



The evolution of leadership: Past insights, present trends, and future directions

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ABSTRACT

We first review leadership research that has been dominant before and after the *Journal of Business Research* was established fifty-one years ago, along with a discussion of those approaches that have continued to attract research attention. Next, we discuss moral approaches to leadership, including authentic, ethical, and servant leadership. We address criticism of these and other approaches, especially concerns about the way leadership styles are measured. Furthermore, we provide coverage of current trends in leadership research, such as studying the dark side of seeming positive leadership approaches, examinations of the importance of followership in the study of leadership, as well as research that explores the effects of leadership from a leader-centric perspective. Finally, we offer directions for future leadership research, such as integrating leader power and authority with leadership approaches and developing ways of addressing criticism that has been leveled against leadership research.

1. Introduction

Although systematic research on leadership started in the 20th century, the influence of leadership has permeated human history for thousands of years. From the dawn of human civilization, leaders have organized and coordinated essential activities such as hunting and gathering, playing an important role in the survival and development of communities. Throughout the long history of human evolution and civilization, many political, business, professional, and religious leaders have influenced the functioning of the society and the direction of history during certain periods. Beyond human society, leadership also plays a role in animal herds and groups, as depicted in wildlife documentaries (e.g., BBC's "Dynasties") and studied by natural scientists (King et al., 2009). From the perspectives of historians, evolutionists, biologists, sociologists, psychologists and so on, leadership is a topic with enduring significance not only in the past but also for the future.

Leadership refers to a social influence process in which leaders attempt to motivate and enable followers to contribute toward achieving collective goals (Bass, 1990; Yukl, 2002). A related concept is management, involving activities of planning, organizing, leading, and controlling organizational resources to attain organizational objectives effectively and efficiently (Kotter, 1990). Although related, substantial

differences exist between the actor roles and focuses of management and leadership. Specifically, managers typically focus on maximizing organizational benefits by planning and organizing resources such as finances, materials, and human capital. In contrast, leaders are seen as more dynamic and visionary, shaping a clear strategy for the future and motivating others to pursue it. As a leadership coach from *Forbes* clarified, simply holding a managerial title does not make someone a leader; leadership is defined by actions. Individuals who inspire, encourage, or engage others through their actions are recognized as leaders, regardless of their formal position or title (Forbes, 2017).

Despite these distinctions being noted (Kotter, 1990; Kotterman, 2006; Terry, 1995), scholars frequently use management and leadership, or managers and leaders, interchangeably in leadership literature. One possible explanation for the confusion and difficulty in distinguishing between leadership and management is that these functions are frequently performed by the same individual. In the practice of the workplace, people are generally recruited as managers but expected to fulfill the tasks related to both management (e.g., distributing daily tasks of employees) and leadership (e.g., motivating employees). Likewise, in academic research, samples used to study leadership generally consist of individuals who hold managerial positions within organizations. However, this is insufficient, if not inconsistent, because these practices

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potentially overlook how leadership can manifest outside of the formal designation (e.g., emergent leadership; [Badura et al., 2022](#)). This issue is related to the relationship between leadership and power.

As defined, leadership is essentially about a leader influencing followers to achieve individual follower's, group's, or organizational goals. This process entails a dependency relationship where followers surrender the authority or power to define and interpret reality to their leaders. Thus, for leaders to effectively exert influence, they should be perceived as powerful by their followers ([French & Raven, 1959](#)), either from their position power, related to the role and status within the organization, or personal power, derived from the individual's traits and abilities ([Lunenburg, 2012](#)), such as technical expertise or charisma ([French & Raven, 1959](#)). In general, leadership can manifest through both the exercise of formal authority and informal influence. While formal leaders, such as CEOs, can enact leadership through both of these avenues, informal leaders typically express their leadership through informal influence alone. The scope of formal leaders' power is largely determined by the positions in organizational hierarchy, combined with varying degrees of personal power. Informal leaders, on the other hand, do not hold official managerial positions, but are still able to wield considerable influence over their colleagues through personal qualities or charisma. Therefore, within an organization, leadership, influence, and power can be understood through the roles of formal and informal leaders who utilize various combinations of position and personal power to exert change and guide others ([Hollander & Offermann, 1990](#); [Pierro et al., 2013](#)).

