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Bridging Methodologies: A Critical Examination of Research Approaches in International Human Resource Management

Abstract

This study critically analyzes the research methodologies applied in International Human Resource Management (IHRM), primarily focusing on the comparative effectiveness of quantitative and qualitative methods. By examining their applications, advantages, and limitations, the research aims to guide scholars and practitioners in selecting appropriate methodologies for analyzing global HR practices systematically. A literature review, coupled with an analysis of a selected research paper – "Meta-analysis of the impact of cross-cultural training on adjustment, cultural intelligence, and job performance" by Li Chenyang (2022) – serves as the framework for this investigation. The research employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative techniques such as surveys and meta-analysis with qualitative methods, including interviews and case studies. Quantitative methods are shown to provide robust statistical data enabling objective analysis and generalizability of findings. For instance, the study highlights how meta-analysis allows for consolidating data from multiple studies, yielding significant insights about the effectiveness of cross-cultural training programs on expatriates' adjustment, cultural intelligence, and job performance. On the other hand, qualitative methods contribute in-depth understanding and richer context, which quantitative metrics alone may fail to capture. The purpose of this critical analysis is to elucidate the complex dynamics of HRM practices in a global context and to propose a balanced approach to research that embraces both objective measures and subjective narratives. Preliminary findings indicate that while quantitative methods enable researchers to identify trends across populations, qualitative insights enhance the interpretation of these trends, shedding light on the why and how behind the phenomena being studied. The conclusion underscores the necessity of methodological pluralism, advocating that a hybrid approach can lead to holistic insights that significantly inform HR practices in international settings. By fostering an informed discussion on methodological choices, this study contributes to the broader IHRM discourse, emphasizing that effective research design can lead to improved organizational performance in managing human resources across cultural boundaries. Ultimately, this critical analysis serves as a call to action for researchers in the IHRM field to adopt a pragmatic stance that embraces both quantitative and qualitative research methods for comprehensive exploration of complex HR issues.

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Keywords

international human resource management, research methodologies, quantitative methods, qualitative methods, mixed methods, cross-cultural training, positivism, interpretivism, critical realism, pragmatism

JEL: M12, M54, F66, J24



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1 Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected global economy, the discipline of International Human Resource Management (IHRM) has emerged as a critical area of study that seeks to navigate the complexities

of managing human resources across diverse cultural and regulatory landscapes. The landscape of IHRM is marked by its multifaceted challenges, from understanding cross-cultural dynamics to addressing legal and ethical considerations in different jurisdictions. As organizations expand their operations

across borders, there is a pressing need for effective research methodologies that can provide insights into the multifarious HR practices that characterize various national and organizational contexts. This article begins with a critical examination of the research methodologies applied in IHRM, focusing on the comparative effectiveness of quantitative and qualitative approaches. Drawing on a robust literature review and a detailed analysis of Li Chenyang's 2022 meta-analysis of cross-cultural training's impact on expatriate outcomes, this article seeks to elucidate the methodological choices that inform research in IHRM and their consequential effects on the field. The debate surrounding the merits and limitations of quantitative versus qualitative methods is central to the discourse, as these paradigms offer divergent yet complementary insights into HR phenomena. Quantitative methods, with their emphasis on statistical generalizability and objectivity, provide researchers with tools to measure and analyze trends in global HR practices systematically. Conversely, qualitative methods enrich the research landscape by offering nuanced, context-driven perspectives that underscore the subjective experiences of individuals within organizations, particularly in culturally diverse environments. In exploring the interplay between these methodologies, this study advocates for a pragmatic approach to research design that embraces methodological pluralism. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques, researchers can cultivate a more holistic understanding of phenomena in IHRM, ultimately contributing to improved organizational strategies that consider both hard metrics and soft insights. As such, this article serves as a call to action for IHRM scholars and practitioners alike, urging them to adopt a comprehensive perspective that bridges methodological divides and enhances the rigor and relevance of research within this dynamic discipline. By doing so, we not only advance academic inquiry but also drive the practical application of HR strategies that effectively address the challenges and opportunities of managing human resources across cultural boundaries.

