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Mono-Method, Multi-Method, or Mixed-Methods Research in Organizational Psychology and Leadership: When is Each Adequate?

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ABSTRACT

Research in organizational psychology and leadership uses different methods, yet the reasons for selecting one approach over another are often presented as preferences rather than as design fit. This paper aims to clarify when a mono-method design is adequate, when a multi-method design is needed, and when a mixed-methods design is worth the added cost and complexity. This paper applies a qualitative method that combines (1) a brief conceptual framing of quantitative and qualitative paradigms and (2) a structured review of a purposive sample of leadership and organizational psychology studies (between 2011 and 2026), selected to represent quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods designs. Quantitative designs provide breadth and comparability but can underplay context, culture, and causal pathways. Qualitative designs provide depth and meaningful reasoning but face limits in scale, time, and transferability. Mixed-methods designs can bridge these gaps through integration, but integration itself becomes a risk caused by dominance of one method, weak linking logic, or high resource needs. The paper offers a simple method-fit logic and a practical set of criteria that can be used early in study planning to align the research question, context, and constraints with an adequate design choice. No single approach is always adequate, but not every problem needs mixed methods. Adequacy depends on the question, the context, the maturity of the construct, and the constraints.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational psychology and leadership research tries to explain why individuals, groups, and organizations behave as they do, and how such behavior shapes outcomes and performance (Scandura, 2016). Because the field deals with people, meaning, and context, it is not surprising that scholars use different approaches to study it (Antonakis *et al.*, 2004).

At the same time, the choice of method is not a neutral technical step. It shapes what the study can claim, what it misses, and how far the conclusions can travel beyond the settings studied. In practice, many papers still treat the method as a routine section, while the real argument of “why this design is adequate” remains unclear.

Research Questions

This paper responds to that gap. Its aim is to make the method choice explicit and defensible for leadership and organizational psychology topics, especially when the phenomena are complex, multi-level, and shaped by culture and time (Parry *et al.*, 2014).

Two questions guide the paper

Research Question 1: When is a mono-method design adequate for leadership and related organizational psychology questions?

Research Question 2: When does the research problem require a multi-method or mixed-methods design, despite added higher complexity?

The paper first consolidates strengths and limits of quantitative and qualitative approaches in leadership

and organizational psychology, drawing on established methodological discussions and examples from recent studies.

Second, it explains mixed-methods value as an integration logic (not only “two methods together”) and clarifies its typical failure modes (e.g., weak linking, dominance of a method, and integration drift).

Third, it proposes a simple set of method-fit criteria that can be used early in study planning to avoid a descriptive, disconnected discussion section later.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background: what leadership research needs from method

Quantitative research generally aims for measurement, comparison, and general patterns across a sample. It can test hypotheses and estimate relationships between variables, which is useful for many leadership questions that focus on correlations and outcomes (Denison *et al.*, 1995).

Qualitative research focuses on meaning, lived experience, and context. It is often used to explore mechanisms, interpret behavior in a social setting, and surface factors that are not well represented in standard measures (Merriam, 2009; Tenny *et al.*, 2022).

In organizational psychology, both drivers (e.g., motivation, well-being) and outcomes (e.g., performance) sit in a wider system shaped by work design, norms, leadership behavior, and external pressures (Dolan & Gabel-Shemuely, 2015). This system nature makes “one clean variable at a time” sometimes insufficient.

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In leadership studies specifically, decades of work have not removed ambiguity, partly because leadership operates through multiple layers (leader behavior, follower perception, group dynamics, culture, time...) and because definitions and measures change across settings (Benmira & Agboola, 2021). For this reason, case-based and interpretive work remains important even when large surveys dominate the field (Bryman *et al.*, 1996).

Mixed-methods research is commonly defined as collecting, validating, analyzing, and integrating quantitative and qualitative data within one study to create a more complete understanding than either approach alone (SAGE, 2022). In leadership and organizational psychology, the main promise of mixed methods is not “more data”, but better alignment between what is measured and what is really happening context (Stentz *et al.*, 2012).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A qualitative document analysis approach was adopted for this research. It is an original synthesis built through a structured review of leadership and organizational psychology studies, combined with methodological literature that discusses design choices.

Sampling and scope

A purposive sample of sixteen studies published between 2011 and 2026 was first compiled to cover different designs (quantitative, qualitative, mixed-methods), different sectors, and different geographies. Three papers were excluded because they did not meet the review selection criteria lacking sufficient methodological transparency. The final synthesis therefore draws on thirteen studies.

