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A configural approach to leadership using latent profile analysis: a key to addressing construct proliferation

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we explore a configural perspective of leadership. From this configural perspective, leadership is not conceptualized or modelled as distinct styles, but rather provides a way to encompass a broad range of leadership approaches arising from the co-occurrence of the same underlying leadership behaviours. As initial support of our theorizing, in two samples, an online sample from the United States ($n = 1025$) and an organizational sample from The Netherlands ($n = 193$), we found that the profiles emerging from our data could be mapped onto existing leadership styles. These promising initial results indicate the potential of a configural approach to leadership – which we theorize in our discussion section. We suggest that more attention should be devoted to developing and studying a taxonomy of leader behaviour categories, and subsequently how they combine, rather than siloed leadership styles. Applying a configural approach such as this addresses the construct redundancy and proliferation problems in leadership research.

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Leadership; taxonomy; latent profile analysis; proliferation; configural approach

Leadership research predominantly uses leadership "styles" to conceptualize and operationalize the focal constructs (Gardner et al., 2020). Styles began to dominate the leadership research landscape in the 1990's with transformational leadership quickly becoming the gold standard (Bass & Avolio, 1994). However, new styles have been proposed and validated each year, leaving the field with a plethora of leadership styles that have been criticized for conceptual and empirical overlap (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Antonakis, 2017; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). This has raised concerns of construct proliferation and redundancy (Banks et al., 2018; Bormann & Rowold, 2018) and questioned the suitability of researching leadership styles (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Empirical (Eva et al., 2024) and theoretical (Anderson & Sun, 2024; Fischer & Sitkin, 2023) works have indicated that leadership styles are not the most useful, parsimonious, and efficient way forward for leadership studies due to their redundancies. Rather, these sources have suggested taking a configural theory approach, where a set of foundational leadership competencies become the building blocks from which to combine and create various configurations and combinations of leadership. Thus, to answer this timely call, we explore how leadership can instead be studied from a configural theory approach, as distinct from styles (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Furnari et al., 2021; Stoker et al., 2023), and in doing so, help resolve the above-noted critiques.

We are not the first to point to the problems caused by the proliferation of leadership styles (e.g., Alvesson, 2020; Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Antonakis, 2017). Meta-analytical work has demonstrated significant empirical redundancies between different leadership styles (e.g., Banks et al., 2016, 2018; DeRue et al., 2011; Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). Review papers have identified the overlap and have tried to create distinctions between styles (e.g., Lemoine et al., 2019; Meuser et al., 2016). Critics of leadership styles have pointed to valence-based conflations between the leader's intentions, behaviours, and outcomes within their conceptualizations that fuel construct redundancy and amalgamation (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023, 2023; Fischer et al., 2017). Recent empirical work by Eva et al. (2024) questions whether leadership styles, as they are currently measured and analysed, can co-exist together due to their extensive empirical overlap.

The construct proliferation problem within the leadership literature motivates the current research to examine how the core leadership behaviours that are

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present across styles (e.g., task-, relations-, change-oriented behaviours) can be configured in different ways that allow multiple forms of leadership to co-exist together, rather than compete against each other, as is the case in research using leadership styles (Eva et al., 2024). Thus, our key contribution is developing and empirically testing whether a configural approach, building on taxonomic leadership behaviours and incorporating person-centred methodologies, can resolve the conceptual conflation inherent in leadership styles research. Specifically, we incorporate our configural approach with the functional theory of leadership which argues that the effective leadership is the fulfilment of essential functions for followers (Morgeson et al., 2010). From this perspective, leadership effectiveness is not tied to any particular style, but rather to the specific combinations of behaviours that align with the functions or needs follower require in a given context – be it task proficiency, or proactivity or wellbeing. In doing so, we address the criticism that conceptualizing leadership as styles introduces confounds to how we think about leadership from the outset by providing an alternative. Through our approach, we explore the possibility that the wealth of different leadership styles and theories can be brought alongside one another in a single overarching configural framework.

Configural theorizing of leadership with a functionalist perspective

A functionalist leadership perspective holds that leadership is effective when it fulfils all critical functions for task or goal maintenance (McGrath, 1962). In this view, leadership is not defined by any single style or trait or behaviour, but rather by ensuring all necessary functions are met. That is, various configurations represent different ways leaders combine behaviours to fulfil core underlying functions. For instance, task-oriented leaders may be seen as primarily fulfiling the function of driving people's goal achievement and need for competence, while relation-oriented configurations would better support followers' relatedness need and wellbeing. This perspective shifts the focus away from identifying a single "best" style of leadership and towards understanding how various combinations of behaviours can satisfy different follower needs within a unified framework.

In a similar way, Fischer and Sitkin (2023, p. 361) argued that leadership styles needed to be broken down into their "coherent building blocks" and then search for meaningful co-occurring patterns within those blocks. They are clear that using the existing measures for these leadership styles is not a productive way forward. Rather, a set of specific leadership behaviours that are theoretically distinct from each other are required, before they are then configured into amalgams of leadership. Anderson and Sun (2024) articulated how leadership researchers could draw inspiration from personality researchers and use existing leadership scale items to generate specific traits (i.e., building blocks) that fit within five or six broad meta-categories. They argued that to do so requires taking existing leadership behavioural taxonomies as a starting point and potentially adding additional behaviours if they are theoretically important for leadership. Eva et al. (2024) again argue for a configural approach but also offer a potential solution forward, pointing to Yukl's (2002; 2012) existing categories as a good place to start developing the common building blocks that form a picture of leadership.

Common across all three is the need to isolate specific leadership behaviours that are representative of the leadership literature (i.e., styles, behaviours, competencies, traits), that these behaviours can be measured, and that co-occur in different patterns depending on the leader, which are then empirically linked to different covariates. By combining the configural theory with a functional perspective, we move beyond the limitations of style-based leadership research to identify leader profiles that reflect the different functions across varying contexts. Some configurations may balance these multiple functions, whereas others might prioritize one function over the rest. Our aim is not to label these profiles as the only possible patterns, instead we hope to use the functionalist perspective to offer theoretical interpretations on the behavioural configurations. That is, the contribution of our work lies in providing a common framework for examining the different combinations of leadership which collectively meet the functions that followers require. Using this literature as a starting point, we integrate this theoretical underpinning with the insights drawn from the configural approach (Furnari et al., 2021) and previous leadership taxonomies (Yukl et al., 2002, 2012) to provide specific competencies.

The configural theorizing process

Furnari et al. (2021) introduced a model of configural theorizing and argue that many of the topics within the study of organizations can be partially explained by multiple phenomena, that rarely one concept or theory can explain a phenomenon, and that collective insights are important in dealing with grand challenges. To that end, Furnari et al. (2021) provide a clear guide on how to theorize from a configural perspective, which consists of

three main stages: scoping, linking and naming. For the purposes of our article, we focus on the first two stages, scoping and linking.

The first stage is the *scoping stage*, in which researchers identify the underlying variables of interest from the existing literature. In the case of our study, this is trying to capture all plausible leadership behaviours. Furnari et al. (2021) note that this process is, in theory, limitless due to the number of behaviours that are in the literature. Thus, "the scoping stage should aim at delimiting the attributes that explain a phenomenon while simultaneously doing justice to the complexity that surrounds it" (p. 784). To accurately capture the literature, the scoping needs to balance complexity and simplification to remove redundancy, increase parsimony, and arrange into a hierarchical structure to form the building blocks of that theory. An example of this approach can be found in personality research (Anderson & Sun, 2024). Currently, personality is typically defined by five personality traits and assumes that the personality of any individual is represented by the degree of presence of all of these traits (McCrae & Costa, 1987). Although more specific facets of personality are encompassed within each of these traits, the consideration of these five broad traits is enough for most academic and practical purposes. We argue that substantial work on the scoping stage has already been completed (e.g., Fleishman et al., 1991, Yukl et al., 2002; Yukl, 2012), resulting in taxonomies of leader behaviours that together are capable of describing a wide array of leadership situations.

