

Relational Leadership: A Systematic Review and Research Agenda

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Abstract

Relational leadership research has been growing with great potential in recent years. The purpose of this review was to provide an overview of the scholarly publications on relational leadership, drawing on 277 articles published between 2000 and 2023. The results found that the relational leadership research focused on five major categories. Notably, 59% of the studies had been published in the past six years. The analysis revealed that 21% of the articles were conceptual, 68% were empirical, and 11% were research reviews. The analysis also showed that long-term qualitative studies should be increased. The analysis identified that authors from the USA take the lead. However, it was seen that there were no authors in regions such as North and West Asia, North Africa, and South America. All in all, this review draws a framework for the existing literature and provides a future research agenda.

Keywords: Relational leadership, Leadership, Relational leader, Systematic review, Literature review

İlişkisel Liderlik: Bir Sistematisk Derleme Çalışması

Öz

İlişkisel liderlik araştırmaları son yıllarda büyük bir potansiyel ile büyümektedir. Bu sistematisk derlemenin amacı, 2000-2023 yılları arasında yayımlanan 277 makaleden yola çıkarak ilişkisel liderlik üzerine yapılan bilimsel yayılmlara genel bir bakış sunmaktadır. Sonuçlar, ilişkisel liderlik araştırmalarının beş ana kategoriye odaklandığını ortaya koymuştur. İlişkisel liderlikle ilgili çalışmaların %59'u son altı yıl içinde yayımlanmıştır. Analiz, makalelerin %21'inin kuramsal, %68'inin ampirik ve %11'inin araştırma incelemesi olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Analiz ayrıca süreç alan nitel çalışmaların artırılması gerektiğini göstermiştir. Sonuçlar, alana en fazla katkıının ABD'li araştırmacılar tarafından yapıldığını göstermektedir. Bununla birlikte, Kuzey ve Batı Asya, Kuzey Afrika ve Güney Amerika gibi bölgelerden hiçbir yazarın bu alanda yayımlanmış çalışması bulunmamaktadır. Sonuç olarak, bu sistemik derleme çalışması mevcut literatür için bir çerçeve çizmekte ve geleceğe yönelik bir araştırma gündemi sunmaktadır.

Anabtar Kelimeler: İlişkisel liderlik, Liderlik, İlişkisel lider, Sistematisk derleme, Literatür taraması

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Introduction

Relational leadership focus on relationships like Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Brower et al., 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2006) and has been growing with increasing potential and different important studies in the last three decades (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Cummings et al., 2010; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012; Dinh et al., 2014; Akram, Lei, Hussain, et al., 2016). The studies that form the basis of LMX theory are related to relationships (Graen et al., 1982; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Gerstner & Day, 1997) and led to the emergence of studies on which relational leadership studies will be based. Also, the fact that LMX theory focuses only on leader-member dyads and behaviors of individuals has led to the emergence of new approaches in the field (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Clarke, 2018). In addition, relational leadership suggests that, unlike previous relational research, leadership studies should focus on more than just the leader-member relationship and that relationships are different dynamic structures.

While different studies form the basis of relational leadership, other definitions form the basis of the field. Based on the existing literature, Hosking (1988) defined leadership as some type of social interaction that has the effect of structuring activities and relationships. Komives et al. (1998) described the relational model of leadership as involving an ethical and interpersonal process where individuals collaborate to strive for positive improvements collectively and examined leadership as a relational process comprising five attributes: inclusive, empowering, purposeful, process-oriented, and ethical. Regan and Brooks (1995) also identified and elaborated on five characteristics of relational leadership: collaboration, caring, courage, intuition and vision. In relational leadership studies, Uhl Bien's study in 2006 caused the field to attract significant attention (Akram, Lei, Hussain, et al., 2016). Uhl-Bien (2006) defined relational leadership as "a social influence process through which emergent coordination (i.e., evolving social order) and change (i.e., new values, attitudes, approaches, behaviors, ideologies, etc.) are constructed and produced" (p. 655) and introduced the relational leadership perspective of "entity" and "relationship". The entity perspective, rooted in a traditional orientation, focuses on individual attributes, and individuals collaborate to achieve shared objectives (Uhl-Bien, 2006). That is, the entity perspective centers on the attributes and actions of individuals, examining how these impact their interpretation of the leader-follower dyad (Clarke, 2018). On the other hand, the relational perspective views leadership as a process of social construction (Uhl-Bien, 2006). In addition, this perspective was later stated as the constructionist perspective (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012).

Considering the entity perspective of relational leadership, the only empirical instrument developed to measure this construct is the Relational Leadership Questionnaire (RLQ), originally developed by Carifio and Eyemaro (2002) and later reanalyzed by Carifio (2010). The theoretical background of the developed scale is grounded in the earlier studies of Komives et al. (1998) and Regan and Brooks (1995). The scale comprises five dimensions: inclusive, empowering, caring, ethical, and vision. The inclusive aspect refers to the leader's contribution to the learning processes of subordinates by helping them take responsibility and develop themselves. In terms of empowerment, the leader shares power with followers to increase their willingness to act and expects them to align with such behaviors (Komives et al., 1998). In the caring aspect, the leader values followers' opinions and responds to their needs (Regan & Brooks, 1995). The ethical aspect of leadership involves making the right decisions and taking the right actions based on moral principles (González & Guillen, 2002). Finally, vision emerges when followers can freely express their opinions within organizational processes (Yukl, 2013).

Publications on relational leadership have resulted in very different outcomes. Relational leadership has been found to contribute to the development of social capital (Walsh & Martin, 2023) and organizational social capital (Akram, Lei, Hussain, et al., 2016), affects outcomes resulting from the leader-follower social exchange (Aboramadan et al., 2022), influences trust in subordinates and leaders (Werbel & Lopes Henriques, 2009; Kim et al., 2018), demonstrates a positive relationship with communication satisfaction (Xu & Farris, 2022), is positively associated with employee performance in innovative work approaches processes (Kim, 2022), has an impact on employee unethical pro-organizational behaviour, and affects employee creativity (Ansung et al., 2023). In studies conducted in the healthcare field, relational leadership has been observed to improve health system performance (Cleary et al., 2018), increase personnel and customer health performance (Cummings et al., 2021), play an important role in influencing subordinate nurses by nurse leaders (Cummings et al., 2018), and is positively related to some patient outcomes (Wong et al., 2013). Consequently, while recognizing the multifaceted effects of relational leadership, it is clear that the systematic nature of the research framework produces very different results.

It is essential to scrutinize various publications to comprehend the diverse outcomes and methodologies in relational leadership studies. Also, different studies and methods need to be examined in order to develop and understand the constructionist perspective in relational leadership studies (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). Yukl (2013) stated that research obtained from surveys collected at a single time is insufficient to understand relational leadership processes and that researchers should turn to qualitative methods that involve long processes for different discoveries. Considering that the number of studies investigating relational leadership has increased in recent years and that there is a lack of studies examining relational leadership research to date, the status of the relational leadership literature needs to be evaluated. In light of these developments, the aim of this study is to provide an overview of scholarly publications on relational leadership. The review addressed the following research questions:

- 1- What is the volume of literature published on relational leadership in the world in all journals?
- 2- How has the volume of journal publications on relational leadership between 2000 and 2023?
- 3- What is the geographical distribution of authors in relational leadership articles published since 2000?
- 4- What is the composition of the relational leadership literature in terms of 'type of study': empirical, conceptual, commentary, research review?
- 5- What are the notable categories in relational leadership studies?
- 6- What is the future of relational leadership research?