Screening logic: Studies were grouped by design type and then read with a consistent lens:

- what research question they try to answer,
- what each method enables,
- what each method hides or weakens, and
- what risks appear in execution (e.g., self-report bias,

response rate concerns, context typicality, or integration weaknesses).

These risks are discussed using relevant methodological guidance (e.g., Holtom *et al.*, 2022; Hensel & Tatarynowicz, 2024; Simard *et al.*, 2025).

Analysis approach

Rather than reporting each article as a standalone summary, the synthesis extracts repeated patterns across studies and then links those patterns to a practical method-fit logic for leadership research. The goal is to tighten the argument from the start: method choice should follow the research problem, not the other way around.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Findings: what each approach enables and where it breaks

Quantitative designs: breadth, comparability, and typical blind spots

Quantitative studies in the sample show how leadership

constructs can be linked to performance and engagement outcomes at scale. Meta-analytic work demonstrates how transformational leadership relates to multiple performance criteria across levels (Wang *et al.*, 2011). Large global surveys also provide useful baselines for engagement and workplace experience (Towers Watson, 2012; Harvard, 2014).

Still, the same strengths create predictable weaknesses. Surveys can over-rely on self-report, and they often carry weak causal reasoning even when the language sounds causal. Response rates, sampling decisions, and cross-cultural equivalence are not always handled with enough care (Holtom *et al.*, 2022).

Quantitative designs can also lose the pathway logic. For example, multi-wave designs add time strength, yet they can still remain descriptive about mechanisms if they do not explore how culture, norms, or power distance shape the observed links (Hu *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, very large computational studies (e.g., text analysis of leadership research trends) are useful for mapping the field, but they may not fully cover the literature and they cannot replace context-rich understanding of leadership behavior in practice (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2024).

Qualitative designs: depth, meaning, and the problem of transfer

Qualitative work is strong when the leadership question is about lived experience, sense-making, and context. Systematic and narrative reviews can surface behavioral frameworks and explain why certain leadership practices matter in specific contexts (Orkamo *et al.*, 2025). Interviews and interpretive work can also highlight barriers and coping strategies that would be difficult to capture through fixed surveys, such as in gendered leadership challenges (Khanal *et al.*, 2026).

However, qualitative work faces practical constraints. It needs time, access, and skill in analysis. It may also be criticized for limited transferability, especially when the setting is very specific or when the method is mainly narrative without a systematic logic (Dacier *et al.*, 2025).

In leadership research, the key risk is not “small sample” alone. The risk is weak connection between the claims and the evidence trail. When that link is strong, qualitative work can carry high credibility even with limited scope (Bryman *et al.*, 1996; Smith *et al.*, 2021).

Mixed-methods designs: integration value and integration risk

Mixed-methods designs are often presented as a solution to the limits of single methods. In practice, their value depends on integration quality. Studies in the sample show different integration patterns: combining survey data with field insights to explain exchange relationships and helping behavior (Zou *et al.*, 2015), or combining quantitative measures with broader synthesis to map constructs and measures (Eva *et al.*, 2019).

Mixed methods become especially helpful when leadership is expected to influence both measurable outcomes and harder-to-measure cultural layers (Stanhope *et al.*, 2019;

Jensen *et al.*, 2020). Quantitative data can show direction and magnitude, while qualitative data explains why the relationship takes this shape and what contextual triggers exist.

Yet mixed-methods designs introduce a new problem: integration itself can fail. Integration can drift into parallel reporting (two mini-studies with no linking logic),

or one method can dominate and reduce the other to an appendix. Contemporary discussions of integration and epistemology show how compatibility and merging logic are hard problems, not only technical steps (Simard *et al.*, 2025). Design also demands time, resources, and multi-method skills (Lall, 2021).

Table 1: A simple method-fit logic for leadership and organizational psychology studies

Fit criterion	Mono-method (quantitative)	Mono-method (qualitative)	Mixed-methods
Main aim of the study	Test associations, compare groups, estimate magnitude	Explore meaning, mechanisms, or lived experience	Explain patterns and test magnitude; develop then validate (or the opposite)
Context sensitivity	Low to moderate (needs careful controls)	High (context is part of the evidence)	High (context informs interpretation and measure choice)
Stage of theory and/or construct	Mature measures available	Construct still evolving or contested	Construct needs refinement and validation
Constraints (time / access / budget)	Lower, especially for surveys and secondary data	Moderate to high (access and analysis time)	Highest (integration, time, funding)
Main quality risks	Self-report bias, response rates, weak causality claims	Weak audit trail, over-interpretation	Weak integration, dominance of one method

Discussion of Findings

The Best Approach to Study Leadership

To identify the most suitable method for leadership research, I have selected sixteen studies, published between 2011 and 2026, spanning diverse designs, geographies, and sectors.