The second stage of configural theorizing is the *linking stage*, where the theorizing turns to exploring how each of the competencies fits together (Furnari et al., 2021). This involves thinking about co-occurrences of the underlying building blocks and how they combine to create configurations. This may involve examination of which combinations are present and identifying the differences between these common combinations in relation to covariates. Furnari et al. (2021) argue that the linking stage of configural theorizing centres on how or why attributes connect with each other in three ways. First, this can be how the attributes interact together within one leader, such as having high levels of *task*- "and" *relations*-oriented behaviours (i.e., Furnari et al's *conjunctively*). Second, that being high on one attribute substitutes for another in how the leader is perceived as effective, for example having strong *change*- "or" *task*-oriented behaviours (i.e., *equifinality*). Third, leaders might have an absence of an attribute, such as "not" being *integrity*-oriented (i.e., *absence*). This second step of the configural theorizing process is precisely what person-centred analyses such as latent profile analysis (LPA) achieve by identifying commonly occurring subpopulations within a sample that display a similar response pattern on the indicator variables (Morin et al., 2018; Spurk et al., 2020).

A few studies have applied conjunctive thinking to answer research questions in the leadership field, typically examining combinations among subscales of a style (Chénard-Poirier et al., 2017; Chou et al., 2015; Coyle & Foti, 2022; Gillet et al., 2022; Stoker et al., 2023). A good example of this is Tian et al. (2023), who used LPA to examine the co-occurrences of transformational leadership subscales in order to identify pseudo-transformational leaders. Hancock et al. (2023) provide a more problematic example in which they examine co-occurrences of six styles of leadership. However, in this example, the authors maintain a "style" conceptualization of leadership and then apply a configural approach on top of it. Specifically, they attempt the *linking stage* of configural theorizing without first conducting a *scoping stage*. As a result, the profile indicators are very highly correlated, with transformational leadership and charismatic leadership co-occurring in all profiles, while abusive supervision always correlated strongly negatively with both transformational and charismatic leadership. In this case, because the initial variables (conceptualized as styles) were already confounded, the profiles identified are less informative than they should be and represent only level effects (Morin & Marsh, 2015; Spurk et al., 2020). A study by Stoker et al. (2023) attempted to apply configural thinking to the problem of construct redundancy in leadership. While this study rightly approaches the problem of construct proliferation, it does not use items from academic scales and also did not account for common method variance or affective responding. In total, the study by Stoker et al. (2023) is an interesting approach seeking to address an important issue, but does not provide the conceptual clarity and an actionable way forward.

Scoping stage in leadership research: taxonomic leadership behaviours

Although the scoping stage (Furnari et al., 2021) has already been attempted through the work of Yukl and colleagues (Yukl, 2012; Yukl et al., 2002), it is prudent to note that this was not the first attempt at creating a leadership taxonomy. Taxonomies of leadership behaviours date back to the early days of leadership research, with Fleishman (1953) proposing initiating structure and consideration as the two fundamental factors of leadership, whereas Blake and Mouton (1981) identified "concern for production" and "concern for people" as key leader behaviour categories. Thus, the concepts of *task-oriented* and *relations-oriented* categories are well-established in the literature. Yukl et al. (2002) expanded

this taxonomic thinking to include *change-oriented* behaviours as popularized by transformational leadership in the 1990's (Gardner et al., 2020). In 2012, Yukl highlighted the need to focus on integrity within the taxonomy as leaders without integrity were unlikely to influence followers. He further argued that attention needed to be paid to *integrity-oriented* behaviours due to the rise in ethical, servant, spiritual, and authentic leadership styles (Yukl, 2012). Finally, we incorporate *empowerment-oriented* behaviours as our final building block. Empowering behaviours were originally part of Yukl's (2012) relations-oriented behaviours, but we are analysing them as a separate category respecting its prominence in contemporary leadership research (see the supplementary materials for more detail).

Thus, from the scoping stage, we identified task-, relations-, change-, integrity- and empowerment-oriented leader behaviours that can be used as the building blocks to move to the second stage of configural theorizing: linking. We should reinforce that we do not agree that each leadership style should fit within one block, but rather that each "style" is a result of combining various building blocks.

Linking stage in leadership research: configuring the building blocks

The second stage outlined by Furnari et al. (2021) is the linking stage, where the building blocks identified in the scoping stage are configured and linked to covariates. To guide this process, we draw on the above arguments to pose two research questions.

Our first research question asks: *How do leader behaviors commonly combine to form profiles?* As discussed above, LPA is a prudent way to examine how and why the attributes are configured. In conducting an LPA on a measure of perceived taxonomic leader behaviours, we expect to yield several profiles of different shapes, indicating distinct ways of leading. However, we do not hypothesize that these profiles will perfectly represent the leadership styles in the literature but rather that they will, as per configural thinking, be combinations of "and's", "or's", and "not's" across the five taxonomic leader behaviours (Furnari et al., 2021). Such an expectation is unreasonable as, for example, the servant leadership scale (e.g., Liden et al., 2015, SL-7 item scale), captures the seven dimensions of servant leadership and thus does not directly measure a host of other base management behaviours in which leaders may engage, such as monitoring the performance on tasks (i.e., task-oriented) or advocating for why policies should be changed (i.e., change-oriented). In this respect, most, if not all leadership styles commit the error of omission.

Our second research question asks: *How does each leadership profile relate to employee outcome variables?* Drawing again on configuration theory, Furnari et al. (2021) argue that the combinations of attributes through their co-occurrence ("and"), equifinality ("or"), and/or absence ("not") are related to different variables in an analytical way. We again utilize LPA, but this time to establish the relationships between the different profiles and theoretically relevant leadership covariates. If the profiles are meaningfully different, we would expect to see them associate differently with various covariates.

From a functional perspective (McGrath, 1962), the different combinations of leadership behaviours may fulfil key functions for followers to varying degrees, and the effectiveness of each emerged profile should be reflected in its pattern of covariate associations. We therefore intentionally selected the outcomes that can be mapped onto the core functional domains that leadership (as in the current literature) is theorized to influence people. In addition, we aim to cover a gamut of outcomes, such as attitudes (i.e., turnover intention), needs (psychological need satisfaction), behaviours (proactivity), performance (proficiency), and positive and negative psychological states (thriving and burnout) as is common in meta-analyses (Hoch et al., 2018) and leadership proliferation studies (e.g., Eva et al., 2024).

The key point of interest in these analyses is to establish whether the profiles are differentially related to outcomes, and thus highlight the importance of different configural patterns. We expect to see different shapes aligning with different types of outcome variables, not a linear ordering of "good" to "bad" profiles.

RQ1: How do leader behaviors commonly combine to form profiles?

RQ2: How does each leadership profile relate to employee outcome variables?

Analytic approach & transparency

All data files, analysis syntax, and supplementary materials are available via OSF and can be found here: https://osf.io/mjywq/?view_only=24f6180440074af8886982d84da58477. A similar analytic approach was used across both studies with all analyses conducted in Mplus (version 7.3 Muthén & Muthén, 2015). Measurement models of the leadership scale were first estimated via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and exploratory structural equation modelling (ESEM; Marsh et al., 2009). We addressed affective responding in accordance with procedures detailed by Eva et al. (2024) via bifactor modelling

(Morin et al., 2016) or the S-1 variation of bifactor modelling (Eid et al., 2018). This process is described in the supplementary materials. Once the optimal leadership measurement model was identified in each sample, a fully latent measurement model including outcomes and a CMV factor was estimated. Through this method, CMV is extracted and excluded from further analysis. Finally, LPA was conducted to identify the optimal number of profiles, before covariates were examined. This study was not pre-registered.

