated experiences of insecurity.

Third, job insecurity has a temporal and identity-related dimension. Faculty concerns may develop from "Can I stay?" to "Can I advance?" and, ultimately, to questions about academic recognition and professional identity. Career security is therefore experienced as an ongoing process rather than simply a condition associated with holding a university position.

Fourth, faculty respond to job insecurity in different ways, including rule compliance, resource acquisition, and potential field transition. These responses vary according to existing capital, perceived

resource risks, and expectations of future returns, suggesting that faculty exercise agency within structural and resource constraints.Taken together, the findings support an explanatory chain of field structure →capital and position→resource perceptions→job insecurity→behavioral responses. Integrating Bourdieu's focus on field structure and capital with COR theory's emphasis on resource dynamics, the framework helps explain how institutional conditions and positional differences are associated with individual experiences and behavioral responses to job insecurity.

Overall, the findings suggest that early-career faculty may experience career insecurity even when formal employment is relatively stable. Such insecurity concerns not only employment continuity but also academic position, career development, and professional identity.

Discussion

The contribution of this study lies not simply in reaffirming the performance, competition, and resource pressures faced by early-career faculty, but in explaining how these conditions generate persistent job insecurity and differentiated career behaviors within the academic field. Integrating Bourdieu's theory of the academic field with Conservation of Resources (COR) theory, the study conceptualizes job insecurity as a dynamic process shaped by field rules, capital positions, resource perceptions, and behavioral strategies.

From "job security" to "positional security": Extending the explanatory boundaries of job insecurity

Existing research on job insecurity has typically conceptualized it as an individual's subjective concern about the continuity of current employment, with considerable attention devoted to contractual instability, organizational restructuring, and the threat of unemployment(Greenhalgh & Rosenblatt, 1984; Lee et al., 2018; Sverke et al., 2002). The present study extends this understanding by showing that, for early-career faculty occupying relatively stable organizational positions, insecurity does not necessarily presuppose an immediate or tangible threat of unemployment. The distinctive dynamics of the academic field—particularly continuous evaluation and relational competition—create a substantial separation between holding a position and experiencing career security.

This finding extends the conventional boundaries of job insecurity research. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the academic field is fundamentally relational: an individual's position is not a fixed or absolute condition but is continually constituted and recognized in relation to other actors. Consequently, obtaining a university position does not eliminate the need for early-career faculty to continuously demonstrate the legitimacy and value of their position through academic production. This helps explain why the absence of an immediate unemployment risk does not necessarily imply the absence of insecurity. What is actually threatened may not be the current position itself, but the individual's capacity to maintain or improve that position under future competitive conditions.

Accordingly, this study suggests that job insecurity in academic careers has a distinctive positional character. Compared with employment-continuity risks more commonly examined in conventional labor-market research, academic careers place greater emphasis on relative position, developmental opportunities, and professional recognition. This interpretation resonates with existing research on uncertainty in early academic careers, but advances it by extending the meaning of insecurity from the employment relationship to the academic position itself. In this sense, the study highlights that the relevant question for early-career faculty is not merely “Do I have a job?” but also “Can I remain competitive and retain a meaningful position within the academic field?”

From “resource scarcity” to “resource cycles”: Explaining the cumulative Nature of early-career faculty insecurity

Previous studies have established that research funding, academic networks, supervisory support, and research time can substantially shape the career development of early-career scholars. This study further demonstrates that resources should not be understood simply in terms of whether individuals “have” or “do not have” them. Rather, academic resources possess a pronounced cumulative and cyclical character, consistent with the resource gain and resource loss spirals emphasized by COR theory.

In particular, academic achievements can generate opportunities for research funding; projects can subsequently provide research time, team support, and data; and these additional resources can facilitate further scholarly outputs, academic reputation, and collaborative opportunities. A resource gain cycle may therefore emerge in which existing resources facilitate the acquisition of additional resources. Conversely, resource scarcity may constrain research investment and scholarly productivity, which in turn reduces access to future funding and collaboration opportunities, generating a resource loss cycle. Thus, the insecurity experienced by early-career faculty derives not only from the inadequacy of their current resources but also from concerns that their future capacity to acquire resources may itself be deteriorating.