The studies that have been considered in this paper have been coded as follows:

- Quantitative research papers: QNR-01 to QNR-08
- Qualitative research papers: QLR-01 to QLR-03
- Mixed-method research papers: MXR01 to MXR-05

Upon initial classification, I have conducted a structured literature review that led to the exclusion of three articles for failing to meet the research criteria.

Analyzing the Quantitative Research Articles

QNR-01 (Wang, *et al.*, 2011) analyzes 113 studies using meta-analysis with 95% confidence interval (CI) and 80% credibility interval, identifying how transformational leadership impacts performance at both the individual and team level. It finds a strong mediation model linking this leadership style with (a) task, (b) contextual, and (c) creative performance. However, this study lacks breakdown figures for geographies, industry, role, and career levels.

QNR-02 (Towers Watson, 2012) surveys 32,000 employees across job levels, industries, and 29 countries to identify a sustainable engagement scale and analyze its dimensions. Although the study is strong in size and precision, it lacks internal validation of engagement constructs and pays limited attention to self-report bias and causal reasoning. The headline claim -that only 35% of employees are highly engaged- is not accompanied by psychometric detail or cross-country comparisons.

Similarly, **QNR-03** (Harvard, 2014) surveys 19,900 employees from eight regions using 56 questions, presenting descriptive and comparative statistics. The study addresses clear and actionable leadership insights but is still subject to self-selection bias. It underscores employees' physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs; and highlight a high-level tagline of "take better care of people" to improve business; but its old dataset (2013–2014) may limit its generalizability to the next centuries.

QNR-04 (Hu, *et al.*, 2020) conducts a three-wave survey with 377 newcomers and their direct leaders from 56 Chinese high-tech companies (75.4% response rate) to investigate "opening and closing leadership" by analyzing 24-item scale covering leadership, role clarity, creative self-efficacy, performance, and innovative behavior. Its multi-wave design also considers confirmatory and validity procedures, which gives it more strength. However, while it collects data at three two-month intervals, it lacks a focus on understanding those pathways influencing innovation and task performance. Additionally, it does not consider Hofstede's cultural dimensions (e.g., power distance) nor traditional Chinese values; therefore, it cannot be generalized even within China.

QNR-05 (Mind Share Partners, 2021) examines mental health challenges among U.S. workers and organizational cultural supports, exploring leadership impact on engagement, retention, and productivity. It analyzes 1,500 survey responses performed with balanced dimensions (gender, race, age...) and compares results to a 2019 survey to enhance temporal validity. The study addresses solid burnout criteria and workplace health matrix. However, it has a potential social desirability bias and limited inferential statistics.

Table 2: An overview of reviewed research

Research File	Citation (Harvard)	Year	Best-Fit Topic	Method	Data Source	Sector	Geographical Scope	Evidence of Sampling Criteria	Evidence of Criteria	Eligibility of Analysis
QNR-01	(Wang, <i>et al.</i> , 2011)	2011	Employee Performance Leadership Effectiveness Productivity	Quantitative	High quality journals database	Multi-sector / Industry	Multi-Countries	Found	Found	Considered
QNR-02	(Towers Watson, 2012)	2012	Employee well-being Leadership effectiveness	Quantitative	Online Survey	Multi-sector / Industry	Multi-Countries	Found	Found	Considered
QNR-03	(Harvard, 2014)	2014	Employee well-being Leadership effectiveness	Quantitative	Online Survey	Multi-sector / Industry	Multi-Countries	Found	Found	Considered
QNR-04	(Hu, <i>et al.</i> , 2020)	2020	Leader Ambidexterity Newcomer Socialization	Quantitative	Field study Survey	Technology	China	Found	Found	Considered
QNR-05	(Mind Share Partners, 2021)	2021	Employee Well-being Leadership Influence Organizational Development	Quantitative	Online Survey	Multi-sector / Industry	U.S.	Found	Found	Considered
QNR-06	(Jiatong, <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	2022	Leadership Effectiveness Organizational Development	Quantitative	Online Survey	Hospitality	China	Found	Found	Considered
QNR-07	(Setyawati, <i>et al.</i> , 2022)	2022	Employee Motivation Organizational Development	Quantitative	Not precisely given	Multi-sector / Industry	Multi-Countries	Not Found	Found	Excluded
QNR-08	(Ribeiro, <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	2024	Organizational Development	Quantitative	High quality journals' database	Multi-sector / Industry	Multi-Countries	Found	Found	Considered
QLR-01	(Orkamo, <i>et al.</i> , 2025)	2025	Digital Transformation Leadership Organizational Performance	Qualitative	High quality journals' database	Private Sector	Multi-Countries	Found	Found	Considered
QLR-02	(Dacier, <i>et al.</i> , 2025)	2025	Leadership Effectiveness Organizational Learning	Qualitative	Empirical Panel Insights	Health Care	U.S.	Found	Found	Considered
QLR-03	(Khanal, <i>et al.</i> , 2026)	2026	Organizational Development Women's Leadership	Qualitative	Semi-structured interviews	Education	Nepal	Found	Found	Considered
MXR-01	(Zou, <i>et al.</i> , 2015)	2015	Leadership Effectiveness Organizational Development	Mixed	Interviews Survey	Hospitality	China	Found	Found	Considered
MXR-02	(Eva, <i>et al.</i> , 2019)	2019	Employee Well-being Leadership Development	Mixed	High quality journals database	Multi-sector / Industry	Multi-Countries	Found	Found	Considered
MXR-03	(Deng, <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	2023	Leadership Effectiveness Organizational Development	Mixed	Not precisely given	Multi-sector / Industry	Multi-Countries	Not Found	Not Found	Excluded
MXR-04	(Bakker, <i>et al.</i> , 2023)	2023	Transformational Leadership Work Engagement	Mixed	Field Study Survey	Military & Defense education	Norway	Found	Found	Considered
MXR-05	(Rachmawati, <i>et al.</i> , 2024)	2024	Productivity Psychological Satisfaction	Mixed	Interviews Peer-reviewed literature	Multi-sector / Industry	Multi-Countries	Not Found	Found	Excluded