2 Research Philosophies

Research philosophy is the foundation upon which all research is built. It encompasses our beliefs about how knowledge is developed, the nature of reality, and the influence of our own values on the research process (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). These assumptions shape our research questions, methods, and interpretations, guiding our choices throughout the research journey. The debate between unificationism and pluralism in business and management research reflects the diversity of perspectives within the field (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). While some advocate for a unified approach, others see the value in embracing the variety of philosophies and

paradigms that contribute to a richer understanding of organizational realities (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In the realm of International Human Resource Management (IHRM), recognizing the depth of difference between research philosophies is essential for selecting the most appropriate research method. By understanding and justifying our philosophical choices, we can design a coherent research project that aligns with our goals and contributes meaningfully to the field of study.

Positivism, as a research philosophy, emphasizes the importance of observable and measurable data in producing law-like generalizations (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p.135–138). This approach, rooted in the works of Bacon, Comte, and the Vienna Circle, seeks to uncover unambiguous and accurate knowledge by focusing on facts uninfluenced by human interpretation or bias. Adopting an extreme positivist stance means viewing organizations and social entities as real as physical objects and natural phenomena, with a focus on discovering observable and measurable facts and regularities (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). In IHRM, positivism can be applied to quantify phenomena such as employee turnover rates, cross-cultural communication effectiveness, or global workforce demographics. Positivist researchers use existing theory to develop hypotheses, which are then tested and confirmed or refuted to further develop theory (Gill and Johnson 2010). They strive to remain neutral and detached from their research and data to avoid influencing their findings, using highly structured methodologies and quantifiable observations for replication and statistical analysis. This approach enables researchers to explain and predict behavior and events in organizations through universal rules and laws.

According to Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2009), **Interpretivism**, a research approach that emphasizes the subjective experiences and perspectives of individuals, is a valuable tool in the field of business and management research. By focusing on the meaning-making processes of individuals within organizations, interpretivism allows researchers to uncover the complex and diverse ways in which people perceive and interact with their social worlds (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 140–141). Utilizing qualitative methods such as interviews, focus groups, and content analysis, interpretivist researchers seek to capture the nuances of human behavior and interactions. This approach is particularly relevant in International Human Resource Management (IHRM), where understanding the cultural complexities of workplaces and individuals is essential. In IHRM, interpretivist research may explore topics such as the lived experiences of expatriates, cultural adaptation processes, or leadership practices in different cultural contexts. By adopting an empathetic stance and acknowledging the role of their own values and beliefs in the research process, interpretivist researchers can

gain deep insights into the unique and ever-changing dynamics of business environments.

In the realm of **critical realism**, researchers are encouraged to look beyond surface-level observations and delve into the underlying causes and mechanisms that shape organizational phenomena (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p.139–140). By embracing epistemological relativism, critical realists acknowledge the historical context in which knowledge is situated, highlighting the importance of understanding how social constructions influence our perception of reality. This implies a departure from the narrow focus on statistical correlations and quantitative methods, allowing for a more holistic and nuanced approach to research. In this way, critical realism challenges researchers to be conscious of their own biases and social conditioning, striving for objectivity and a deeper understanding of the complexities that underpin organizational life (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p.140–141). By integrating elements of positivism and interpretivism, critical realism offers a balanced perspective that seeks to uncover the deeper truths that shape our reality (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p.140–141). In HR research, critical realism offers a valuable framework for examining the complex interplay between organizational practices and societal structures. By employing a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, researchers can delve into the deep-seated factors that influence HR practices and outcomes. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of the social dynamics at play within organizations, allowing for a more informed and nuanced analysis of HR issues.

Pragmatism is a philosophical approach that emphasizes the practical consequences of ideas and knowledge (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 142–143). Originating in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the United States, pragmatism seeks to bridge the gap between objectivism and subjectivism, facts and values, and different contextualized experiences (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 142–143). This philosophy views concepts and theories not in isolation, but in terms of how they can be used as tools for thought and action in real-world situations. Pragmatist research begins with a problem, with the goal of providing practical solutions that can inform future practices (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 142–143). Researchers value the reflexive process of inquiry, in which doubt leads to the creation of new beliefs once a problem has been resolved. Pragmatists are more concerned with practical outcomes than abstract distinctions, leading to flexibility in research design and methodology (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p. 142–143). Overall, pragmatism recognizes the diversity of perspectives in the world and in research, advocating for the use of methods that generate credible, well-founded, reliable, and relevant data. This philosophy

highlights the importance of addressing real-world problems and finding practical solutions through research. In the field of International Human Resource Management (IHRM), where research questions are often complex and multifaceted, a pragmatic approach can be particularly beneficial.