This finding also deepens the explanatory potential of Bourdieu’s theory of capital. Differences in capital should not be treated merely as static structural background conditions; they may be continuously converted and amplified through processes of competition, evaluation, and resource allocation within the academic field. In other words, seemingly modest initial differences in academic capital may, through repeated evaluative and distributive processes, develop into increasingly pronounced differences in career position. Understanding job insecurity among early-career faculty therefore requires attention not only to how many resources individuals currently possess, but also to whether they have the capacity to convert existing resources into future resources.This perspective provides a bridge between Bourdieu’s emphasis on capital conversion and COR theory’s focus on resource accumulation and loss. Academic capital acquires practical significance partly through its capacity to generate further resources, while resource accumulation can simultaneously strengthen an individual’s position within the academic field. Job insecurity thus emerges not simply from absolute resource scarcity but from an increasingly uncertain perception of one’s ability to participate in future resource-generation processes.

From “negative consequences” to “differentiated action”: Rethinking the relationship between job insecurity and behavior

Existing research has frequently associated job insecurity with stress, burnout, reduced work engagement, and turnover intentions, emphasizing its adverse consequences for employees. The present study complicates this predominantly negative interpretation by showing that job insecurity does not necessarily lead to behavioral withdrawal. Its consequences depend partly on what resources individuals possess and how they evaluate the expected returns of future investment.

This finding offers a further refinement of COR theory. When individuals possess relatively limited resources, job insecurity may encourage more defensive strategies, such as adhering closely to organizational rules and prioritizing quantifiable tasks that can reduce the risk of further resource loss. When individuals possess a stronger research foundation and greater resource-generating capacity, however, insecurity may instead stimulate additional investment and resource accumulation. By contrast, when sustained investment repeatedly fails to generate corresponding returns, the marginal benefits of continued investment may decline, making field transition a potentially more viable means of resource protection.

The relationship between job insecurity and behavior is therefore not adequately captured by a simple linear relationship of “higher insecurity → lower investment.” Rather, it more closely resembles a resource-positioned process of strategic choice. This interpretation connects Bourdieu’s logic of “position–practice” with COR theory’s logic of “resource–coping”: field position shapes the range of action possibilities available to individuals; resource conditions influence how they evaluate risks and opportunities; and these risk assessments, in turn, shape their career strategies.Such a perspective also highlights the agency of early-career faculty within structurally constrained environments. Faculty members do not simply passively absorb institutional pressures. Instead, they interpret their resource conditions and competitive positions and select strategies intended to protect, accumulate, or reconstruct valued resources. Behavioral differences, therefore, should be understood not simply as individual variations in coping style, but as responses embedded in unequal positions within the academic field.

From a static state to a dynamic process: Toward a processual explanation of job insecurity

Taken together, the findings reveal another important characteristic of job insecurity: it is not a static psychological state but a continuously evolving career process. Academic rules may change, peer competition continues to intensify, and individuals’ capital may be accumulated or depleted over time. These processes continually reshape how early-career faculty evaluate their future prospects. Consequently, career security today cannot automatically be translated into career security tomorrow.

This processual character also means that job insecurity among early-career faculty is inherently future-oriented. Individuals do not assess their career security solely by asking whether they currently meet performance requirements. Instead, they consider whether their current resources are sufficient to support future development, whether their current academic position can be maintained, and whether their professional identity will continue to receive recognition. Job insecurity thus connects present resource conditions with imagined future career possibilities, functioning as an important mechanism linking institutional environments, individual perceptions, and career action.This temporal dimension further distinguishes academic job insecurity from a narrowly employment-centered conception of insecurity. In academic careers, the future is continuously evaluated through uncertain trajectories of publication, funding, promotion, recognition, and professional identity. As a result, even when current employment remains formally intact, the anticipated possibility of future resource depletion or positional decline may generate substantial insecurity in the present.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite its contributions, this study has three main limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings and informing future research.