Methodology

This study employed a systematic review of research. Systematic review consists of synthesizing, and analyzing proof obtained from different studies transparently and systematically (Gough, 2007; Snistveit et al., 2012; Gough et al., 2017; Pollock & Berge, 2018). In order to begin reviewing, 338 studies were included in the scope of the review focusing on searches made on Web of Science with the keywords "relational leadership", "relational leader" and "relation-oriented leader" on 24.11.2023. Since the review covers the years 2000-2023, new research was conducted on 03.01.2024, and 3 new studies were found on the WOS and included in the study. The reason why the research is limited to the year 2000 is that there is no scientific article on relational leadership when searched with keywords. Scopus and Google Scholar were included in the review to expand the scope of the study. To remove duplicates, article lists accessed via WOS, Scopus and Google Scholar were compared with Excel software macros, respectively. During the systematic review process, the Prisma Flow diagram developed by Moher et al. (2009) and updated by Page et al. (2021) was synthesized and used (Figure 1.).

After removing the duplicates collected from 3 databases, 458 records were reached. As a result of the evaluation made according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 277 articles were included in the systematic review. These studies contained data suitable to answer the research questions and were selected for analysis. The systematic review process included examining the content of these studies, extracting and synthesizing the data, and then analyzing the results. Some data were coded for convenience in analysis. In addition, the Tableau 2024.1 program was used for the geographical analysis of authors and VOSviewer 1.6.20 was used for the bibliometric analysis of keywords. The PRISMA 2020 27-item checklist, updated by Page et al. (2021), was used to ensure transparency and standards at every stage of the study, as well as to examine, evaluate, and report the study.

Inclusion criteria

- 1-Studies published in journals in the Web of Science (WOS), Scopus and Google Scholar databases according to keywords
- 2- Studies about Research questions and Relational leadership
- 3- Studies that include Relational leadership in their title, abstract or keywords
- 4- Studies that were published review or article
- 5- Studies published between 1990 and 2023

Exclusion Criteria

- 1- Studies that do not contain the keywords used in the research in the title, abstract or keyword sections
- 2- Studies for which full-text articles cannot be accessed

3- Studies written in local language (Extended English abstracts were included)

4- Not affiliated with Mainstream and other journals

Screening

For each study, the abstract section was reviewed, and the method section, if any, was examined. Additionally, by looking at the references in the study, its relationship with mainstream studies on relational leadership was examined. We noticed that in some articles accessed through Google Scholar, the article was displayed even though the search keyword was not mentioned in the article, and we excluded these studies. Studies that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria were divided into various categories such as "Business-Management, Health Care, Educational Research, Psychology, Public Administration".

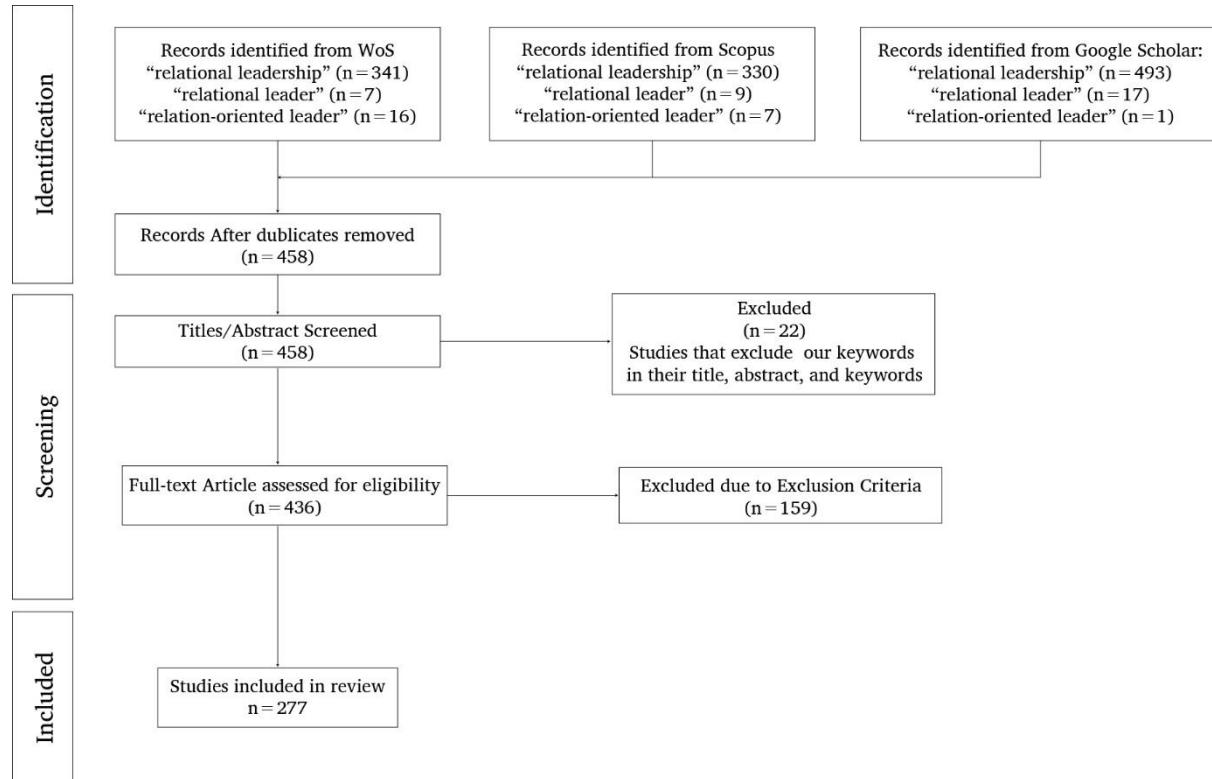


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram of the study (Page et al., 2021)

Data Extraction

Data extraction, research-related process of gathering appropriate information from studies (Gough, 2007; Clarke, 2009). The articles were scanned sequentially to answer the research questions. The abstract, introduction, methodology and conclusion of all included articles were examined by author. Especially when scanning authors' countries, a dilemma arose regarding whether to include only the first author or all authors. In consultation with two experts, it was decided to conduct a country analysis of all authors who wrote articles on relational leadership. Thus, it was possible to make a geographical analysis of all authors working in the field. Data extracted from included studies: category, type, number of authors, country of all authors, journal distribution, research and data collection methods, keywords, sample information, and measurement instruments. The extracted data was then entered into an Excel spreadsheet.

Data Analysis

During the analysis, interrelated and synthesizable data were compiled. However, due to the fact that very different samples were used in the research samples and the measurements used in the studies were very different, the samples and measurements were not included in the analysis. However, these parts were used little in the study. First, it was decided to categorize the studies to identify trends related to relational leadership. Also, although there were studies categorized through WOS, the studies were not categorized in Scopus and Google Scholar exactly. Therefore, in order to provide analysis, some categories were combined, subcategories were changed, and main categories were created. Graphical and visual tools were used to understand data analysis and synthesis. Descriptive statistics, content analysis and bibliometric analysis were

used to synthesize the data. Additionally, the data obtained in the analysis were compared with other leadership reviews.

Result

In this section, answers to the research questions were sought through the analysis of the included studies. The analysis results of 277 studies published between 2000 and 2023 on relational leadership are presented, with the study volume covering a long period and a large number of articles being examined.