Latent profile analyses were conducted in a sequential manner with 1 to 9 profiles specified. Factor scores were used (Skrondal & Laake, 2001) and analyses applied 10,000 random starts, of which the 300 best were retained for optimization, with 300 iterations (Hipp & Bauer, 2006). To extract the ideal number of profiles, both the meaningfulness of profiles and statistical indicators were examined (Spurk et al., 2020). We report and examine information criteria (AIC, BIC, & ABIC) and k-1 profile adequacy statistics (LMR & BLRT). The LMR and BLRT statistics indicate the suitability of the currently estimated profile solution versus a solution with one fewer profiles. This comparison indicates the necessity of adding more profiles and thereby adding complexity. We assessed mean-level difference of outcome variables across profiles via the MODEL CONSTRAINT command.

Study 1

Materials and methods

Participants

A sample of Participants employed full-time in the United States ($n_{final} = 1025$) were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk at a single time point. We sought to assess full-time employees to ensure they were suitably immersed in their workplace and had an informed perspective of their leader. Part-time employees may not have as many interactions with their leader, and may indeed work across different teams or under different leaders as is common for casual employees, which would induce further noise into the respondents' assessments. A small financial incentive ($2USD) was provided to participants. The mean age of the sample was 38.37 years (41.7% female). Participants were primarily from industrial relations (21%), accounting and finance (16%), education (11.3%) industries. Legal, distribution, and healthcare industries also represented 6% of the sample each. On average, participants worked 40.37 hours per week ($SD = 8.2$) and had been with their current organization for an average of 6.4 years ($SD = 5.3$). The average income of the sample was 47,778 USD/year. The study was approved by the ethics review committee at the university of the first author (application ID: 28414)

Several steps were taken to ensure the quality of the data. Attention checks were included in the survey, with participants who failed these removed from the study. Respondents who reported working fewer than 25 hours per week were also removed. After data collection was complete, any participants who completed the survey in less than 3 minutes, 30 seconds were removed due to likely careless responding. This criterion was based on the expectation that it takes at least 2.5 second to read and respond accordingly to each item (Ward & Meade, 2018).

Measures

All measures were follower-reported, and items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale unless otherwise specified. Task-, relations-, change-, and empowerment-oriented leader behaviours were measured via the Managerial Practices Survey (MPS 16–4; Yukl, 2012). In this study task-oriented behaviours were represented entirely by the four-item *clarifying* scale, change-oriented behaviours were captured by the four-item *envisioning* subscale, relations-oriented behaviours by the four-item *supporting* subscale, and empowerment-oriented behaviours by the four-item *empowerment* subscale. Each scale displayed acceptable reliability ($\alpha = .80$, .84, .81, & .81 respectively). We also examined leader integrity-oriented behaviours with a four-item scale developed from existing items ($\alpha = .88$; e.g., "*My leader is a person who acts with integrity*" and "*My leader can be trusted*"). The theoretical justification for each sub-scale can be found in the supplementary materials.

Participants completed a self-report measure of performance (Griffin et al., 2007) measuring proficiency ($\alpha = .68$) and proactivity ($\alpha = .79$). Thriving was measured with a ten-item scale (Porath et al., 2012; $\alpha = .82$). Turnover intention was measured with a three-item inventory (Meyer et al., 1993; $\alpha = .64$).

Analyses

We first examine the measurement model of leadership factors. While CFA fit the data well (RMSEA = .040, CFI = .965, TLI = .961; Table S1, also see Table S2 for factor loadings), the correlations between leadership factors were very high (see Table S3). ESEM improved model fit (RMSEA = .020, CFI = .994, TLI = .990) and reduced inter-factor correlations (range = .51 to .74, mean = .63), and was thus retained for further analysis. In order to account for affect towards the leader, an S-1 model (Eid et al., 2018) was then applied with four S-factors

representing task-, change-, empowerment-, and integrity-oriented factors, and a separate G-factor capturing all relationship-related variance including follower affect and follower observation of relations-oriented behaviour. This process and the reasons for combining affect and perceived relationship-behaviours is further elaborated in the supplementary materials (also see Eva et al., 2024). This final S-1 model was found to fit the data very well. Finally, a fully latent measurement model including the S-1 model described above, and outcomes (estimated via CFA), and an additional CMV factor was then estimated. This CMV factor was uncorrelated with any other latent factors and was excluded from further analyses (see Tables S4 & S5 for factor loadings and correlations).

Results

The five-profile solution was retained as the optimal solution (see Table S6). Fit indices, most notably the LRT, indicated that the addition of profiles above five reduced parsimony and were not warranted. Furthermore, the information criteria (AIC, BIC, ABIC) stopped decreasing significantly after the five profile solutions, indicating the optimal parsimony of this solution. Finally, examination of the profiles shows that each of the five identified profiles were distinct shapes. Each profile also captured a relatively large proportion of the sample (> 5%), whereas the sixth profile captured only .002% of the sample. Classification accuracy was relatively high with the average classification probability of .77 (range = .70 to .87; see Table S7). The retained five-profile solution is depicted in Figure 1 (see Table 1 for numerical scores).

Profile 1 is characterized by a strong focus on facilitating employees through the provision of autonomy and maintaining functional relationships. This profile describes leaders who were viewed as significantly above average in empowerment-oriented behaviours (Mean = 0.77; 95%CI [.65–.90]), as well as above average

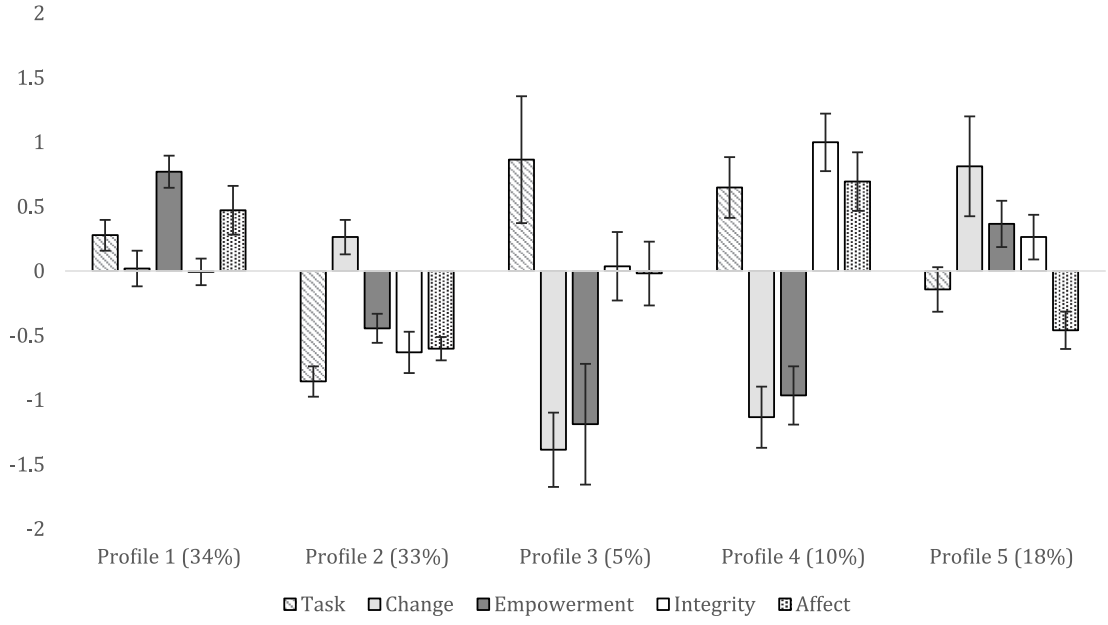

Figure 1. Identified latent profiles of leadership behaviors (Study1).

Table 1. Standardized mean leadership scores of the extracted 5-profile solution (study 1).