While the majority of the existing leadership literature has been developed based on studies of formal leaders, our discussion of leadership in this paper is broader and more inclusive. Aligning with the definition that leadership involves the process of influencing others toward a shared objective, leadership can be enacted by anyone, not just those with formal titles or positions of authority. Moreover, leadership is not confined to the exercise of managerial authority, it can also occur when formal leaders engage in informal behaviors beyond their official responsibilities. For example, [Sparrowe and Liden \(2005\)](#) discovered that through informal activities, such as a luncheon or a social event, leaders may share valuable contacts in their informal networks by introducing them to their followers. Thus, through informal means, leaders may build follower influence and stature in the organization by helping followers expand their own networks of contacts.

In the following sections, we begin by briefly reviewing key leadership approaches covered in the literature, including trait, behavioral, contingency, and relational approaches, as well as various leadership styles. Next, we discuss the methods used in leadership research, with a particular focus on survey-based leadership measures, which have been criticized by scholars (e.g., [Fischer & Sitkin, 2023](#); [van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013](#)). Given the dominance in the leadership literature of survey methods used to capture leadership styles, we address the tension that criticism of the prevailing approach to leadership has created. We also elaborate on the different levels of analysis involved in leadership study (i.e., within-person, between-person, dyadic levels, etc.). In the final section, we highlight several underexplored yet crucial areas for future research. We argue that leadership literature would benefit from a deeper exploration of the use of power or authority in the leadership process, profiles of leadership behaviors, the crucial role of followers, the impact of leadership on leaders themselves, leadership differentiation within work groups, and the emergence of digital leadership.

In the past 100 years, over 32,000 papers and 4,500 books have been published on leadership-related topics.² Among them, 236 articles on leadership have been published in the *Journal of Business Research* since its establishment in 1973. These publications spread across multiple domains including sociology, psychology, education, marketing, organizational behavior, strategy, healthcare, hospitality, public

administration, political science, and religion. Although our article focuses on leadership studies within the organizational behavior domain in the context of workgroups with samples drawn from low- and mid-level leaders in for-profit organizations, our article provides insights for audiences from these related fields. Furthermore, our conceptualization of leadership applies to all organizational levels – from first-line managers to CEOs. Relatedly, some historical, current, and future approaches and perspectives to be discussed are applicable to addressing questions across a broad range of disciplines and organizational contexts. We hope to inspire more innovative, interdisciplinary, and nuanced future research that further enriches the leadership literature.

2. Overview of important leadership approaches

What is effective leadership? Over 100 years of leadership research has explored this question from various perspectives by developing and utilizing various theories ([Avolio et al., 2009](#); [Jago, 1982](#)). To provide our readers with a comprehensive view of leadership, we will briefly introduce several of the most important approaches: trait approaches, behavioral approaches, contingency approaches, the relational approach (i.e., leader-member exchange), and leadership styles.

2.1. Trait approaches

Driven by the need to select leaders during and after World War I, leadership research emerged in an effort to identify factors that predict good leaders ([Lord et al., 2017](#)). Influenced by historian Thomas Carlyle's "great man" hypothesis—which posits that history is shaped by leaders—early leadership research was based on a belief that certain traits or attributes could predict whether an individual can become a leader (leadership emergence), or how well leaders perform in their leadership roles (e.g., leadership effectiveness; [Judge et al., 2002](#)). Leader traits refer to a wide range of relatively stable individual differences that can influence the effectiveness of leadership ([Zaccaro, 2007](#)). These include physical factors (e.g., appearance and height), demographic qualities (e.g., age, gender, and race), skills and abilities (e.g., intelligence and knowledge), personality characteristics (e.g., big five personalities), motives, needs, and values ([Jago, 1982](#); [Javalagi et al., 2024](#); [Judge et al., 2002](#); [Stogdill, 1948](#); [Tomova et al., 2024](#); [Yukl, 2006](#)). Research on traits that are considered difficult to change (e.g., demographics and personalities) guides the practice of leader selection and assessment ([Stogdill, 1948](#)), whereas research on "developed traits", such as knowledge and skills, suggests the possibility of training and developing effective leaders from non-leaders or ineffective leaders ([Mumford et al., 2007](#)).