Differently, **QNR-06** (Jiatong, *et al.*, 2022) focuses on the hospitality sector in China, reporting on 1,000 questionnaires (with 84.5% validity rate and acceptable reliability) among staff aged 18–30 in various hotels. It also strengthens its procedure by collecting consent from all participants. The study demonstrates that transformational leadership positively affects job commitment and performance. It shows that employee engagement significantly mediates these relationships. However, it lacks the ability to address the impact of other leadership behaviors, and it is not generalizable beyond its narrow sample.

QNR-08 (Ribeiro, *et al.*, 2024) analyzes 56,547 papers using computerized text-analysis and manual screening with transparent preprocessing steps which strengthen its insights. Nonetheless, it faces uncertainty in covering all leadership literature. It also relies heavily on costly computing resources and covers two years only (2021–2023). This study shows that leadership research is expanding in scope whereas transformational leadership remains dominant, and identifying five leadership trends: “digital transformation, performance, education, practices, gender/diversity.” It is generalizable across sectors, applicable to academic and corporate leadership development, but less suited for micro-level ethnographic research.

Analyzing The Qualitative Research Articles

QLR-01 (Orkamo, *et al.*, 2025) seeks to strengthen the theoretical and empirical understanding of the relationship between leadership and organizational performance by reviewing 65 articles (2000–2024) from 51 journals in the private sector. Using Yukl’s (2012) behavioral taxonomy (task, relation, change orientation), it synthesizes relevant literature. It provides a multidimensional behavioral framework -generalizable to digital transformation context- highlighting that emotional intelligence emerges as a critical enabler for sustaining performance. However, the study lacks diversity of languages beyond English, ignores public sector, and does not examine specific leadership styles in depth.

QLR-02 (Dacier, *et al.*, 2025) in its turn draws on insights collected from a healthcare panel in U.S and reflects on lessons learned from real-world experiences of multiple leaders. It highlights successful strategies (employed in challenging situations) like self-trust, use of experience, help-seeking, and team support. The study provides high practical validity, but it lacks a generalizable systematic methodology while counting only on narrative descriptive context.

Differently **QLR-03** (Khanal, *et al.*, 2026) uses semi-structured interviews with a focus on women leadership at the education sector in Nepal. It employs five-months conversations with seven female leaders and strengthens the research using IPA and SCCT. It also applies transcript validation, strict anonymity, and bilingual translation. The study links structural barriers and gender norms in Nepal to adaptive strategies and further establishes common

guidelines towards work-life balance and flexibility, generalizable to South Asian. However, it overlooks the perspectives of those who have left the profession for similar difficulties.

Analyzing The Mixed-Methods Research Articles

MXR-01 (Zou, *et al.*, 2015) examines, through a filed study and live survey, how LMX and TMX mediate the relationship between servant leadership and helping behavior in the Chinese hospitality sector. It analyzes, through Likert chart, responses from 300 employees and 80 supervisors (40% of them are female). Despite being time-intensive, the study provides solid, scope-fit insights, though generalizability to other industries is limited.