Profile	Task	Change	Empowerment	Integrity	Affect
Profile 1 (34%)	0.28	0.02	0.77	−0.01	0.47
	(0.16; 0.40)	(−0.12; 0.16)	(0.65; 0.90)	(−0.11; 0.10)	(0.28; 0.66)
Profile 2 (33%)	−0.86	0.26	−0.45	−0.63	−0.60
	(−0.98; −0.74)	(0.13; 0.40)	(−0.56; −0.33)	(−0.79; −0.47)	(−0.69; −0.51)
Profile 3 (5%)	0.86	−1.39	−1.19	0.04	−0.02
	(0.37; 1.36)	(−1.68; −1.10)	(−1.66; −0.72)	(−0.23; 0.30)	(−0.27; 0.23)
Profile 4 (10%)	0.65	−1.13	−0.97	1.00	0.70
	(0.41; 0.88)	(−1.37; −0.90)	(−1.19; −0.74)	(0.78; 1.22)	(0.47; 0.92)
Profile 5 (18%)	−0.14	0.81	0.37	0.26	−0.46
	(−0.32; 0.03)	(0.43; 1.20)	(0.19; 0.55)	(0.09; 0.44)	(−0.61; −0.32)

Profile indicators are factor scores with $M = 0$ and $SD = 1$.

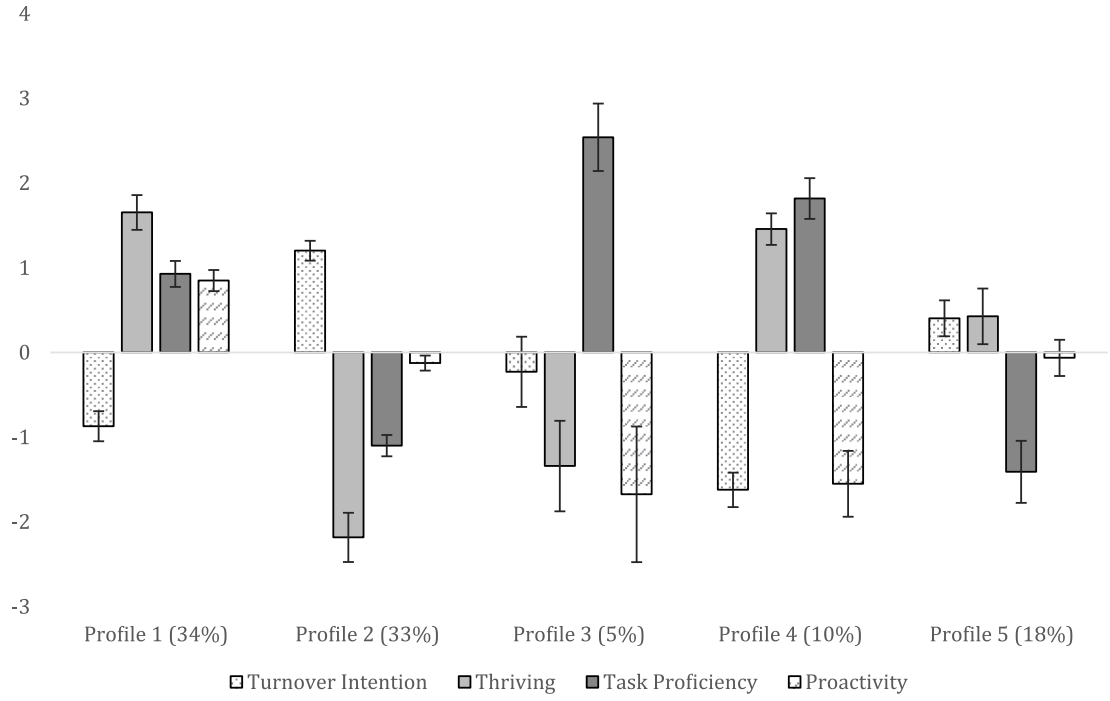

Figure 2. Mean level of outcomes associated with profile membership (study 1).

in task-oriented behaviours (Mean = .23; 95%CI [.16–.40]) and general affect towards the leader (Mean = .47; 95% CI [.28–.66]). Change- and integrity-oriented behaviours were average for this profile. Under these leaders, employees are given some task direction and empowered better than most to deliver the tasks in the way the employee thinks best. This relies on a decently strong relationship between the leader and follower as captured through the above average follower affect towards their leader. This is a relatively follower focused profile and best described 34% of the sample.

Profile 2 is characterized by slightly above average levels of change-oriented behaviours as indicated by 95% confidence intervals (Mean = 0.26; 95%CI [0.13–-0.40]), but significantly below average task- (Mean = −0.86; 95%CI [−0.98 - −0.74]), empowerment- (Mean = −0.45; 95%CI [−0.56 - −0.33]), integrity-oriented behaviours (Mean = −0.63; 95%CI [−0.79 - −0.47]) and low affect (Mean = −0.60; 95%CI [−0.69 - −0.51]). Under these leaders, followers are provided with clearer goals for change than the sample average, but they are not given the corresponding support and guidance for accomplishing these goals. This profile captures approximately 33% of the sample.

Profiles 3 and 4 both represent leaders who are seen as highly task focused, with Profile 4 representing a well-liked version of the otherwise similar leadership profile. Both Profiles 3 and 4 are defined by high levels of task-focused behaviours and very low levels of change- and empowerment-oriented behaviours. In both cases, these leaders are clear about how the job must be done and have little interest in innovation, change, or employee empowerment. The key difference between these profiles is that while Profile 3 represents average levels of leader integrity-oriented behaviours (Mean = 0.04; 95% CI [−0.23–0.30]) and follower affect towards the leader (Mean = −0.02; 95%CI [−0.27–0.23]), Profile 4 has high levels of both integrity-oriented behaviours (Mean = 1.00; 95%CI [0.78–1.22]) and follower affect (Mean = 0.69; 95%CI [0.47–0.92]). These profiles described 5% and 10% of the sample respectively.

Profile 5 is characterized by above average levels of change-oriented behaviours (Mean = 0.81; 95%CI [0.43–1.20]), slightly above average empowerment- (Mean = 0.37; 95%CI [0.19–0.55]) and integrity-oriented behaviours (Mean = 0.26; 95%CI [0.09–0.44]), and average levels of task-oriented behaviours. These leaders were also liked less than average (Mean = −0.46; 95%CI [−0.61 - −0.32]). Leaders characterized by this profile will provide relatively strong envisioning behaviours for the team and organization, empower followers to achieve that vision to some degree, but provide little task guidance to achieve the vision. This profile categorized 18% of the sample.

Table 2. Standardized mean outcome scores for each profile (study 1).

	Turnover Intention	Thriving	Task Proficiency	Proactivity
Profile 1 (34%)	−0.87	1.65	0.923	0.85
	(−1.05; −0.70)	(1.45; 1.86)	(0.77; 1.08)	(0.72; 0.97)
Profile 2 (33%)	1.20	−2.18	−1.10	−0.13
	(1.08; 1.32)	(−2.47; −1.89)	(−1.23; −0.97)	(−0.22; −0.04)
Profile 3 (5%)	−0.23	−1.34	2.54	−1.68
	(−0.64; 0.19)	(−1.88; −0.81)	(2.14; 2.94)	(−2.48; −0.88)
Profile 4 (10%)	−1.62	1.46	1.82	−1.55
	(−1.83; −1.42)	(1.27; 1.64)	(1.58; 2.06)	(−1.94; −1.16)
Profile 5 (18%)	0.40	0.43	−1.41	−0.06
	(0.19; 0.61)	(0.10; 0.75)	(−1.78; −1.04)	(−0.28; 0.15)

Outcomes are factor scores with $M = 0$ and SD = 1.

Table 3. Comparison of mean differences in outcomes (study 1).