Personality traits. The research on personality traits garners significant attention in leader traits studies. Numerous personality traits have been analyzed to predict the emergence and effectiveness of leadership. Particularly, extensive research has centered on the role of the Big Five personality traits in predicting leadership outcomes. Meta-analyses confirm the effects of Big Five personality traits on predicting leadership effectiveness across various situations ([Javalagi et al., 2024](#); [Judge et al., 2002](#); [Lord et al., 1986](#)), and studies have delved into the mechanisms and boundary conditions of the influence of traits (e.g., [Zhang et al., 2023](#)). Additionally, the relationships between dark traits (e.g., narcissism, psychopathy, Machiavellianism, and hubris) and leadership effectiveness have been thoroughly examined ([de Vries & Miller, 1985](#); [Kaiser et al., 2015](#); [Petit & Bollaert, 2012](#); [Volmer et al., 2016](#); [Zhang et al., 2023](#)). For instance, research has investigated leader narcissism's detrimental effects on followers and organizations ([Braun, 2017](#); [Zhang et al., 2023](#)). A balanced perspective has been adopted, exploring both the positive and negative effects of favorable and unfavorable traits on leadership ([Judge et al., 2009](#)).

Sex/Gender and leadership. Sex deals with differences between males and females, whereas gender is a socio-attitudinal dispositional variable ([Deaux, 1985](#)). This variable is typically operationalized using

² Based on a search on the PsycINFO database.

self-report attitudinal and/or personality measures and is considered to fall on a continuum ranging from masculine to feminine. Since the 1990s, the increasing presence of women in the labor force and the trend toward diverse workplaces have heightened research interest in the relationship between sex and leadership (Lord et al., 2017). Although the term “gender” is typically used, most research has examined sex rather than gender. Research has explored whether sex affects the likelihood of becoming a leader or being perceived as one, whether leadership styles are influenced by leader gender, and whether gender impacts the actual effectiveness of leadership and its evaluation (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Shen & Joseph, 2021). Findings indicate that female leaders are not less effective than male leaders in leadership roles (Appelbaum et al., 2003). However, sex and gender stereotypes (Schein et al., 1996) and discrimination significantly hinder women’s leadership emergence and negatively affect evaluations of female leaders’ effectiveness (Badura et al., 2018; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016; Johnson et al., 2008).

Perceived traits. It can be the perceived traits, rather than the actual traits, that influence leadership effectiveness (Calder, 1977). According to implicit leadership theory, people hold a prototype or stereotype of leaders based on their experience or social construction (Lord et al., 2020). This prototype includes the traits (e.g., masculinity and intelligence) that they think a leader should have. People compare their prototypes to the perceived traits of a leader or potential leader, forming evaluations about the individual’s potential for leadership and the effectiveness of their leadership (Lord et al., 1984). The popular construct of charismatic leadership has its roots in the trait approaches. Initially presented in House (1977) by Robert House, charismatic leadership theory emphasizes the importance of charisma as a leadership trait in influencing followers. Leaders who are high in charisma are more likely to be perceived by followers as “attractive, nurturant, successful, or competent” (House, 2005, p. 339), and this favorable perception will lead to a high level of actual and perceived leader effectiveness.

Although trait approaches dominated the very early stage of leadership research, inconsistent results from empirical examinations cast doubt on the ability of traits alone to predict leadership effectiveness. However, following the publication of the first meta-analysis that indicated the predictive power of traits in leadership effectiveness (Lord et al., 1986), there has been a renewed interest in trait approaches. In the past 20 years, research has strived for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the role of traits in leadership. The effects of more leader traits have been explored, such as leader trait affect (Joseph et al., 2015), leader mindfulness (Schuh et al., 2019), leader age (Tomova et al., 2024; Walter & Scheibe, 2013), leader bottom-line mentality (Babalola et al., 2021), and leader workaholism (Clark et al., 2016; She et al., 2024). In addition, there is a call for studies to explore the integration and interaction of different sets of traits (e.g., Owens et al., 2015), to combine traits with contextual factors and behaviors, and to explore the influence of traits on objective leadership effectiveness instead of perceived effectiveness (DeRue et al., 2011; Javalagi et al., 2024; Judge et al., 2009; Zaccaro et al., 2018).