Categorization

This part was the most challenging compared to the other analysis. Although the categories of the articles were specified on the Web of Science, analysis showed that some studies fell into more than one category, and some studies were not related to the relevant category. Additionally, there were no categories for studies in Scopus and Google Scholar. Due to Business and Management studies being very similar to each other, these studies were included in the common category. Also, the categories of some works have been changed. For example, in the WOS database, the study of Matykiewicz and McMurray (2013) was categorized as "Business, Management", and Sihvola et al. (2022)'s study is categorized as "Management, Nursing", but it has been placed under the "Healthcare" category considering its relationship with the field of health. Categories of some studies were changed from "Management, Nursing" to "Healthcare" (e.g. Cummings et al., 2008; Wong et al., 2013). Luster et al. (2021), Aboramadan et al. (2022) and Van der Merwe (2014) were included in the "Educational Research" category because their studies were related to education, although they were in different categories. Similarly, the categories of some studies were changed by the author. Thus, 17 categories related to relational leadership were obtained. Taking the different tabulations as an example (Markham, 2010; Rudolph et al., 2020), the database from which all the publications were taken, their categories and types of articles were tabulated in order to examine all of the compiled research. Table 1. shows the number of authors, databases sourced from, category, and type of article for each article.

Table 1. *Categorization, number of authors, databases sourced from, categories, and types of articles between 2000-2023*

Categorization	N	%
Number of Authors		
1	61	22
2	89	32.1
3	61	22
4	35	12.7
5	11	4
>5	20	7.2
Databases Sourced From		
WOS	235	84.8
SCOPUS	18	6.5
Google Scholar	24	8.7
Category		
Business-Management	114	41.2
Health Care	44	15.9
Psychology	38	13.7
Educational Research	36	13
Public Administration	13	4.7
Environmental Sciences	7	2.5
Social Issues	5	1.8
Women's Studies	4	1.4
Hospitality	4	1.4
Religion	3	1.1
Others (Sociology (2), Criminology (1), Dancing (1), Mathematics (1), Economy (1), Information Science (1), Environmental Sciences (1), Ergonomics (1))	9	3.3

As shown in Table 1, the most researched category regarding relational leadership is 114 studies under the title of Business-Management (e.g. Crevani et al., 2010; Einola & Alvesson, 2021; Xu & Farris, 2022; Walsh & Martin, 2023). In addition, the analysis revealed that 44 studies were related to the "Healthcare" category (e.g. Alilyyani et al., 2018; Cardiff et al., 2018; Warshawsky, 2020; Smithson, 2022), 36 studies to the "Educational Research" category (e.g. Gibson, 2014; Branson et al., 2016; Dube & Jita, 2018; Nhlapo & Hlalele, 2023), 38 studies to the "Psychology" category (e.g. Boer et al., 2016; Binyamin et al., 2018; Zhao et

al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022), 13 studies to the "Public Administration" category (e.g. Kinder et al., 2021; Hajjaj, 2023; Sancino et al., 2023; Troisi & Alfano, 2023), and 8 studies to the "Environmental Sciences" category (e.g. Grin et al., 2018; Blakey & Clews, 2020; Crossweller, 2022). Apart from these, it was observed that studies were conducted on different topics related to relational leadership, such as Criminology (Benefiel, 2019), Dancing (Biehl, 2019), Mathematics (Guo et al., 2021), Economy (Horlings et al., 2017), Information Science (Moon et al., 2018), Ergonomics (Zohar et al., 2014), Sociology (Hurwitz, 2019; Nguyen, 2019), Religion (Breedt & Niemandt, 2013; Watt, 2014; Allen, 2019), Hospitality (e.g. Bhutto et al., 2021; Palermo et al., 2023), Women's Studies (e.g. O'Brien, 2017; Cunha & Martins, 2023) and Social Issues (e.g. Harrison et al., 2013; Sanga et al., 2021). In addition, the analysis of 763 authors in this study showed that 61 (22%) articles were single-authored, while 216 (78%) articles were co-authored.

Journal distribution

When the journals in which the field was published were analyzed, it was determined that publications were made in 183 different journals. During the tabulation phase, due to the large number of journals, journals in which less than 2 articles were published were listed in the other section. The journals that have published more than 2 articles on relational leadership are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Journal distribution of articles on relational leadership*

Journal	N	%
The Leadership Quarterly	17	6.2
Leadership	15	5.4
Journal Of Nursing Management	7	2.5
Leadership in Health Services	6	2.2
Journal of Business Ethics	6	2.2
Human Relations	5	1.8
Journal of Leadership Studies	5	1.8
Frontiers in Psychology	4	1.4
International Journal of Nursing Studies	4	1.4
Leadership & Organization Development Journal	4	1.4
Personnel Review	4	1.4
Corporate Communications	3	1.1
Current Psychology	3	1.1
Educational Management Administration & Leadership	3	1.1
International Journal of Public Leadership	3	1.1
Journal of Advanced Nursing	3	1.1
Organization Studies	3	1.1
Others (n<2)	182	65.7

As shown in Table 2, in 17 articles published in *The Leadership Quarterly*, which is under the umbrella of Elsevier and publishes on relational leadership, it was determined that 80% of the authors (all the authors, not first) were from the USA. In similar leadership publications, it has also been observed that USA ranks first again (Tao et al., 2021; Hickey et al., 2022). Surprisingly, in the *Leadership* published under the umbrella of SAGE, most authors are from the USA, followed by New Zealand and the UK. Although the field is distributed among many different journals, it has been observed that publications in top journals are limited to certain countries. Moreover, the journal-based analysis revealed that healthcare-related journals such as the *Journal of Nursing Management* (7 articles) and *Leadership in Health Services* (6 articles) made notable contributions to the relational leadership literature. Other influential outlets included the *Journal of Business Ethics* (6 articles), *Human Relations* (5 articles), and the *Journal of Leadership Studies* (5 articles).

Publication volume

When the annual distribution of publications in the field was examined, it was observed that the number of studies on relational leadership increased steadily over time. Between 2000 and 2023, a total of 277 articles related to relational leadership were published in 183 different journals. The publication volume is shown in Figure 2.

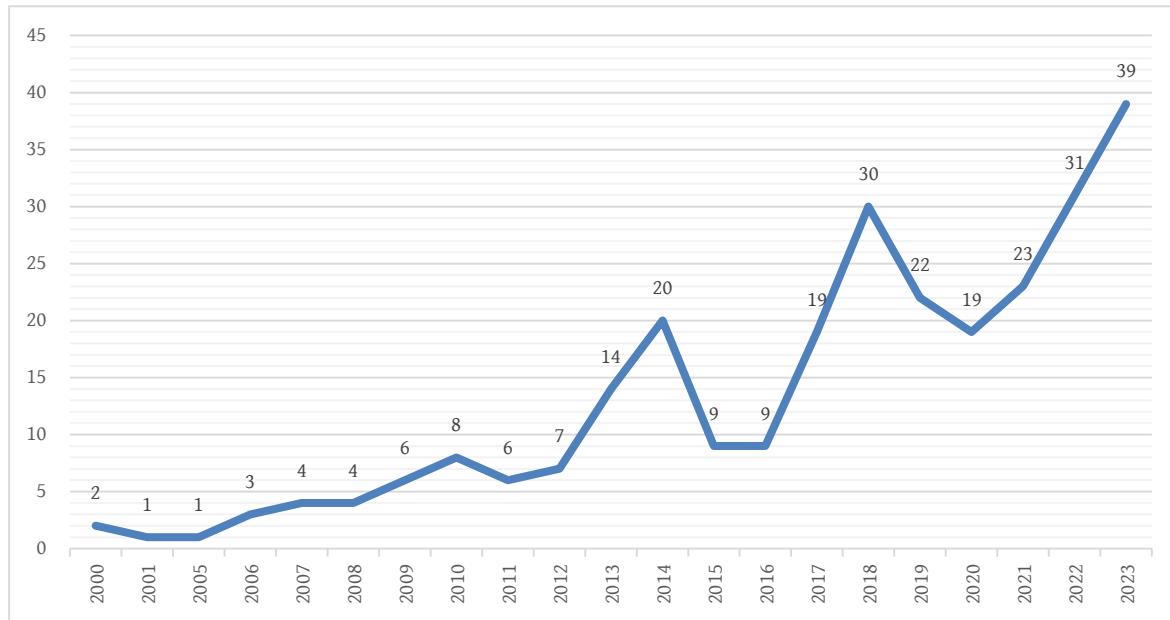


Figure 2. Annual volume of articles on relational leadership published in selected journals, 2000–2023