	Profile 1 versus				Profile 2 versus			Profile 3 versus		Profile 4 versus
Outcomes	2	3	4	5	3	4	5	4	5	5
Turnover	−1.31*	−0.41*	0.47*	−0.80*	0.90*	1.78*	0.50*	0.88*	−0.40*	−1.28*
Thriving	2.09*	1.63*	0.11	0.67*	−0.46*	−1.98*	−1.42*	−1.52*	−0.96*	0.56*
Proficiency	1.02*	−0.81*	−0.45*	1.18*	−1.83*	−1.47*	0.16	0.36*	1.99*	1.62*
Proactivity	0.62*	1.60*	1.52*	0.58*	0.98*	0.91*	−0.04	−0.08	−1.02*	−0.94*

Significant difference marked with *.

Outcomes of profile membership

Outcomes of profile membership were then estimated with the mean levels for each outcome represented in Figure 2 (Table 2) With Table 3 displaying results of mean comparisons between profiles for each outcome. Membership in Profile 1 was associated with well above average mean levels of employee thriving (Mean = 1.65; 95%CI [1.45–1.86]), proactivity (Mean = 0.85; 95%CI [0.73–0.97]), and proficiency (Mean = 0.93; 95%CI [0.77–1.08]), as well as below average turnover intentions (Mean = −0.87; 95%CI [−1.05 - −0.69]). Notably, this was the only profile with above average follower proactivity. This aligns with previous research indicating that leaders who prioritize the needs of followers are likely to have followers who are thriving, proactive, good at their job, and are less likely to leave the organization (Lee et al., 2020).

Profile 2 was associated with the highest reported turnover intentions (Mean = 1.20; 95%CI [1.08–1.32]) and the lowest thriving (Mean = −2.18; 95%CI [−2.47 - −1.89]), indicating significant wellbeing and satisfaction detriments. Task proficiency was slightly below average (Mean = −1.10; 95%CI [−1.23 - −0.97]), while proactivity scores were approximately at the average level. These results are similar to those expected from laissez-faire adjacent leaders (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

Profile 3 was associated with the highest level of task proficiency (Mean = 2.54; 95%CI [2.14–2.99]) and the equally lowest level of proactivity (Mean = −1.68; 95%CI [−2.48 - −0.88]). Employee thriving was below average (Mean = −1.34; 95%CI [−1.88 - −0.81]), whereas turnover intention was average. Profile 4 provides a very interesting comparison as it was associated with high task proficiency (Mean = 1.82; 95%CI [1.58–2.06]), although significantly lower than Profile 3, and a similarly low level of proactivity (Mean = −1.55; 95%CI [−1.94 - −1.16]). Profile 4 was however associated with significantly lower turnover intention (Mean = −1.62 95%CI [−1.83 - −1.42]), the lowest of all identified profiles. Employee thriving was also found to be well above average for this profile (Mean = 1.46; 95%CI [1.27–1.64]).

Profile 5 was associated with very low levels of proficiency (Mean = −1.41; 95%CI [−1.78 - −1.04]) and average levels of proactivity. This profile was also associated with slightly above average turnover intentions (Mean = 0.40; 95%CI [0.19–0.61]), but also slightly above average thriving (Mean = 0.43; 95%CI [0.10–0.75]). Due to this not being a commonly studied combination of leadership behaviours, it is hard to identify past research that mirrors these results. This demonstrates a strength of a profile approach as it identifies actual combinations of leader behaviours present within the sample.

Study 1 discussion

Study 1 identified five distinctly shaped leadership profiles, each representing a unique combination of behaviours. These profiles reflect a range of leader behaviour patterns that are not reducible to any single leadership style, but instead illustrate how core behaviours co-occur in this sample. This pattern aligns with our functionalist perspective as distinct behaviour profiles represent different configurations for fulfiling some, but not all, core leadership

functions. For instance, the follower-focused Profile 1 appears to satisfy the relational and supportive functions, which explain its association with outcomes such as thriving and proactivity. In contrast, the more task-dominant Profile 3 and 4 emphasize the directive functions as leaders, aligning with higher task proficiency but limited autonomy or wellbeing support. Further discussion of profile shapes is presented in the supplementary materials.

The relative proportions associated with each profile are important because they provide an estimate of how common each profile is in a general sample of US workplaces. Results indicate that many US employees view their leaders as being primarily unsupportive (33%), unliked (5%) or transactional (10%). As noted by some (Antonakis & House, 2014; Fischer & Sitkin, 2023), leadership in practice is not as positively valanced as the existing leadership literature would suggest (Alvesson, 2020). This highlights another advantage of the profile approach, as profiles are identified based on the data and not subject to *a priori* beliefs or styles dictated by researchers. As such, this demonstrates how leadership can be meaningfully captured under a single conceptual framework (Anderson & Sun, 2024; Eva et al., 2024) in order to avoid issues of construct proliferation and redundancy (Fisher & Sitkin, Banks et al., 2018; Fischer & Sitkin, 2023).

Study 2

Study 2 replicates our procedure in a second sample to demonstrate the utility of our conceptualization and methodology across different samples from different countries. The value of this configural approach is that a very broad variety of leadership configurations can be captured and analysed within a single framework (and based on a single relatively short scale), and as such, the value of replication here lies in demonstrating that the conceptual approach is replicable, rather than specific profiles. We do not expect the profile to replicate exactly as many contextual differences will impact which profiles are present and in what proportion (Dorfman et al., 2012; Johns, 2024). Instead of researchers examining the exact same model but substituting in different leadership styles (e.g., leadership influencing performance through trust), a profiles approach allows a variety of different profiles to occur within the model which can be analysed together. Thus, advancing leadership science quicker and more parsimoniously. To achieve this, we collect data in a more focused manner from a real-world organization. This is important as this type of data, and sample size, is largely representative of those used in leadership research (Gardner et al., 2020).

Materials and methods

Participants

Participants in this study were employees from a Dutch engineering and manufacturing organization ($n = 193$), spanning 56 groups. The mean age of the sample was 39.75 years (SD = 10.96; 65.5% male, 11.7% female, 22.7% unreported). On average, participants had been with the organization for an average of 13.7 years ($SD = 13.91$), and working with their leader for an average of 5.94 years (SD = 7.57). Procedures to ensure data quality were once again applied. Participants did not receive any incentive.

Measures

Similar to Study 1, we measured specific subscales from Yukl's Managerial Practices Survey (MPS 16–4; Yukl, 2012). The ethics subscale (Yukl et al., 2013) was examined as a separate category aligning with the integrity-oriented behaviour category. Employee outcomes of burnout and basic psychological need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, & relatedness) were measured. Burnout was measured with a three-item scale (Schaufeli et al., 2017; alpha = .82) while basic psychological needs were measured with the work-related basic need satisfaction scale (Van den Broeck et al., 2010). The alpha coefficients were acceptable for autonomy (.83) competence (.90) and relatedness (.95).

Analysis

Analyses in this study mirror those of Study 1. CFA and ESEM solutions were examined to ensure expected factor structure of the leadership scale (see Table S8 for fit statistics; see Table S9 for factor loadings). The CFA and ESEM solutions demonstrated good model fit, though correlations between leadership behaviour factors were again high (Table S10; Mean = .71 & .63 respectively). As such we proceeded to model affective responding and then eliminate CMV.

In this sample, separate factors could be specified for leader relationship behaviours and follower affect due to the quality of data. In this case, five latent factors were specified aligning with our proposed taxonomy, with an additional general factor (specified through bifactor modelling) that represented affective responding of participants (Eva et al., 2024). As such, profiles in this study contained six indicators. Once again, outcome variables

were then examined via CFA and added to the model, and a separate CMV factor (extracting 11% of item variance; Table S10) was again specified to capture and remove variance common among all follower reported leadership and outcome variables (See Table S12 for correlations). Latent profile analysis was then conducted in the same fashion as Study 1.