2.2. Behavioral approaches

In the late 1940s, Ralph Stogdill (1948) concluded that after decades of research that largely failed to identify leader traits that consistently relate to leadership effectiveness, it would be best to focus on what leaders do, rather than what they are. As a result, researchers shifted their focus to examining the role of behaviors in leadership (Jago, 1982). The underlying assumption of behavioral approaches is that the effectiveness of leadership is predicted by how leaders behave when interacting with followers instead of their personal traits or characteristics. An extensive program of research at Ohio State began with the identification of hundreds of leader behaviors, culminating through a series of factor analyses in two key behaviors, consideration and initiating structure (Fleishman, 1951; Hemphill & Coons, 1957; Stogdill, 1963)

which capture the relationship and task orientations of leaders, respectively. Consideration is the extent to which leaders care about the followers’ well-being and facilitate good-quality leader–follower relationships (Bass, 1990; Jago, 1982). Example behaviors involved in consideration are “treating all group members as his/her equals,” “doing personal favors for group members,” and “finding time to listen to group members” (Halpin, 1957, p. 4). Initiating structure describes the extent to which leaders facilitate groups’ task completion by providing clear guidance, expectations, and rules, and establishing communication channels (Fleishman, 1953, 1973; Jago, 1982). For example, “assigning group members to particular tasks,” “maintaining definite standards of performance,” and “letting group members know what is expected of them” (Halpin, 1957, p. 6). Research suggests that the most effective leaders engage in a high level of both consideration and initiating structure (Fleishman & Simmons, 1970; House et al., 1971). The research team at the University of Michigan identified another two-dimension leader behavior framework involving employee-centered and production-centered behaviors (Katz et al., 1950, 1951). Different from the consideration-initiating structure framework, this framework regards the two types of behaviors as opposite ends in a single continuum.

Yukl and colleagues (2002) expanded these two behavioral categories to include change-oriented behaviors as did DeRue et al. (2011). Yukl and colleagues (2002) also identified subdimensions for task, relations, and change behaviors. For example, relations behaviors include supporting, developing, empowering, recognizing, and consulting. Yukl (2012) next added a fourth behavioral category, external, which includes the dimensions of networking, external monitoring, and representing. On the other hand, DeRue and colleagues’ (2011) fourth dimension is passive leadership.

Behavioral approaches have not been at the forefront of leadership research for a long period. Consideration and initiating structure, referred to as the “forgotten ones” (Judge et al., 2004), have seen limited focus over the past two decades, with fewer studies on employee-centered and production-centered behaviors (Dinh et al., 2014). Additionally, the behavioral categories proposed by either Yukl or DeRue and colleagues have not been widely used in leadership research. However, leadership research has incorporated the consideration of behaviors. Since the 2000s, the primary focus of leadership research has been leadership styles, which are often viewed as patterns of behaviors (Carton, 2022) and will be introduced later. Besides overall leadership styles, individual dimensions of leadership styles and individual leader behaviors have often been explored in terms of their impacts on followers and leaders themselves (e.g., Rai et al., 2024; Song et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2024).

2.3. Contingency approaches

At the beginning of the 1970s, scholars began to challenge the assumption that certain leader traits and behaviors remain effective in all situations and turned to the contingency perspective which considers the influence of situational factors on the effectiveness of traits and behaviors. Fiedler’s contingency leadership theory (1971) and House’s path-goal theory (1971) are two representatives of this approach.