As shown in Figure 2, the early 2000s marked the initial stage of research on relational leadership, with only a few studies published each year. The analysis revealed that the increase in the number of articles and citations after 2006 and 2012 was influenced by the relational leadership model proposed by Uhl-Bien (2006) and later developed in Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012). Especially the high number of citations of these studies indicates a shift towards this model within the field. The number of publications reached 20 in 2014, dropped slightly in the following years, and then rose again to 30 in 2018. It was also observed that 59% of the studies were conducted in the last 6 years. The most productive year was 2023 with 39 published articles. Although there were minor fluctuations, the overall pattern indicates a consistent and accelerating growth in scholarly attention to the topic.

Keyword Relation Analysis

While preparing for keyword analysis, it was determined that 40 articles did not have keywords. A total of 907 keywords were detected in the remaining 237 articles. The identified keywords were analyzed with the VOSviewer 1.6.20 software, at least 2 of which were similar, and 128 similar keywords were found to be related to each other. Keyword Relation Analysis is shown Figure 3.

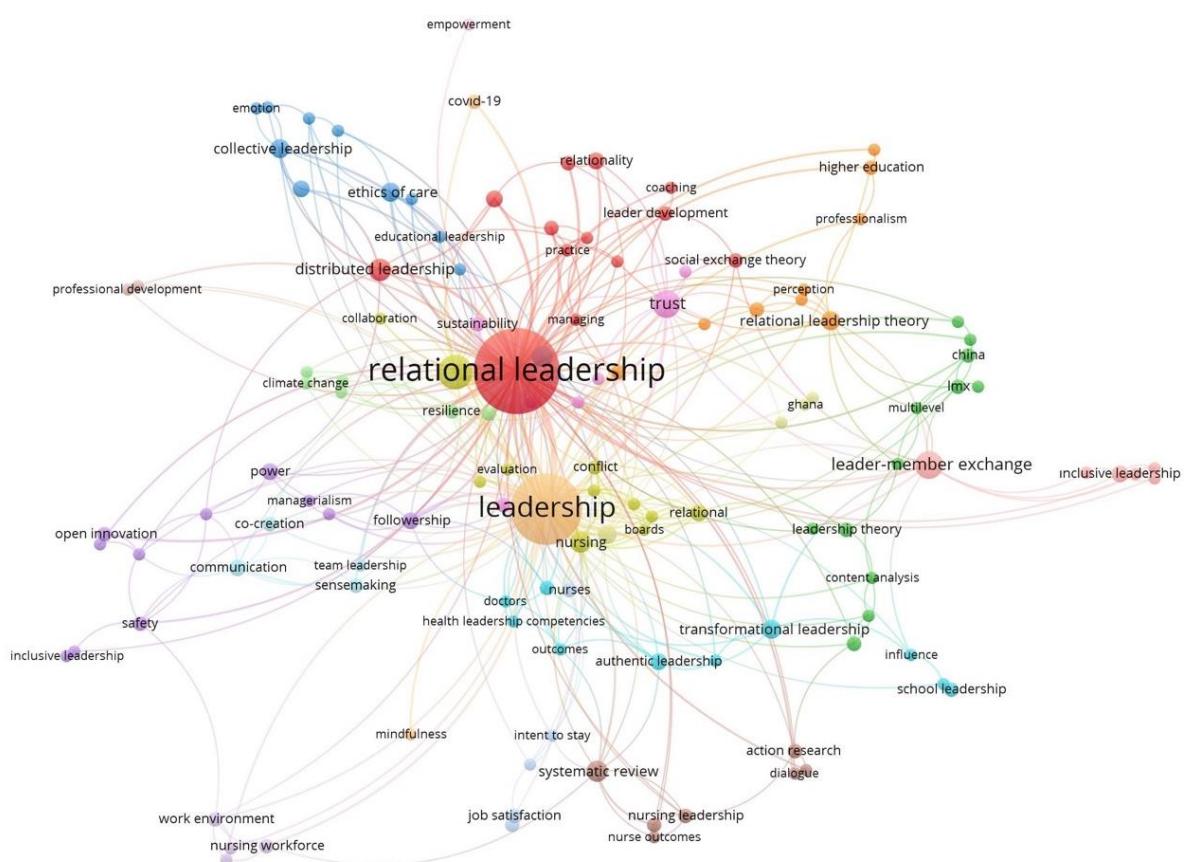


Figure 3. Keyword relation analysis on relational leadership publications

As shown in Figure 3, the most frequently repeated keywords after the keyword "relational leadership" were leadership, leadership development, leader-member exchange, trust, systematic review, nursing, and healthcare, respectively. These associations highlight that relational leadership has been examined across diverse contexts, particularly in education, organizational management, and healthcare settings. Additionally, in publications about leadership, keywords such as distributed leadership, transformational leadership, collective leadership, inclusive leadership, shared leadership, authentic leadership, and nursing leadership (articles to be cited) were found to be associated with relational leadership. This pattern suggests that relational leadership serves as a bridging concept that connects multiple leadership paradigms. The reason for this is that relational leadership theory is regarded as an important approach that encompasses other leadership theories under its umbrella (Clarke, 2018). Moreover, leader-member exchange theory also emerged as a significant keyword. Because the entity perspective of relational leadership theory is a leadership approach grounded in leader-member exchange theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006; Werbel & Lopes Henriques, 2009). Another significant and closely related keyword that emerged is trust. Trust is considered necessary because it forms the foundation of the relationship between the leader and subordinates in relational leadership (Brower et al., 2000). Keywords such as nursing, nurses, doctors, nurse outcomes, and nursing workforce specifically emerged in the keyword relation analysis. Particularly within the healthcare literature, relational leadership has been suggested as a framework to enhance the efforts of both organizations and individuals (Cummings et al., 2018). These keywords indicate that the literature on relational leadership has become increasingly concentrated on studies conducted in the healthcare context.

Types of articles

According to the classification made by Hallinger and Chen (2015), each article was assigned to one of three categories according to the article type: (1) empirical studies, (2) conceptual/commentary, (3) research review. The conceptual/commentary section does not specify a definitive methodology but instead comprises interpretation-based assessments aimed at formulating abstract or concrete theories or models concerning relational leadership. Empirical studies typically report the results of studies in which data are collected and analyzed to answer specific research questions, collecting and analyzing quantitative and/or qualitative data in the process. Research review include the processes of synthesizing and analyzing the data

obtained as a result of literature review. (Hallinger, 2018). Distribution of relational leadership literature by type of article is shown in Figure 4.