Results

We once again settled upon the 5-profile solution (see Table S13). Fit statistics indicated that the optimal number of profiles was between 3 and 5 with the LRT failing to reach significance past the 4-profile solution, and the information criteria flattening noticeably around the 5-profile solution. The inclusion of additional profiles continued to be thematically relevant until the six-profile solution in which the new profile was extremely small. Classification probabilities for the five-profile solution were high (range .847 to 1.0, mean = .89; See Table S14). Accordingly, the five-profile solution was selected and is depicted in Figure 3 (Table 4).

Profile 1 represented leaders who were perceived to be at the average or below average level in all leadership behaviours. This profile describes leaders with below average levels of change-oriented behaviours (Mean = −0.60; 95%CI [−0.91 - −0.30]), and affect of followers towards their leader (Mean = −1.18; 95%CI [−1.77 - −0.59]), and statistically average levels of task-, relations-, empowerment-, and integrity-oriented

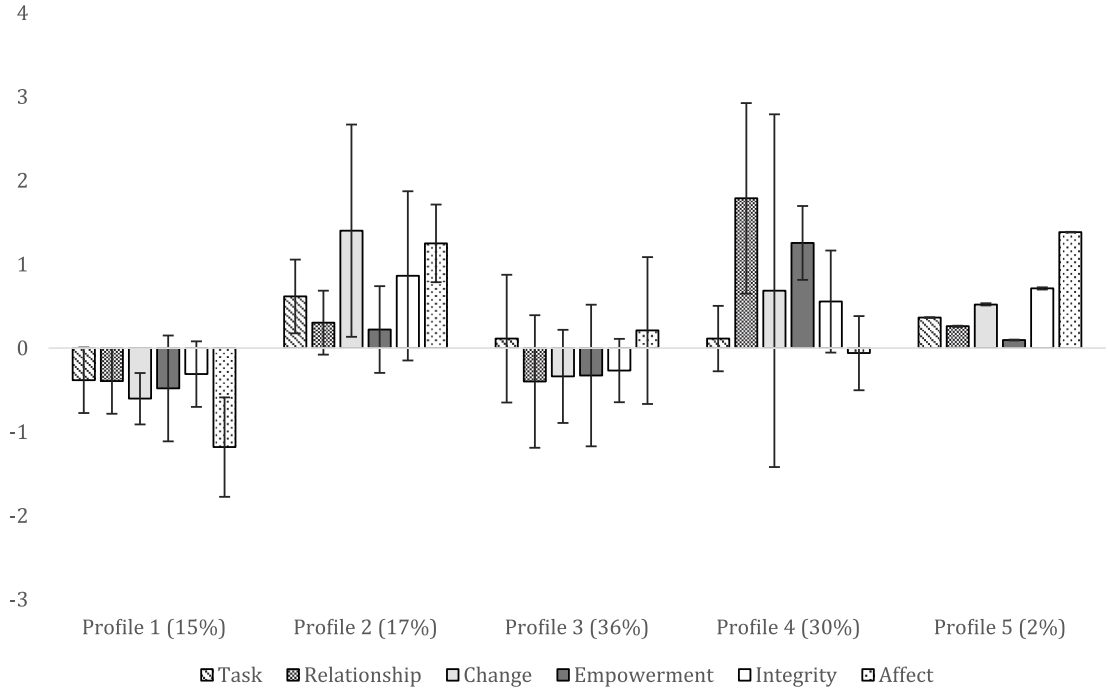

Figure 3. Identified latent profiles of leadership behaviors (study 2).

Table 4. Standardized mean leadership scores of the extracted 5-profile solution (study 2).

Profile	Task	Relationship	Change	Empowerment	Integrity	Affect
Profile 1 (15%)	−0.38	−0.39	−0.60	−0.48	−0.31	−1.18
	(−0.78; 0.01)	(−0.78; −0.01)	(−0.91; −0.30)	(−1.11; 0.15)	(−0.70; 0.08)	(−1.77; −0.59)
Profile 2 (17%)	0.62	0.30	1.40	0.22	0.86	1.25
	(0.18; 1.06)	(−0.08; 0.69)	(0.14; 2.67)	(−0.30; 0.74)	(−.15; 1.87)	(0.79; 1.71)
Profile 3 (36%)	0.11	−0.40	−0.34	−0.33	−0.27	0.21
	(−0.65; 0.88)	(−1.19; 0.39)	(−0.89; 0.22)	(−1.17; 0.52)	(−0.64; 0.11)	(−0.67; 1.09)
Profile 4 (30%)	0.11	1.79	0.69	1.26	0.56	−0.06
	(−0.28; 0.50)	(.65; 2.92)	(−1.42; 2.79)	(0.82; 1.70)	(−0.05; 1.16)	(−0.50; 0.38)
Profile 5 (2%)	0.37	0.26	0.52	0.10	0.71	1.38
	(0.36; 0.37)	(0.25; 0.27)	(0.51; 0.54)	(0.09; 0.10)	(0.70; 0.73)	(1.38; 1.39)

Profile indicators are factor scores with $M = 0$ and $SD = 1$.

behaviours. Under these leaders, followers have little direction or support, and have little positive affect for their leader. This profile captures approximately 15% of the sample, and appears to represent a similar version of Profile 2 in Study 1.

Profile 2 comprises above average levels of change-oriented behaviours (Mean = 1.40; 95%CI [0.14–2.67]), and somewhat above average levels of task-oriented behaviours (Mean = 0.62; 95%CI [0.18–1.06]). Empowerment-oriented behaviours were average, as were relationship- and empowerment behaviours. Affect towards these leaders was above average (Mean = 1.25; 95%CI [0.79–1.71]). Under these leaders, followers are provided with change-oriented goals and are given the task (but not relational) support to achieve these goals. However, the overall shape of the profile indicates that it is a modestly supportive change-oriented profile as it is typically above average in each behaviour category, but only slightly. This profile described about 17% of the sample.

Profile 3 is a balanced profile with scores aligning with the sample average across all profile indicators. Under these leaders, followers are given some level of task direction to achieve their goals but are not given the active coaching or autonomy to achieve the outcomes in their own way. The profile resembles an altogether average leader in this sample, although may bear some shape resemblance to Profiles 3 and 4 from Study 1. This profile characterizes approximately 36% of the sample.

Profile 4 represents 30% of the sample and describes leaders who were seen to possess well above average levels of relations- (Mean = 1.79; 95%CI [.65–2.92]) and empowerment-oriented behaviours (Mean = 1.26; 95%CI [0.82–1.70]), and average levels of task-, change-, and integrity-oriented behaviours. The follower affect factor was also average. Under these leaders, the leader-follower relation is strong, and employees are able to achieve the vision set by the leader in an autonomously-driven way with little direct leader direction. This profile represents 30% of the sample.

Profile 5 represents leaders who are viewed to be above average in all measured leader behaviours. This profile describes leaders who are somewhat above average in integrity- (Mean = 0.71; 95%CI [0.67–0.73]) and change-oriented behaviours (Mean = 0.52; 95%CI [0.51-–0.54]), as well as slightly above average in task- (Mean = 0.37; 95%CI [0.36–0.37]) and relations- (Mean = 0.26; 95%CI [0.25–0.27]) and empowerment-oriented behaviours (Mean = 0.10; 95%CI [0.09–0.10]). Followers' affect towards these leaders is reported to be well above average (Mean = 1.38; 95%CI [1.38–1.39]). Under these leaders, employees are given a clear direction of the future and have the task and social support to achieve these goals. This is a distinctive profile and the one most closely representing transformational leadership so far observed. However, it must be kept in mind that this profile only captures approximately 2% of the sample, and reports from these individuals were very consistent, resulting in very narrow confidence intervals. As such,