Fiedler’s contingency leadership theory proposed that the effectiveness of leader traits is contingent on their suitability to the situations, which ultimately determines the productivity of groups (Fiedler, 1971, 1978). This theory highlights two leadership traits (i.e., task motivation and relationship motivation) and three situational factors (i.e., leader-member relations, task structure, and position power) that can affect a leader’s control over the situation (Fiedler, 2005). This theory suggests that leaders are most effective in situations where the control level matches their leadership traits. In practice, this insight leads to the “leader match procedure”, whereby leaders adjust the situation characteristics to align with their own traits (Fiedler, 2005).

While contingency theory focuses on the match between leader traits

and situations, the path-goal theory of leadership effectiveness emphasizes the match between leader behaviors and situations (House & Mitchell, 1974). Based on the path-goal hypothesis and expectancy theory of motivation, House and his colleagues (1971) suggested that effective leaders satisfy the followers' needs by clarifying the paths to goals and providing necessary instructions and resources to achieve these goals. While other contingency theories of leadership (e.g., Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969) assume all of a leader's followers to be essentially the same, path-goal theory is unique in that each follower's characteristics and needs are considered by the leader in determining the behaviors best suited to create a path that motivates that follower to perform well. Recognizing that different followers have different needs regarding goals and resources to realize goals, this theory suggests that effective leaders should tailor their behaviors to suit the diverse needs of their followers.

The popularity of contingency approaches was relatively short-lived, fading as transformational leadership emerged in the late 1970s, which we will discuss in more detail later in the section on leadership styles. Nonetheless, the core ideas of the contingency approaches continue to influence leadership research. For example, contemporary studies frequently consider situational factors such as follower traits, task characteristics, and organizational contexts when examining the effects of specific leader traits and behaviors. In addition, the importance of leader–follower relationships and the consideration of individual followers' needs are manifested in the domain of leader-member exchange research, which we will introduce next.

2.4. Relational approach – Leader-member exchange

2.4.1. Theoretical foundation

Relational approaches to leadership came to the forefront in the Ohio State Leadership studies, with the identification of behaviors that were labeled consideration (Fleishman, 1951), which parallel the University of Michigan's concern for people (Katz et al., 1950) and Fiedler's consideration of relationship as a situational factor (Fiedler, 1971). Interestingly, the contemporary approach most closely linked to relational approaches to leadership, leader-member exchange (LMX), was discovered in a study of consideration and initiating structure (Graen et al., 1972). At that time, researchers assumed that leader behavior was stable across followers and that differences in follower ratings of the leader were due to error in measurement. Graen and his colleagues (1972) demonstrated that rather than being error, these differences represented valid differences in behaviors directed toward each follower. This discovery led to the vertical dyad linkage (VDL) model of leadership, which abandoned the “average leadership style” approach in which the leader was assumed to treat all followers in the same way. Instead, each leader–follower dyad was studied as a separate entity. Some followers, the cadre, were in the leader's in-group whereas the out-group consisted of “hired hands” (Graen, 1976). The name of the approach was changed from VDL to LMX to better capture that followers also play a role in the development and maintenance of the relationships between leaders and followers.

The LMX approach to leadership continues to attract substantial interest among researchers. Multiple meta-analyses on LMX have been published along with increasing empirical studies on LMX (Dulebohn et al., 2012; Ilies et al., 2007; Martin et al., 2016; Rockstuhl et al., 2012). These studies were conducted primarily at individual, dyadic, or group levels.

2.4.2. Individual/dyadic level

Although the individual and dyadic levels are no longer the focus of all LMX research, many studies continue to be published at this level, with a wide range of topics being explored (e.g., Uhl-Bien et al., 2022; Xu et al., 2014), such as performance (Hu & Liden, 2013), affect (Tse et al., 2018), and creativity (Volery & Tarabashkina, 2021). Although antecedents and outcomes of LMX continue to be studied, there is also an

interest in LMX as a moderator of a wide range of relations between variables, such as the association between supervisor-induced stress and follower job neglect (McLarty et al., 2021) and the relation between role conflict, ambiguity, overload, and affective organizational commitment (Montani et al., 2017). In some cases, the effects of LMX on coworkers have been explored at the individual level (e.g., Lau & Liden, 2008).