3 Alternative Research Methods in General

Quantitative Methods:

Quantitative research methods are essential in International Human Resource Management (IHRM) research as they provide a systematic approach to collecting and analyzing data (Kabir, S.M.S., 2016).

Surveys and questionnaires, for example, are commonly used in IHRM studies to gather information from a large and diverse sample of participants. This allows researchers to generalize their findings to a broader population and draw conclusions based on statistical analysis. Surveys and questionnaires are particularly useful in IHRM research when studying topics such as employee satisfaction, cultural diversity, or global mobility trends (Kabir, S.M.S., 2016).

Experiments are another quantitative research method that can be valuable in IHRM research. By manipulating variables in controlled environments, researchers can establish causal relationships between different factors. For example, an experiment could be conducted to assess the impact of a particular training program on employee performance in different countries. Experimental research in IHRM can provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of HR policies and practices across diverse cultural contexts (Kabir, S.M.S., 2016).

In addition to surveys and experiments, **secondary data analysis** is a quantitative research method that can be particularly useful in IHRM research. By analyzing existing data sources, such as company records, industry reports, or international HR databases, researchers can identify trends and patterns that may not be apparent through primary data collection methods (Kabir, S.M.S., 2016). Secondary data analysis is also a cost-effective way to conduct research, as it eliminates the need for collecting new data and can provide valuable insights into long-term trends in the field of IHRM (Kabir, S.M.S., 2016).

While quantitative research methods have their advantages, they also have limitations. For example, surveys and questionnaires may not always capture the full complexity of HR issues, as they rely on predetermined questions and response options (Kabir, S.M.S., 2016). Experiments, while great for establishing causal relationships, may not always be feasible in real-world IHRM settings due to ethical or practical concerns. Secondary data analysis, while cost-effective, may be limited by the availability and quality of existing data sources (Kabir, S.M.S., 2016).

Qualitative Methods:

Qualitative research methods, on the other hand, provide a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of complex HR issues in the context of IHRM. Interviews, for example, allow researchers to gather detailed insights into individual experiences and perspectives. In IHRM research, interviews can be particularly valuable for exploring topics such as cross-cultural communication, expatriate experiences, or the impact of globalization on HR practices (Kabir, S.M.S., 2016).

Focus groups are another qualitative research method that can be beneficial in IHRM research. By bringing together a small group of participants to engage in in-depth discussions on a particular topic, researchers can uncover collective views, attitudes, and social dynamics that may not emerge through individual interviews. Focus groups are especially useful in IHRM research when exploring sensitive topics or cultural differences within multinational teams (Kabir, S.M.S., 2016).

Case studies are yet another qualitative research method that can provide comprehensive examinations of specific instances within their real-life context. In IHRM research, case studies can be used to explore complex and multifaceted HR issues, such as cross-border mergers and acquisitions, global talent management strategies, or diversity and inclusion initiatives. By conducting detailed analyses of real-world situations, researchers can draw rich insights and practical implications for IHRM practice (Kabir, S.M.S., 2016).

Mixed methods approach in research design involve combining both qualitative and quantitative research data, techniques, and methods within a single framework. This approach allows researchers to capitalize on the strengths of each method while mitigating the weaknesses that may arise from using a single research design. By integrating both qualitative and quantitative data, researchers can enhance the validity and reliability of their findings (Kabir, S.M.S., 2016).