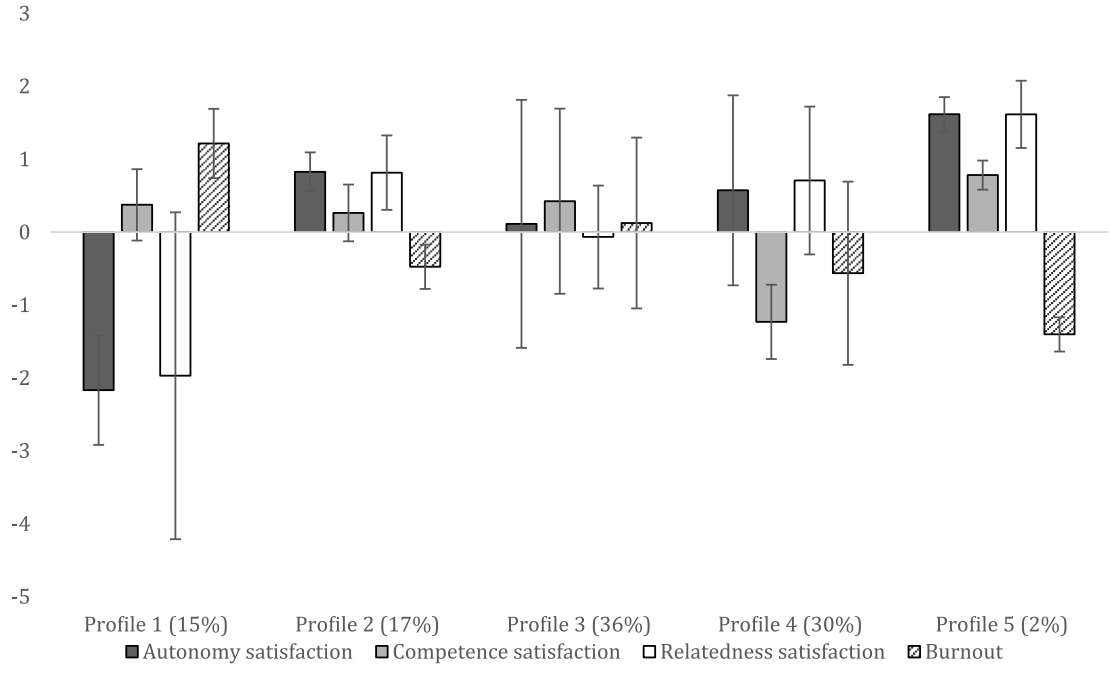

Figure 4. Mean level of outcomes associated with profile membership (study 2).

Table 5. Standardized mean outcome scores for each profile (study 2).

Profile	Autonomy satisfaction	Competence satisfaction	Relatedness satisfaction	Burnout
Profile 1 (15%)	−2.17	0.38	−1.97	1.22
	(−2.92; −1.42)	(−0.12; 0.86)	(−4.21; 0.27)	(0.74; 1.69)
Profile 2 (17%)	0.83	0.26	0.82	−0.48
	(0.56; 1.09)	(−0.13; 0.65)	(0.31; 1.33)	(−0.78; −0.17)
Profile 3 (36%)	0.11	0.42	−0.07	0.13
	(−1.59; 1.81)	(−0.85; 1.69)	(−0.77; 0.64)	(−1.05; 1.30)
Profile 4 (30%)	0.57	−1.23	0.71	−0.56
	(−0.73; 1.88)	(−1.74; −0.72)	(−0.31; 1.72)	(−1.82; 0.69)
Profile 5 (2%)	1.62	0.78	1.62	−1.40
	(1.38; 1.85)	(0.58; 0.98)	(1.15; 2.08)	(−1.64; −1.17)

Outcomes are factor scores with $M = 0$ and SD = 1.

Table 6. Comparison of mean differences in outcomes (study 2).

	Profile 1 versus				Profile 2 versus			Profile 3 versus		Profile 4 versus
Outcome	2	3	4	5	3	4	5	4	5	5
Autonomy	−0.36*	−0.27*	−0.33*	−0.45*	0.09	0.03	−0.09*	−0.06	−0.18	−0.13
Competence	0.06	−0.03	0.84*	−0.21	−0.08	0.78*	−0.27*	0.87*	−0.19	−1.05*
Relatedness	−2.56*	−1.75*	−2.46*	−3.30*	0.81	0.10	−0.74*	−0.71	−1.55*	−0.83
Burnout	2.10*	1.36	2.21*	3.26*	−0.75	0.11	1.15*	0.86	1.90*	1.04

Significant difference marked with *.

this appears to be a very close representation of a very few leaders.

Outcomes of profile membership

Outcomes were then examined for each of these profiles (Figure 4; Table 5), and results of mean comparison analysis presented in Table 6. Membership in Profile 1 was associated with above average levels of reported burnout (Mean = 1.22; 95%CI [0.74–1.69]) and very low levels of autonomy (Mean = −2.17; 95%CI [−2.92 - −1.42]) and relatedness need satisfaction (Mean = −1.97; 95%CI [−4.21–0.27]). Competence need satisfaction was average. In line with previous research, uninvolved leadership appears to be maladaptive for followers (Hancock et al., 2023).

Profile 2 was associated with above average autonomy and relatedness satisfaction (Mean = 0.82; 95%CI [0.31–1.33]) and below average burnout (Mean = −0.48; 95%CI [−0.78 - −0.17]). Competence need satisfaction was average when accounting for confidence intervals. In comparison, Profile 5 was associated with the same pattern of outcomes but with more extreme means. Competence need satisfaction was slightly above average (Mean = 0.78; 95%CI [0.58–0.98]) while burnout was the lowest in the sample (Mean = −1.40; 95%CI [−1.64 - −1.17]). Autonomy (Mean = 1.62; 95%CI [1.38–1.85]) and relatedness (Mean = 1.62; 95%CI [1.15–2.08]) were both well above average. Given the generally congruous shapes of Profiles 3 and 5, it is reassuring to see the same pattern of associations with outcomes which are consistent with the literature (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe et al., 1996). Profile 3 was associated with entirely average levels across all outcomes, reflecting the average levels of profile indicators comprising the profile.

Profile 4 was associated with significantly below average levels of competence satisfaction (Mean = −1.23; 95%CI [−1.74 - −0.72]), while the remaining the outcomes were at average levels for the sample. This indicates that highly empowering leaders may struggle to impart competence supporting feedback. This might reflect the common criticism levelled at the follower-focused literature that these leaders are too nice, and do not provide the critical feedback required for employees to truly develop (Zhong et al., 2018).

Study 2 discussion

The results from this study were similar to Study 1 with both task-focused and follower-focused profiles once again identified. This gives continued credence to the work by authors such as Fleishman (1953) and Blake and Mouton (1981) that task- and relations-oriented are two of the bedrocks of leadership behaviours. Consistent with the functional lens of leadership, these findings suggest that leaders tend to gravitate towards recurring behavioural configurations that fulfil core but distinct functions: some emphasize goal accomplishment, others prioritize support or considerations for followers. As in Study 1, a profile representative of uninvolved leaders was identified. In contrast to Study 1, this sample demonstrated the presence of leaders who were change-oriented and also supportive to a greater extent (Profiles 2 & 5).

This finding is rather important given this supportive accompaniment appears highly influential when considering the different outcomes. Secondly, it also now appears that variations of task-focused leadership, in forms slightly varying, are prevalent across the different samples. In contrast to the change and empowering profiles noted above, the task-focused profile demonstrated positive mean outcome scores relating to competence satisfaction, but likewise increased mean burnout scores, affirming that overbearing task direction without relationship support has its specific uses and important limitations (Young et al., 2021). The sample also highlighted a different variation of follower-focused profile, with greater focus on relations- and change-oriented behaviours than observed in Study 1. The supplementary materials include additional comparison of the profiles across samples.