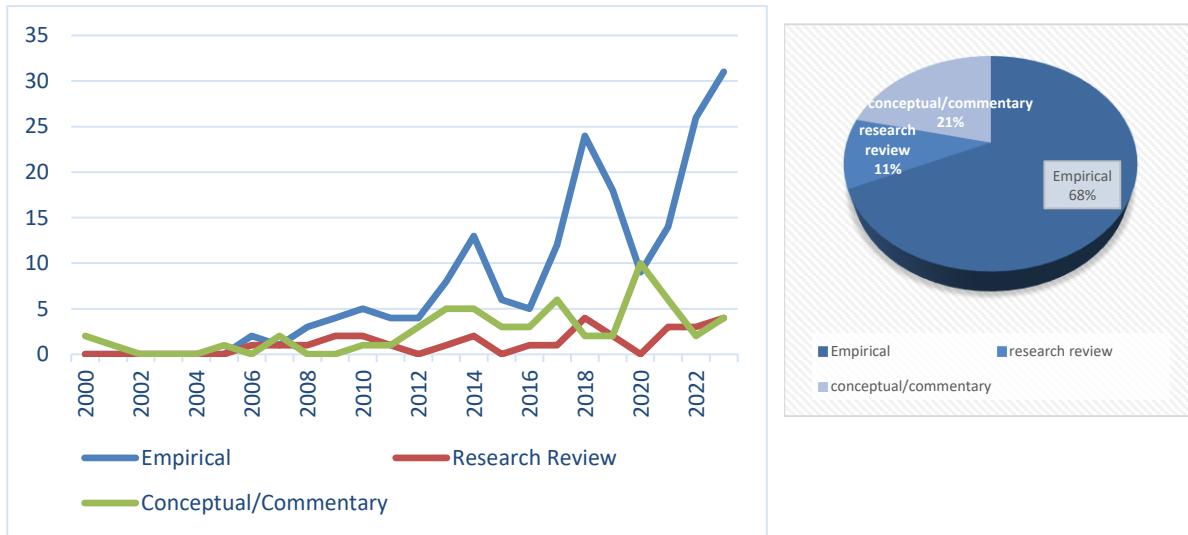


Figure 4. Distribution of relational leadership literature by type of articles, 2000-2023

As shown in Figure 4, a clear upward trend in empirical studies can be observed, particularly after 2010. Sharp increases occurred around 2014 and 2018, followed by another notable rise after 2021, reaching the highest level in 2023. In contrast, conceptual and review articles have remained relatively stable throughout the period. Among the 277 articles retrieved from three databases, 189 empirical studies constituted a significant majority (68%). In addition, 59 (21%) of the articles were identified as conceptual/commentary and 29 (11%) were research reviews. These findings were similar to the outcomes of other leadership reviews (Harrison et al., 2016; Clark et al., 2019; McQuade et al., 2021). These findings indicated that relational leadership research has matured theoretically and now emphasizes empirical validation across various contexts.

Research Methods

The analysis of empirical articles on relational leadership is shown in Figure 5. This classification is divided into three types suggested by Creswell (2017): (1) qualitative, (2) quantitative, (3) mixed method. It was determined that there were 189 empirical studies in the literature reviewed. Among these publications, 102 (54%) were qualitative, 77 (41%) were quantitative, and 10 were mixed-methods. Unlike other topics, coding was used in the analysis of qualitative research. Because in some publications, the research design part was not clearly specified. In other publications, single or multiple case studies (Marcketti & Kozar, 2007; Sanders, 2018; Fischer, 2019; Zehrer & Leiß, 2020; McCauley & Palus, 2021; Fagerdal et al., 2022), action research (Reitz, 2017; Cardiff et al., 2018; Stuart, 2018; Zehrer & Leiß, 2020), bricolage (Blakey & Clews, 2020), ethnography (Cunliffe & Eriksen, 2011; Bradford & Leberman, 2019), videography (Aromaa et al., 2020), autoethnography (Sanga et al., 2021), ethnographic narrative inquiry (Smit, 2014), grounded theory (Painter-Morland & Deslandes, 2017; Styhre et al., 2022), constructivist grounded theory (Reynolds et al., 2023) were used as research designs.

Quantitative and mixed-method publications generally consisted of surveys that included measurements and did not contain a specific research design. It was determined that the Relational Leadership Scale developed by Carifio (2010) was used to measure relational leadership in the publications (Akram, Lei, & Haider, 2016; Akram, Lei, Hussain, et al., 2016; Zhang & Yao, 2019; Ansong et al., 2023; Memon & Ooi, 2023). Following this, it can be stated that this scale was developed in the field of education, and more scale related to relational leadership could be developed in healthcare, management, business and other areas. Additionally, an explanatory sequential mixed methods (Ladegard & Gjerde, 2014; Grealish et al., 2023), and parallel convergent mixed methods (Shin et al., 2022) were utilized as research methods.

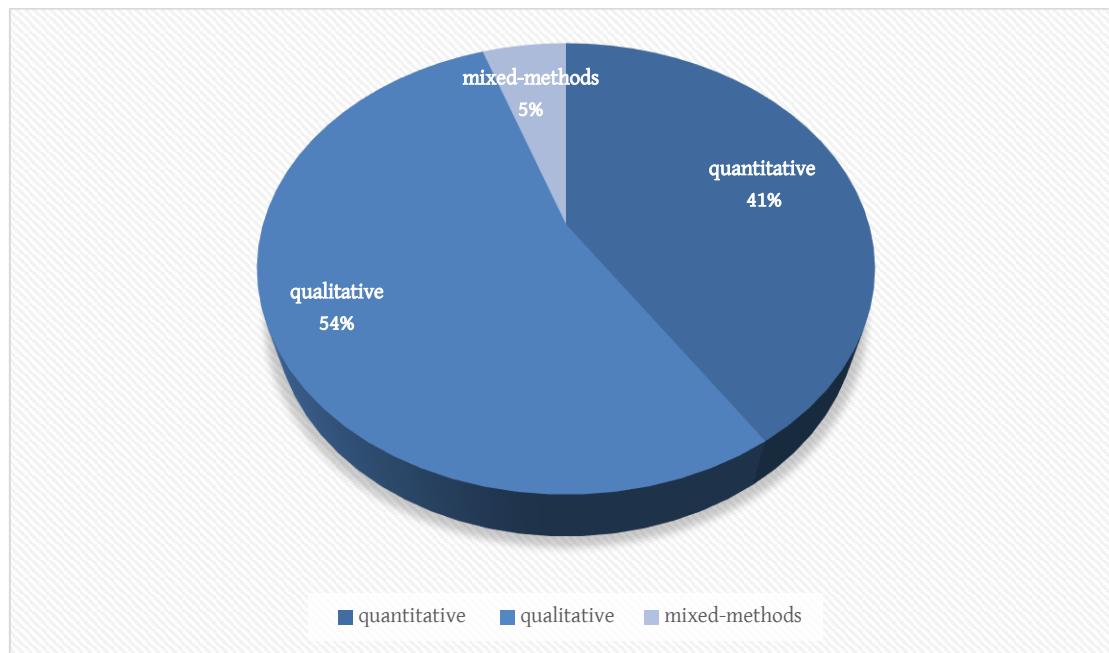


Figure 5. Distribution of relational leadership articles by research methods

Data Collection Methods

The following analysis examines the data collection method employed in relational leadership research. While in some studies the data collection method remained unclear, in others more than one data collection method was used. Figure 6 illustrates the distribution of data collection methods used in empirical studies on relational leadership between 2000 and 2023.