Research has also been appearing on agreement between leader and follower on LMX. Whereas earlier research pointed to low agreement as an indication of low validity of LMX as a construct, LMX agreement is now treated as a substantive variable (Cogliser et al., 2009; Matta et al., 2015). The more a leader and a follower agree on the quality of their LMX relationship, the more positive the outcomes (Yuan et al., 2023). Not surprisingly, though, if a leader and a follower agree that the relationship is of low quality, the outcomes are not as positive as when they agree that they have a good relationship (Cogliser et al., 2009).

2.4.3. Group level

In the first three decades of LMX research, there was a strong emphasis on individual-level outcomes of LMX, and virtually no attention was paid to the implications of LMX at the group level. Specifically, how does the formation of LMX relationships of differing quality in the workgroup affect group performance? The majority of group-level studies have examined LMX differentiation, the extent to which LMX relationships vary in quality across group members (Liden et al., 2006). Research has shown that differentiation is positively related to workgroup performance when the groups' task interdependence is high (Liden et al., 2006) and when the leader differentiates based on performance rather than liking (Han et al., 2021). It has also been shown that the more intelligent the leader, the stronger the positive association between LMX differentiation and performance (Matta et al., 2024). It may be that intelligent leaders are more likely to base differentiation on work factors, such as job performance. We will discuss this area in more detail later.

2.4.4. Criticism of LMX

Although LMX research was criticized earlier in its existence as a leadership construct (e.g., Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Schriesheim et al., 1999), critiques of LMX have continued in the past decade. Scandura and Meuser (2022) lamented that perhaps because the LMX approach emerged from empirical findings, a solid theoretical framework for LMX has never been developed. Gottfredson et al. (2020) echoed the earlier criticisms of Liden et al. (1997) and Bernerth and colleagues (2007) that LMX does not capture social exchange, despite social exchange theory being used since the late 1980s to provide a framework for understanding leader–follower behavior toward one another. Bernerth and colleagues (2007) acted on their criticism of LMX measurement by developing a measure based on social exchange that they labeled leader-member social exchange (LMSX). The LMSX measure includes items that capture reciprocity directly. For example, “If my manager does something for me, I will return the favor at some point.” Liden and Maslyn's (1998) leader-member exchange multidimensional measure (LMX-MDM) and Graen and Uhl-Bien's (1995) LMX-7 capture reciprocity indirectly by asking what each party of the dyad brings to the relationship, without specifically asking respondents if the reciprocity motivated a dyadic member's contribution to the relationship. It may be that respondents of the LMX-7 and LMX-MDM see the behavior of each party as being intertwined as the correlations between the LMSX and the LMX-7 and LMX-MDM are typically in the high .70s or .80s (e.g., Bernerth et al., 2007).

Another concern about LMX-7 and LMX-MDM measurement is that the items are not “balanced” in capturing what each member brings to the relationship, as only one of the LMX-7 items (excluding the item asking about overall effectiveness of the relationship) assesses what the follower contributes to the relationship (Liden et al., 2016). Similarly, only three of 12 items in the LMX-MDM address what followers provide to leaders. Liden and Maslyn had intended for there to be a balance in

what each member of the dyad contributed to the exchange, but the scale development process (items removed based on content validation, bias checks, and factor loadings) resulted in the imbalance. Chaudhry and colleagues (2021) rectified this by developing a measure based on the LMX-MDM that equally captures what leaders and followers bring to the relationship.

2.5. Leadership styles

Leadership styles can be regarded as the extension of behavioral approaches. To understand what combination of leading behaviors is effective, researchers explore the high-level construct of leading behaviors, and leadership styles became the focus of leadership research, especially after 2000. The leadership styles are single constructs including a set of behaviors that reflect a common theme (Carton, 2022). Among all the leadership styles, transformational and transactional leadership, ethical leadership, authentic leadership, servant leadership, humble leadership, and destructive leadership have gained a large percentage of research attention in the past 30 years (Carton, 2022; Dinh et al., 2014; Gardner et al., 2020).

2.5.1. Transformational and transactional leadership

Transformational leadership and transactional leadership were originally theorized as two ends on a single continuum (Burns, 1978), while further theorizing and empirical examinations imply that they are distinct constructs and can be both high or low (Bass, 1999). They represent two typical ways of leading by inducing extrinsic motivation or intrinsic motivation in followers.