General discussion

The current research examined combinations of perceived leader behaviours (Yukl et al., 2002) through the application of latent profile analysis. There has been a growing demand to examine leadership through a configural approach (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023) beginning from a leadership taxonomy (Anderson & Sun, 2024; Eva et al., 2024) in order to resolve the issues of construct overlap, redundancy, and proliferation. Yet to date there has been no empirical demonstration of how this could be achieved in a viable and scalable way that could be adopted across the research field. By taking a functional perspective (McGrath, 1992), we conceptualize leadership not as a single style, but as combinations of behaviours that fulfil critical functions or needs for followers. As such, this study moves the literature forward by providing an actionable conceptual approach to study a broad range of leadership approaches under a single framework, operationalized by a single relatively short scale, in much the same way personality is captured by five factors (Anderson & Sun, 2024). This avoids the creation of a near infinite number of new "styles" each with their own scales and literatures which has become a problem for the field. This change in conceptualization will be necessary to resolve the construct proliferation issue in the literature (Anderson & Sun, 2024; Alvesson, 2020; Banks et al., 2018; Eva et al., 2024; Fischer and Sitkin, 2023).

Reassuringly, the profiles identified were not mere level effects (Morin & Marsh, 2015) representing "good" and "bad" leadership (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Hancock et al., 2023), but functionally differentiated combinations that yield distinct outcome patterns. This supports our second research question by showing that these configurations matter – not only how much leadership is enacted, but how different behaviours are combined. For example, two profiles might yield similar performance outcomes, but diverge in terms of follower well-being or autonomy need satisfaction, depending on the presence of relational or empowerment functions. This also explains why many popular leadership styles (e.g., transformational, servant) often show overlapping effects – they may be near-identical configurations of the same core functions. By beginning from a taxonomic basis (Anderson & Sun, 2024; Furnari et al., 2021), and accounting for affective responding (Eva et al., 2024; Martinko et al., 2018), we were able to identify highly distinct shapes, each with their own strengths and weaknesses when considering employee outcomes. Taken together, we were able to examine multiple distinct approaches to leadership with a single, relatively concise scale of perceived leader behaviours.

Implications for theory and research

The primary implication of this research is to demonstrate how leadership can be conceptualized and studied as a functionally grounded configuration via an established taxonomy of leader behaviours (Anderson & Sun, 2024; Stoker et al., 2023; Yukl, 2012). From this perspective, leadership effectiveness is less about adhering to one style than about how well a particular configuration of behaviours fulfils the functional demands in a given context (McGrath, 1962). Leadership can, and we argue should, be more holistically studied through such configural perspectives in which all variations of leadership can be captured by a single assessment of conceptually deconflated leader behaviour categories (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023), and ideally with deconflated measurement (Banks et al., 2023). Leadership "styles" are inherently messy due to their boundless scope (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023), errors of omission (Antonakis, 2017), and significant theoretical, conceptual, and empirical overlap (Alvesson & Einola, 2019; Antonakis, 2017; Van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). They encourage categorical thinking with new behaviours, values, attitudes, or leader characteristics added to existing constructs to create seemingly novel styles. As such, the proliferation of leadership styles will continue so long as the field continues to conceptualize leadership as categorical styles, composed of non-interchangeable parts.

Rather than focus on incremental predictive variance and pitting styles against one another, we instead emphasize the commonalities inherent within leadership styles via a taxonomic view of leadership, and how these common elements combine in real-world settings. This alternate conceptualization may be necessary in

order to untangle the proliferation of leadership constructs and arrive at a usable overarching approach to leadership (Anderson & Sun, 2024). As alluded to by Fischer and Sitkin (2023), and empirically demonstrated in this article, leadership can be effectively viewed as combinations of underlying leader behaviours (Yukl, 2012). Data can be collected, analysed, and profiles identified that clearly indicate what configurations of leadership behaviours are commonly observed in real organizations, rather than the abstract, theoretical and positively valanced idealizations of leadership styles (Alvesson, 2020). This perspective ameliorates the ever-growing problem of construct proliferation and redundancy because the building blocks themselves are finite. In this respect we once again look to the example of personality research explained by Anderson and Sun (2024) and how that field of research overcame their proliferation problem. It would not seem sensible to create new scales and fields of research to capture every possible combination of the underlying personality traits. Instead, the personality field has established an agreed upon set of five personality traits as the basis of personality research (Anderson & Sun, 2024). We suggest a similar shift is necessary in leadership studies: rather than continuously multiplying style constructs, we see the need to define a finite set of leader behaviours categories that can be configured to address critical functional demands. Through this approach, the field of leadership can move forward, bringing the wealth of different leadership styles and theories alongside one another in a single overarching perspective.

Practical implications

Globally, it is estimated that over 60 billion dollars are spent annually on leadership development (Yemiscigil et al., 2023). A survey of 500 executives reported that only 11% felt that their leadership development programmes were successful (Ismail-Wey, 2023). This may be due to an emphasis on teaching a specific leadership style, such as ethical leadership. The findings of the current investigation suggest that this approach may be misguided. Rather than being trained to implement a specific leadership style, leaders may be more likely to enhance their leadership effectiveness by developing an understanding of the underlying behaviours and their combinations that are most useful based on the situation at hand. Whereas there are times when ethical leadership should be stressed, in most situations being ethical alone is not adequate for achieving optimal effectiveness. With the configural approach that we have advanced here, the integrity-oriented category may be combined with another category(ies), such as empowering- or relational-oriented. Our configural approach includes five behavioural categories that can be configured to match situations. For example, the empowering- and change-oriented categories may be emphasized by leaders in rapidly evolving dynamic situations in which they need to motivate follower creativity in identifying ways to most effectively adapt to the changing environment. Such a configuration might be especially appropriate in the case of leading employees through mergers and acquisitions.

Limitations and directions for future research

Further refinement and validation of the leadership behaviour taxonomy will be necessary. We drew upon Yukl's taxonomy (2012) and measured five subs-scales of perceived behaviour to broadly capture leadership as currently studied. This taxonomy may be a strong starting point, but further theoretical elaboration and empirical testing will be required. Further taxonomy development would also benefit by linking these behaviours with the mechanisms of influence.

Using suitable measures and methodologies remains important (Banks et al., 2023). The current studies examine follower perceptions of leaders while taking care to remove CMV and modelling follower affect (Eva et al., 2024). This approach was relatively successful and allowed examination of meaningfully different profiles (Morin & Marsh, 2015), yet complementary measurement methods are recommended. In addition to this, the role of affect is undoubtedly complex as it is simultaneously an outcome of leader behaviours, but also an important lens through which followers view their leaders. As such, affect seems to play several roles throughout the leadership process, potentially resulting in reciprocal relationships. Addressing this will require further theoretical and methodological work.

Predictors of profile membership, such as personality, values, and training experience, can also be studied. Some leaders may also demonstrate a greater range of potential profiles, having developed a broader range of leader behaviour capabilities through experience or training. While developing a range of available leader behaviours will be useful, the ability to switch between different leadership approaches (i.e., profiles) may be an equally important skill.

As primary research on taxonomic categories and their combinations develops, questions concerning context can be addressed. Firstly, the observed leadership profiles will vary across different contexts, varying as a function of many individual and social factors. While some profiles may be more common across contexts (as the task-focused profile appeared to be in our two

samples) others may be more specific to certain populations, whether that be different industries, countries, or based on individual differences. It might also be that some leader behaviours, or profiles, are more impactful in certain contexts potentially depending on national, industry, organizational, or even team specific differences (Liden & Antonakis, 2009). Leaders may even interact with different employees through a different leadership profile. As the study of behaviour taxonomies improves, a systematic list of contextual influences can also be devised (see Green et al., 2023).

Conclusion

In this study we view leadership not as a predefined style, but as different combinations of common underlying behaviours. Results from across the two studies found several leadership profiles of distinctly different shapes, representing different approach to leadership as reported by followers. In doing so, we were able to study multiple different configurations of leadership within a single study and based on a relatively short and conceptually unambiguous scale of leader behaviours. This represents a deeply practical approach to leadership research and is an important conceptual step that exemplifies how leadership "styles" can be brought together under a single configural framework.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Open Science Framework repository at: https://osf.io/mjywq/?view_only=24f6180440074af8886982d84da58477

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