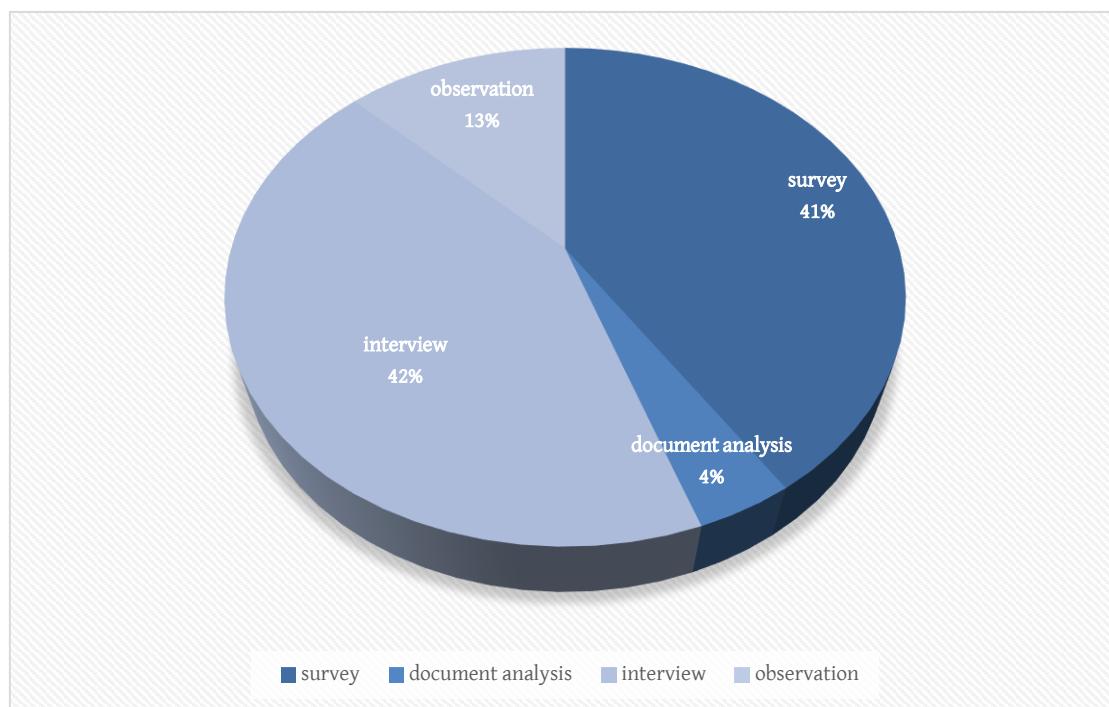


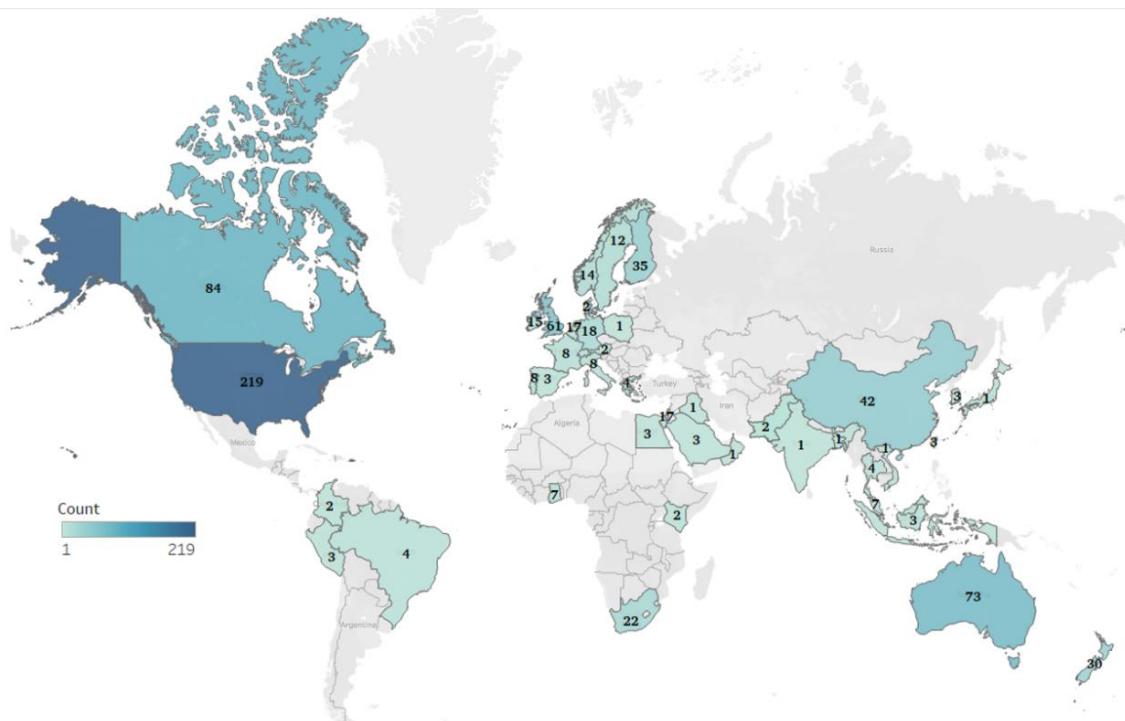
Figure 6. Distribution of relational leadership articles by research methods

As presented in Figure 6, analysis of the empirical studies reviewed revealed that 42% of the articles used interviews as the data collection method (e.g. Ospina & Foldy, 2010; Biehl, 2019). The predominance of interviews suggested that relational leadership studies focus on detailed and relationship-based exploration. This was followed by surveys with 41% (e.g. Guo et al., 2022; Perry et al., 2022), observations

with 13% (e.g. Rowland & Parry, 2009; Ryömä & Satama, 2019), and document analysis with 4% (e.g. Seemiller & Murray, 2013; Verhoeven et al., 2023). The high proportion of surveys indicated an increasing effort to quantify relational dynamics and empirically validate relational constructs. In addition, the relatively low rates of observation and document analysis showed that direct behavioral observation and archival research remain scarce in the field.

Geographic distribution

Figure 7 shows distribution of articles related to relational leadership by all authors' countries. The map illustrates the global representation of authors, indicating the number of researchers contributing to relational leadership studies from each country. Darker colors represent a higher number of authors.



Eva et al. (2019). Notably, 59% of relational leadership studies have been published in the last six years. This indicates that the field has experienced significant growth in recent years. This rapid increase shows the growing recognition of relational leadership as a critical framework for understanding leader–follower dynamics in organizations. The steady upward trend after 2006 and 2012 also confirms that the theoretical model proposed by Uhl-Bien (2006) and later expanded by Uhl-Bien and Ospina (2012) has become a cornerstone in shaping contemporary research on the topic. The results of the review also showed that the USA is the leading country in relational leadership studies. Similar findings were reported in reviews of other leadership studies (Gardner et al., 2011; Harrison et al., 2016; Hickey et al., 2022; Zhong et al., 2023). The author attributes this to foundational studies on relational leadership published in the USA. The foundations laid by Brower et al. (2000) and the new perspective developed by Uhl-Bien (2006) have contributed to the growth of relational leadership in this country. Furthermore, the dominant role of the United States can also be linked to the support for leadership research and the visibility. Additionally, *The Leadership Quarterly* and *Leadership* were found to be the journals that published the most on relational leadership and contributed to the development of the field.

Analysis of categories showed that some of the publications accessed through WOS, Scopus, and Google Scholar did not have categories or were incompatible with the study. Categorization showed that there were generally 17 different categories of publications in the field of relational leadership. As a result of the analysis, 114 of these publications were normally under the Business-Management category. Strikingly, the analysis showed that relational leadership has been studied more in the Healthcare category than other leadership types. The author also reported that there is a significant relationship, especially between relational leadership and nursing leadership (Cummings et al., 2008; Wong et al., 2013; Grealish et al., 2023; Hult et al., 2023). This trend suggests that relational leadership has become an essential framework for explaining leadership processes in healthcare settings. The fact that relational leadership publications are studied in vastly different categories, such as "Criminology, Dancing, Ergonomics, Religion", among others, illuminates the breadth of boundaries the field has reached. Such diversity demonstrates the theoretical adaptability of relational leadership, enabling its application across both the social sciences and other fields.