For example, by combining numerical data with rich, contextual insights, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of complex HR issues in a global context. Surveys and experiments provide systematic data collection and analysis, for instance, allowing for generalizability and causal relationships to be established. Interviews, focus groups, and case studies offer in-depth perspectives and nuanced understanding of individual experiences and real-world situations. This mixed methods approach is particularly beneficial in IHRM research, where the complexity of cross-cultural communication, expatriate experiences, and global HR practices requires a multifaceted approach. By using both quantitative and qualitative methods, researchers can uncover a wide range of insights and practical implications for IHRM practice. Ultimately, mixed methods provide a holistic and comprehensive way

to address the diverse challenges and opportunities in the field of International Human Resource Management.

4 Application of Research Methods

The application of research methods in research article "Meta-analysis of the impact of cross-cultural training on adjustment, cultural intelligence, and job performance" by Li Chenyang (2022), in the field of international human resource management demonstrates the importance of using both quantitative and qualitative methods to address research questions effectively.

The paper starts by conducting a thorough literature search using various databases and journals to identify relevant studies published between 1991 and August 2021. The keywords used in the search, such as "intercultural training" and "job performance," were carefully selected to ensure the inclusion of studies related to CCT and its impact on various outcomes. This comprehensive search process resulted in the identification of 302 unique studies, of which 37 independent studies met the inclusion criteria for further analysis (Chenyang, 2022).

The researchers then proceeded to code the data extracted from the included studies to ensure accuracy and consistency in the analysis. Coding variables such as training phase, CCT-consequent variables correlations, sample sizes, and potential moderator variables were meticulously recorded to facilitate the meta-analysis. The coding procedure followed established recommendations to maintain reliability and validity in the data analysis process (Chenyang, 2022).

The paper chosen for study utilizes a meta-analysis to examine the impact of CCT on the aforementioned variables across 37 independent samples involving a total of 7,040 trainees. The researchers use quantitative methods to analyze the data, including correlation coefficients, effect sizes, confidence intervals, and moderator testing. By employing both quantitative and qualitative methods, the researchers are able to provide a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between CCT and expatriates' outcomes (Chenyang, 2022).

The results of the meta-analysis demonstrate that CCT is positively associated with expatriates' adjustment, cultural intelligence, and job performance. The effect sizes of the relationships are medium to small, indicating a significant but not overwhelming impact of CCT on the outcomes. The researchers also identify potential moderators that influence the effectiveness of CCT, such as training phase, training method, and rating source. By analyzing these moderators, the researchers are able to provide valuable insights into how organizations can optimize the effectiveness of CCT programs for expatriates (Chenyang, 2022).

Overall, the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by validating the effectiveness of CCT in enhancing expatriates' adjustment, cultural intelligence, and job performance. The findings have important implications for organizations and human resource practitioners seeking to design effective cross-cultural training programs. The study also highlights the need for future research to explore additional moderators and expand the scope of study samples to gain a comprehensive understanding of CCT effectiveness in different contexts.

Research Question: How does cross-cultural training impact expatriates' adjustment, cultural intelligence, and job performance, and what are the potential moderators that influence the effectiveness of cross-cultural training programs? This research question highlights the central focus of the study on understanding the relationship between cross-cultural training (CCT) and expatriates' outcomes. By examining the impact of CCT on expatriates' adjustment, cultural intelligence, and job performance, the study aims to provide valuable insights for organizations and human resource practitioners on designing effective training programs for individuals working in cross-cultural contexts.

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5 Conclusion

In conclusion, the choice between quantitative and qualitative methods in IHRM research depends on the research question, objectives, and underlying philosophical assumptions. Quantitative methods offer generalizability and objectivity, while qualitative methods provide depth and context. A mixed-method approach can yield comprehensive insights, balancing the strengths of both. By critically evaluating the application of these methods in a specific research paper, researchers can better understand their impact and suitability in studying international HRM practices. The meta-analysis conducted in "Meta-analysis of the impact of cross-cultural training on adjustment, cultural intelligence, and job performance" by Li Chenyang (2022) exemplifies the effectiveness of integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods in IHRM research. Embracing a mixed-method approach allows researchers to provide a comprehensive analysis of complex HR issues, offering valuable insights and practical implications for the field. Ultimately, a balanced approach to research methods is crucial in advancing our understanding of international HRM practices and enhancing organizational effectiveness.

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