MXR-02 (Eva, *et al.*, 2019) applies secondary research of 285 articles from 122 journals, spanning 20 years (1998–2018) in 39 countries, evaluating 16 measures of servant leadership with strong construct considerations and validation. This review offers a holistic map of the field and an agenda for improvement but relies heavily quantitative measures in its design.

Finally, **MXR-04** (Bakker, *et al.*, 2023) employs field observation in Norwegian military and defense education. It analyzes 30-day diaries from 57 participants to explain how transformational leadership relates to work engagement and performance. The study provides very strong reliability but lacks generalizability in other sectors.

What is an “adequate” approach, and why?

The reviewer comments point to a common issue in method papers: discussion becomes a list of what methods are, rather than an argument about fit. For leadership research, “adequate” should mean: the design can answer the question with acceptable validity, while acknowledging what is not answered.

Mono-method designs can be adequate when the research question is narrow and the construct is stable. For example, if the goal is to test whether a specific leadership style relates to a defined outcome in a known population, quantitative work can be sufficient (Wang *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, if the goal is to understand how leaders and followers interpret a situation inside one setting, a qualitative design can be adequate (Richardson, 2024).

However, leadership questions often combine both: leaders’ act, followers’ interpretation, and the organization’s response over time. In such cases, single-method work tends to produce either (a) broad patterns with thin mechanisms or (b) rich stories with limited comparability. This is where mixed methods can be justified.

Still, mixed methods should not be used as a default. The sample studies and the methodological literature suggest at least three conditions for using mixed methods. First, when triangulation or complementarity is needed to reduce uncertainty, especially in complex organizational phenomena (Park & Ho, 2025). Second, when the study needs development logic, such as building a survey from

qualitative insights or explaining survey results through interviews (Brimhall & Palinkas, 2020; SAGE, 2022). Third, when the context is not “typical”, and the researcher must show why findings can (or cannot) travel to other contexts (Hensel & Tatarynowicz, 2024).

Across the sample, the most repeated weaknesses are not about method labels. They are about quality controls. For surveys, response rate logic, bias handling, and careful language on causality matter (Holtom *et al.*, 2022). For qualitative studies, transparency of coding and a clear evidence trail matter (Smith *et al.*, 2021). For mixed methods, the linking logic and integration plan matter as much as data collection (Simard *et al.*, 2025).

A final point is practical: mixed methods is costly. It needs time, funding, and multi-method competence. If these resources are missing, a “weak” mixed-methods study can be worse than a strong mono-method study (Lall, 2021). This is why several institutions emphasize that mixed methods is justified when the research question truly requires it, not when it only sounds sophisticated (JHU, 2023).

CONCLUSION

The central message is simple: no single approach is always adequate, but not every problem needs mixed methods. Adequacy depends on the question, the context, the maturity of the construct, and the constraints.

Quantitative designs help when the goal is measurement and comparison, but they often require stronger handling of bias and context. Qualitative designs help when meaning and mechanism are central, but they demand clear evidence trails and careful claims. Mixed-methods designs can bridge both, but they require a strong integration plan and resources to avoid becoming descriptive and disconnected. By translating these points into a method-fit logic and practical criteria, the paper aims to help leadership and organizational psychology researchers tighten their argument from page one and produce a discussion and conclusion that are linked to the wider literature, rather than separated from it.

Implications for researchers and practice

For researchers, the first implication is to state the aim and contribution early and link them to design decisions. If the contribution is a method argument, the study must show a clear fit logic: what the method enables, what it cannot do, and why this trade-off is acceptable.

Second, discussion should not be a separate “summary section”. It should interpret findings in relation to known limitations in the field, such as cultural appropriateness, context typicality, and measurement dominance (Hensel & Tatarynowicz, 2024; Holtom *et al.*, 2022).

For practice, the implication is cautious use of evidence. Organizations often adopt leadership advice from large surveys and trend reports. Such evidence can be useful, but leaders should ask: does the context match our context, and do we understand the mechanism behind the numbers (Harvard, 2014; DDI, 2018)?

Limitations and future research

This paper is a structured synthesis based on a purposive sample, not a comprehensive meta-review of all leadership methods. Therefore, the logic proposed here should be seen as practical guidance rather than a final rule.

Future work can test the method-fit criteria more formally, for example by reviewing a larger sample of studies and scoring integration quality, cultural generalizability, and evidence transparency across designs. Another useful direction is to develop a simple “method selection table” for leadership studies that can be used in early research planning, then validate it through application in multiple contexts.

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