First, the study is situated within a specific institutional and national context. The sample comprises 35 early-career faculty members from Chinese elite universities, most of whom work under performance-based appointment arrangements. While this context is valuable for examining insecurity under high performance pressure, it may limit the transferability of the findings to other institutions, disciplines, and national systems. Future research could adopt comparative designs to examine which aspects of the field-capital-resource mechanism are context-specific or more broadly applicable.

Second, the study relies on retrospective interviews to reconstruct changes in job insecurity across the T1-T6 stages of the appointment period. Such accounts may be shaped by selective memory, subsequent career outcomes, and current interpretations of past experiences. Thus, the trajectory curves should be understood as process-oriented reconstructions rather than direct longitudinal measures. Future research could combine repeated interviews with longitudinal observations or institutional records to capture changes in job insecurity over time.

Third, the sampling and interview process may have shaped the range of experiences captured. Participants were doctoral-holding faculty aged 35 or younger, with fewer than six years of university teaching experience in Double First-Class universities. The shared language and academic context between the first author and participants, as well as the online interview format, may also have influenced disclosure and interpretation. Future studies could employ more heterogeneous samples, multiple data sources, and explicit reflexive procedures to capture greater variation in job insecurity.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Authors' ContributionsJianxiong Zeng: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal Analysis, Writing - Original Draft Preparation, Project Administration. Xiaokun Qi: Validation, Data Collection, Writing - Review & Editing, Visualization.Guodong Zhang:Methodology, Investigation, Supervision.