Author analysis revealed that approximately 22% of the articles had a single author, while the remaining 78% were co-authored. This indicates a high level of collaboration among scholars studying relational leadership. The inclusion of all authors publishing on relational leadership would have allowed me to observe the field's development and geographic distribution. Additionally, approximately 90% of the authors are from developed countries. The author supports the suggestion of increasing studies in developing countries in other leadership research (Mcquade et al., 2021). This finding shows that most research comes from high-income and Western countries, creating a clear imbalance in where knowledge is produced. Geographic analysis revealed that authors from Canada, Australia, the UK, and China made significant contributions to publications on relational leadership following the USA. The contribution of authors from Pakistan, Ghana, and Malaysia to articles on relational leadership was noted as a noteworthy finding. In addition to authors being spread across the globe, very few studies have been conducted in the regions of North and West Asia, North Africa, and South America. This shows that relational leadership should be studied in different regions and fields.

Keyword analysis revealed the relationships between publications related to relational leadership. This is noteworthy because keywords show the focus of the articles and the scope of the literature (Zhang et al., 2015; Dai et al., 2020). Accordingly, the analysis shows that relational leadership is connected to various leadership approaches rather than being studied as an independent concept. Thus, we could see how the concept of relational leadership was approached from a broad perspective and how it was related to other types of leadership. The most notable keywords in the studies were leader-member exchange, trust, leadership development, healthcare, and nursing, except for relational leadership. In terms of keywords related to leadership, the results were striking for distributed leadership, transformational leadership, authentic leadership, and nursing leadership. This pattern suggests that relational leadership functions as a bridging construct connecting multiple leadership paradigms (Clarke, 2018). Additionally, the prominence of leader–member exchange and trust highlights that relational leadership is built on the quality of relationships and mutual trust, reflecting its roots in LMX theory (Brower et al., 2000). The frequent use of health-related terms (e.g., nursing, nurse outcomes, nursing workforce) further indicates a growing concentration of relational leadership research in healthcare. These findings demonstrate the foundations of relational leadership research and the scope of studies in this field. Additionally, emphasizing how the

concept of relational leadership is correlated with other significant concepts in the leadership literature points to the depth and diversity of research in the field.

The study showed an uneven distribution of the relational leadership literature according to the types of articles. Although most of the publications were empirical, it was observed that there was a significant increase in conceptual/commentary and research review studies. The analysis also shows that the popular methodological approach is qualitative methods (54%), followed by quantitative (41%) and mixed research methods (5%). In other leadership systematic review, quantitative studies outnumbered qualitative studies (Eva et al., 2019; Mcquade et al., 2021; Hickey et al., 2022). These findings support the suggestion that qualitative research should be further investigated to develop the constructionist perspective in relational leadership. It was reported that many different research methods were used in empirical studies, and the interview was also used in the majority of qualitative research as a data collection method (42%). These findings emphasize the methodological diversity and variety of approaches in relational leadership, indicating that research in the field spans a broad spectrum.

Limitations

This systematic review has several limitations. First, 276 publications were analyzed in English full-text, and 1 publication was analyzed based on an English extended abstract. This review, which only focuses on English publications, may have led to the overlooking of potential outputs from studies conducted in local languages. Second, since the studies obtained from different databases did not have categories, the author categorized them. Thus, the uncertainty and subjective approach in the categorization process may have created a limitation.

Third, postgraduate students' dissertations, conference proceedings, books, or book chapters have not been included in the scope of this review. Because there were a lot of publications and a limit to accessing most books and book chapters, this decision represents a limitation of the study, as it may overlook valuable insights and perspectives offered by these publications. Fourth, the purpose of this study is to draw a general framework for the studies rather than examining the findings obtained in scientific publications on relational leadership. Therefore, future reviews should need to focus on more in-depth and detailed findings on relational leadership. Additionally, considering that this study covers a specific period, I think it may be useful to conduct a new review in the distant future to integrate more current literature and evaluate the development of existing research over time.

Recommendation

Publications related to relational leadership show that a significant amount of literature has accumulated in the healthcare and educational research categories. However, it is noticeable that educational research still needs to be improved compared to other types of leadership in this field. Especially considering the long duration of educational research and its interaction within the process, I think that more studies can be conducted on educational research related to relational leadership in the future. Additionally, research that addresses cultural differences and local dynamics in different countries may influence our understanding of the universality of the relational leadership model. In addition to the lack of authors interested in relational leadership in countries such as Türkiye, Iran, Ukraine and Russia, Cyprus, there are also very limited authors working on relational leadership in countries such as Iraq, Japan, India, Poland and Switzerland. Thus, I suggest that future studies be conducted on relational leadership in different countries and societies.

Although many different methods have been studied with relational leadership, the author agrees with the opinion that there should be more long-term studies to develop a more in-depth constructionist perspective (Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012; Endres & Weibler, 2017). This type of long-term qualitative research will help us better understand the dynamics of relational leadership and examine the long-term effects of leadership interactions. After scale developed by Carifio (2010), there have been continuous publications and current developments in different categories on relational leadership. In light of these current developments, it shows that new scales need to be developed in different categories and fields in quantitative research. Therefore, the development of different quantitative measurement tools, taking into account current developments and leadership practices, will contribute to a more effective evaluation of relational leadership and the advancement of the field. In addition, this study recommends that quantitative research be increased to address the existing gaps in the field.

This review was conducted by a single author, and the studies were reviewed multiple times to ensure meticulousness. The processes in review studies, which include many stages such as examination,

compilation, synthesis and analysis of studies, can be very long and tiring. Therefore, the author thinks that it is beneficial for the systematic review to be conducted by more than one author, depending on literature size.

Ethical Declaration

During the writing process of the study titled “*Relational Leadership: A Systematic Review and Research Agenda*” scientific rules, and ethical and citation rules were respected. This study was not submitted to any other academic publication platform for evaluation. This study did not require an ethics committee approval required for the research.

Etik Beyan

“*İlişkisel Liderlik: Bir Sistematik Derleme Çalışması*” başlıklı çalışmanın yazım sürecinde bilimsel kurallara, etik ve alıntı kurallarına uyulmuş; toplanan veriler üzerinde herhangi bir tahrifat yapılmamış ve bu çalışma herhangi başka bir akademik yayın ortamına değerlendirme için gönderilmemiştir. Bu araştırmada sistematik derleme yöntemi kullanıldığından dolayı etik kurul kararı zorunluluğu bulunmamaktadır.

Declaration of Conflict

There is no potential conflict of interest in the study.

Çatışma Beyanı

Çalışmada herhangi bir potansiyel çıkar çatışması söz konusu değildir.