After being proposed by Burns (1978), transformational leadership became the most heavily researched leadership theory (Dinh et al., 2014) once it was advanced by Bass (1985). Transformational leadership is the set of leading behaviors that motivate followers by transforming them to identify with the common goal (Bass, 2005). It can motivate followers to perform beyond expectations. It has four components—idealized influence or charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Judge & Piccolo, 2004)—and has significant positive impacts on objective and subjective leadership outcomes through various mechanisms such as affects and social exchange (Ng, 2017). Its positive effects have been demonstrated at the individual, group, and organizational levels (e.g., Chen et al., 2019; Jensen et al., 2020; Murphy & Anderson, 2020; Sheehan et al., 2020). Furthermore, it has an augmentation effect over transactional leadership in terms of individual, team-level, and organizational-level performance, indicating its critical role in predicting leadership effectiveness (Birasnav, 2014; Wang et al., 2011).

Transactional leadership is the most common style of leadership in organizations (Young et al., 2021). Based on the exchange principle, transactional leaders motivate followers to meet the standards and expectations by providing rewards that can satisfy the followers. Three dimensions of transactional leadership are contingent reward (i.e., rewarding followers in exchange for meeting expectations), management by exception—active (i.e., monitoring follower behaviors to avoid the occurrence of issues), and management by exception—passive (i.e., solving occurred issues) (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978). When examined separately, three dimensions of transactional leadership can benefit and harm productivity through different mechanisms (Young et al., 2021). Transactional leadership was suggested to be most effective when used together with transformational leadership. While its predictive effects over transformational leadership are doubted, empirical research has shown that it has an augmentation effect over transformational leadership when predicting individual task performance (Wang et al., 2011).

2.5.2. Moral approaches – ethical, authentic, and servant leadership

Since the onset of the 21st century, morally focused leadership has emerged in the literature. Ethical leadership, authentic leadership, and servant leadership are the three representatives attracting the most

attention.

Ethical leadership. Ethical leadership specifically focuses on improving ethical standards and making ethical decisions in organizations. Ethical leadership involves demonstrating and promoting fair, moral, and ethical behaviors in organizations (Brown et al., 2005). Ethical leaders influence followers by acting ethically and fairly as role models, being concerned for people during interpersonal interactions, and rewarding ethical behaviors (Brown et al., 2005; Kalshoven et al., 2011). Ethical leadership is correlated with positive ethical-related and work-related outcomes. It is positively related to work attitudes and performance, as well as ethical and altruistic behaviors at both the individual level and group level (Bedi et al., 2016; Kuenzi et al., 2020; Walumbwa et al., 2017). The mechanism of its effects has been explained by social learning and social exchange theories (Banks et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2005; Ng & Feldman, 2015). Personal traits (e.g., agreeableness and moral identity) and contextual factors (e.g., ethical culture and climate, and follower characteristics) have been suggested as antecedents of ethical leadership (Den Hartog, 2015). Ethical leadership has incremental effects over transformational leadership and transactional leadership on some general criteria beyond purely ethics-related outcomes (Ng & Feldman, 2015). Although most research within this literature has focused on the positive side of ethical leadership, some studies have revealed a negative side to ethical leadership, such as followers finding it taxing to try meeting the leaders' high moral standards, or leaders' effectiveness being harmed as the result of an obsession for following all rules and procedures (Stouten et al., 2013). Other researchers have focused specifically on unethical leadership (Mitchell et al., 2023).

Authentic leadership. The core of authentic leadership is the display of authenticity in the managerial role. Authentic leaders know and value their "real self", and express their "real self" in personal actions and interpersonal interactions (Avolio et al., 2004). Although different definitions have been offered, authentic leadership encompasses four core components: self awareness (i.e., knowing oneself well), relational transparency (i.e., expressing the "real self" to others), balanced processing (i.e., having objective and balanced views), and internalized moral perspective (i.e., acting consistently with the internal moral standards and values) (Walumbwa et al., 2008). Authentic leaders influence followers by acting as role models and establishing reliable relationships. Empirical studies suggest that authentic leadership positively influences followers' work attitudes and performance (e.g., Banks et al., 2016; Laschinger et al., 2013; Leroy et al., 2012). Although meta-analyses showed weak incremental effects of authentic leadership over transformational leadership in terms of individual performance, it has a unique role in predicting group and organizational performance (Banks et al., 2016; Hoch et al., 2018).