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Figures

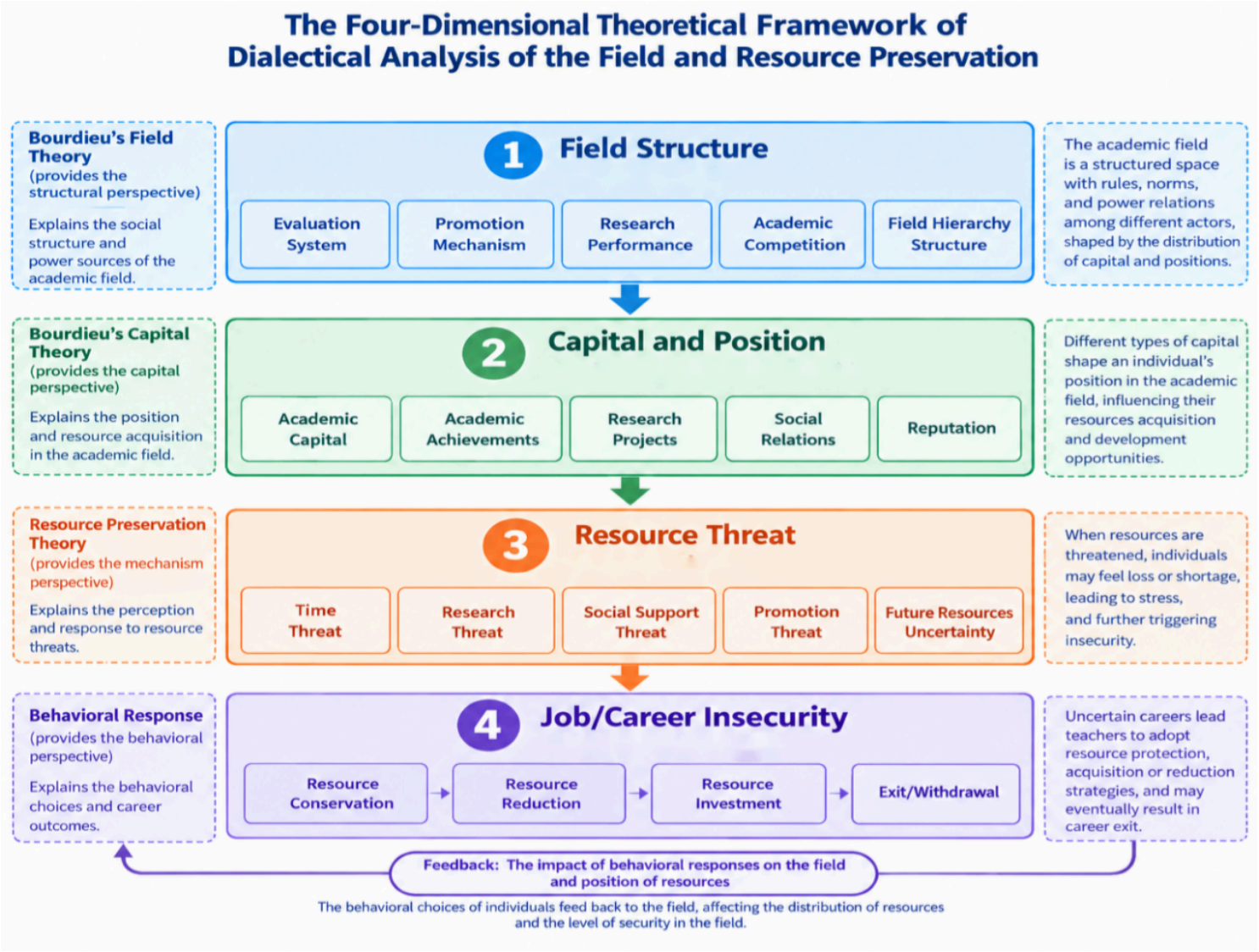

Figure 1

Theoretical framework

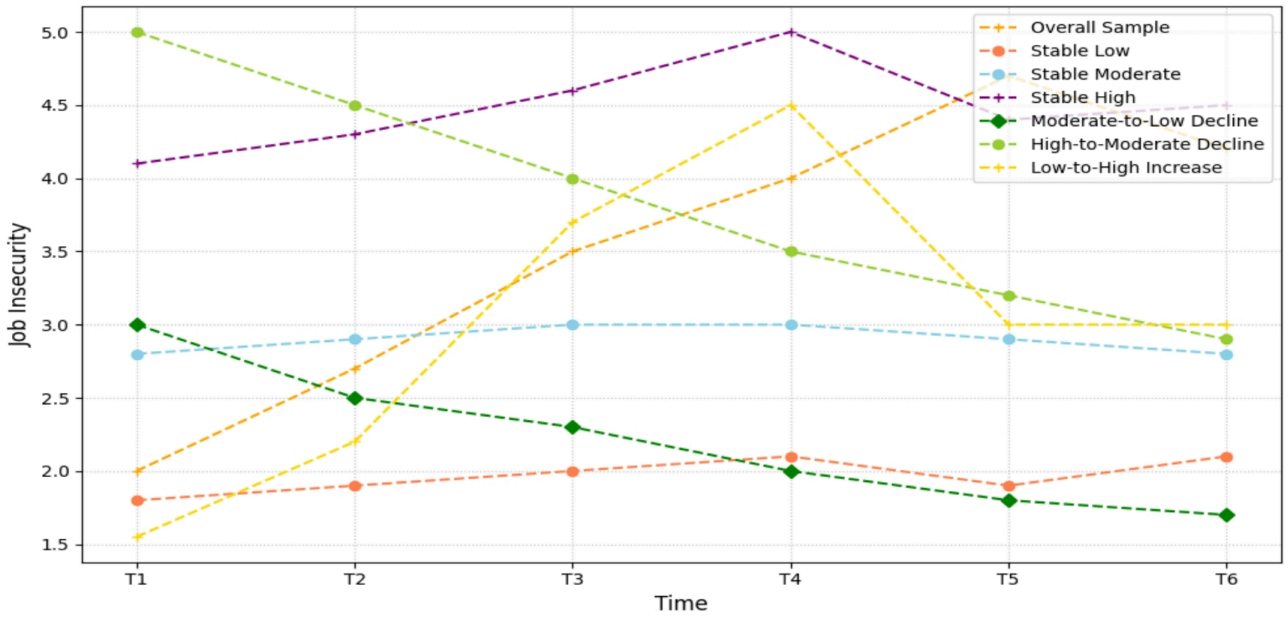

Figure 2

Developmental trajectories of job insecurity among early-career faculty