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GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

İlişkisel liderlik yaklaşımı, bireyler arasındaki etkileşimleri merkeze alan ve lider-üye ilişkilerinin ötesine geçen, dinamik ve çok boyutlu bir çerçeveye sunmaktadır. Bu teori, Lider-Üye Etkileşimi (LMX) teorisinin temel prensiplerinden yararlanmakla birlikte (Brower vd., 2000; Uhl-Bien, 2006), liderlik ilişkilerinin daha geniş bir perspektifle ele alınması gerektiğini savunmaktadır. Son otuz yılda ilişkisel liderlik yaklaşımına ilişkin önemli araştırmaların yapıldığı ve alana yönelik artan bir ilginin olduğu alanyazında görülmektedir (Akram vd., 2016; Cummings vd., 2010; Dinh vd., 2014; Uhl-Bien, 2006; Uhl-Bien & Ospina, 2012). LMX teorisinin temelini oluşturan çalışmalar, ilişkiler üzerine yoğunlaşmış (Gerstner & Day, 1997; Graen vd., 1982; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) ve ilişkisel liderlik araştırmalarına zemin hazırlamıştır. Ancak, LMX teorisinin yalnızca lider-üye ikilisine ve bireylerin davranışlarına odaklanması, alanda yeni yaklaşımın ortaya çıkışmasına neden olmuştur (Clarke, 2018; Uhl-Bien, 2006). Bu çalışma, 2000-2023 yılları arasında ilişkisel liderlik üzerine yapılan bilimsel araştırmaların kapsamlı bir analizini ele almaktadır. İlişkisel liderlik, liderlik literatüründe giderek daha fazla önem kazanan bir liderlik yaklaşımı olarak öne çıkmaktadır; bu alanda yapılan çalışmaların artan hacmi ise kavramın akademik ve pratik düzeyde geniş bir yankı bulduğu göstermektedir. Bu araştırma, ilişkisel liderlik literatürünün gelişim sürecini, yöntemlerini, araştırma yaklaşımlarını ve coğrafi dağılımlarını ortaya koymayı amaçlamaktadır. Sistematiğ bir literatür taraması yaklaşımı benimsenerek, ilişkisel liderlik literatüründe öne çıkan eğilimler ve metodolojik yaklaşım detaylı bir şekilde incelenmiştir. İlk aşamada, araştırma kapsamına alınacak çalışmalar için dahil etme ve dışlama kriterleri belirlenmiştir. Bu kapsamında, "relational leadership", "relational leader" ve "relation-oriented leader" anahtar kelimeleri kullanılarak, Web of Science, Scopus ve Google gibi geniş kapsamlı veri tabanlarından ilgili çalışmalar taramaştir. Yalnızca İngilizce yazılmış, tam metin erişimi sağlanabilen ve ilişkisel liderlik kavramını doğrudan ele alan makaleler incelemeye dahil edilmiştir. Kitap bölümleri, tezler ve konferans bildirileri gibi akademik kaynaklar ise analiz dışında bırakılmıştır. Bu yöntem, yüksek akademik standartlara sahip bir veri seti oluşturmayı sağlamıştır. İlişkisel liderlik araştırmalarında, 2006 yılında Uhl-Bien tarafından ortaya konan modelin ve 2012 yılında Uhl-Bien ile Ospina tarafından geliştirilen perspektiflerin etkisiyle, özellikle bu tarihlerden sonra hem makale sayısında hem de atıf oranlarında belirgin bir artış gözlemlenmiştir. Çalışmaların %59'unun 2018–2023 yılları arasında yayımlanmış olması, bu alanın büyümeye trendinin devam ettiğini ve akademik ilginin giderek arttığını göstermektedir. 2023 yılı, 39 makale ile en üretken yıl olarak öne çıkmıştır. Bu, ilişkisel liderlik literatürünün önemli bir ivme kazandığını göstermektedir. Analiz sonucu yapılan sınıflandırma ile, ilişkisel liderlik çalışmalarının türlerine dair önemli bulgulara ullaşılmıştır. İnceleenen 277 makalenin %68'si ampirik çalışmalar, %21'i kuramsal/yorumlayıcı makaleler ve %11'i araştırma incelemelerinden oluşmaktadır. Bu oranlar, ampirik araştırmaların ilişkisel liderlik literatüründe baskın olduğunu, ancak kuramsal ve literatür inceleme çalışmalarının da alana katkı sağladığını göstermektedir. Ampririk araştırmaların yöntemsel dağılımı incelediğinde, nitel yöntemlerin %54 ile öne çıktı, nicel yöntemlerin %41 oranında kullanıldığı ve karma yöntemlerin ise %5 gibi bir oranla daha az tercih edildiği görülmüştür. Ampririk çalışmalarda en sık kullanılan veri toplama yöntemi %42 oranla görüşme yöntemi olurken, bunu %41 ile anketler takip etmiştir. İlişkisel liderlik araştırmalarının coğrafi dağılımı incelediğinde, literatürün büyük ölçüde ABD, Kanada, Avustralya, İngiltere ve Çin gibi ülkelerde yoğunlaştığını göstermektedir. ABD, 219 yazar ile bu alandaki en yüksek katkıyı sağlayan ülke olmuştur. Ancak Kuzey ve

Batı Asya, Kuzey Afrika ve Güney Amerika gibi bölgelerde bu alanda yapılan çalışmaların oldukça sınırlı olduğu görülmektedir. Türkiye, İran, Hindistan, Japonya ve İsviçre gibi ülkelerde ilişkisel liderlik üzerine daha fazla araştırmaya ihtiyaç duyulduğu belirtilmiştir. Özellikle Türkiye'de ilişkisel liderlik ile ilgili araştırma bulunmamaktadır. Coğrafi çeşitliliğin artırılmasının, ilişkisel liderlik modelinin farklı kültürel bağlamlardaki uygulanabilirliğini ve geçerliliğini anlamak açısından önemli olduğu değerlendirilmektedir. Anahtar kelime analizi, ilişkisel liderlik ile ilgili yayınların içerik ve odak noktalarını anlamak açısından önemli bir içgörü sunmaktadır. Bu analizde, "ilişkisel liderlik" anahtar kelimesi dışında en sık kullanılan kelimeler liderlik, liderlik gelişimi, lider-üye etkileşimi, güven, sağlık hizmetleri ve hemşirelik olmuştur. Ayrıca, dağıtılmış liderlik, dönüşümçü liderlik, otantik liderlik ve hemşirelik liderliği gibi diğer liderlik türleriyle ilişkilerin de sıkça incelendiği görülmüştür. Bu bulgular, ilişkisel liderliğin diğer liderlik türleriyle olan güçlü etkileşimini ve bu alandaki araştırmaların çeşitliliğini göstermektedir. Özellikle sağlık ve eğitim alanlarında önemli bir literatür birikimi olduğu, ancak eğitim alanındaki araştırmaların geliştirilmesi gerekmektedir. Çalışmanın sonuçları, metodolojik açıdan da zengin bir tablo çizmektedir. Özellikle nitel araştırmaların, ilişkisel liderliğin derinlemesine anlaşılmamasında önemli bir rol oynadığı görülmektedir. Uzun süreli ve derinlemesine nitel araştırmaların, liderlik etkileşimlerinin dinamiklerini daha iyi anlamak ve ilişkisel liderliğin inşacı perspektifini geliştirmek açısından faydalı olacağı belirtilmiştir. Nicel araştırmalarda ise daha fazla ölçek geliştirme çalışmasına ihtiyaç duyulmakta; özellikle Carifio (2010) tarafından geliştirilen İlişkisel Liderlik Ölçeğinin farklı alanlarda uygulanması gerekmektedir. Son olarak, bu sistematik incelemenin yalnızca İngilizce tam metinlere dayalı olarak yapılmış olması, diğer dillerdeki çalışmaların dışarıda bırakıldığı anlamına gelmektedir. Ayrıca, kitaplar, konferans bildirileri ve yüksek lisans/doktora tezleri gibi kaynakların analize dahil edilmemesi, çalışmanın kapsamını sınırlayan bir diğer faktör olmuştur. Bu nedenle, gelecekte yapılacak incelemelerin bu sınırlamaları aşarak daha geniş bir literatürü kapsayacak şekilde tasarlanması önemlidir. Özellikle kültürel farklılıklar ve yerel dinamikleri ele alan çalışmaların, ilişkisel liderlik literatürüne önemli katkılar sağlayacağı aşikardır.