Servant leadership. The term servant leadership was first raised by Greenleaf (1970), who described many tenets guiding studies on servant leadership until today. The most important principles of servant leadership are "going beyond one's self-interest" (Van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011, p. 1230), prioritizing the needs of immediate followers, and also serving the needs of stakeholders including followers, organizations, and the community. Although servant leadership was introduced in 1970, with few exceptions (e.g., Graham, 1991), academic research was slow to follow, as it was not until the 2000s that conceptualization and operationalization of servant leadership developed, and empirical studies at the individual level and firm level appeared. The literature on servant leadership has matured, signified by the appearance of several meta-analyses and review papers (e.g., Eva et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). Servant leadership is defined as a multidimensional construct with seven dimensions: emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, and behaving ethically (Liden et al., 2008). Servant leadership is theoretically and empirically supported to be beneficial for employees, groups, and organizations (Eva et al., 2019). However, it can be costly for the

leaders themselves as they can spend substantial time and energy providing individualized support to their followers (Li et al., 2023; C. Liao et al., 2021). Compared to authentic or ethical leadership, servant leadership is better at explaining incremental variance in outcomes beyond the variance explained by transformational leadership (Hoch et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2020). Thus, it is a unique and valid predictor of leadership outcomes.

2.5.3. Humble leadership

In the past decade, the idea of humble leadership has gained attention among organizational scholars. Humble leadership manifests humility by recognizing that there exists “something greater than the self” (Ou et al., 2014, p. 37), being aware of one’s own weaknesses, appreciating the followers’ strengths, and being open to feedback and new perspectives (Liu, 2016). Due to the theoretical similarity with authentic, servant, and ethical leadership, humble leadership was categorized as one of the moral-focused approaches (Kelemen et al., 2023). However, it is a distinct leadership style theoretically and empirically (Owens et al., 2013). The positive effects and the mechanisms of humble leadership for individual employees, teams, and organizations have been examined, while its “dark side” has also been understood from a leader-centric perspective (Chandler et al., 2023; Kelemen et al., 2023). However, the research on humble leadership has not captured the full essence of the theory (Chandler et al., 2023). Humility is conceptualized as either the leader’s disposition from a trait perspective (e.g., leader humility, Owens et al., 2013) or the leader’s behaviors (e.g., humble leader behaviors, Oc et al., 2015).

2.5.4. Destructive leadership – Abusive supervision

While the previously discussed leadership styles are primarily beneficial, destructive leadership has mainly harmful effects on individuals and organizations. Destructive leadership is defined as voluntary, repeated, and hostile behaviors targeted at followers to harm them and/or the organization (Krasikova et al., 2013; Schyns & Schilling, 2013). Destructive leadership is an overarching construct for many different types of harmful leadership, such as abusive supervision (i.e., leaders’ “sustained display of hostile verbal and nonverbal behaviors, excluding physical contact”; Tepper, 2000, p. 178), aversive leadership (i.e., leading through “threats, intimidation, and punishment”; Bligh et al., 2007, p. 530), petty tyranny (i.e., using “power and authority oppressively, capriciously, and perhaps vindictively”; Ashforth, 1997, p. 126) and so on. Among these specific types of destructive leadership, abusive supervision is the most representative one. Its adverse effects on followers, leaders themselves, customers, teams, and organizations have been revealed by empirical research (Fischer et al., 2021; Mackey et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2019). The adverse effects of abusive supervision are consistent with the effects of overall destructive leadership as reported in Mackey et al.’s (2021) meta-analysis. Although the vast majority of studies have been conducted at low to mid-levels of the organization, recent research has demonstrated the relevance of abusive supervision among CEOs (e.g., Yin et al., in press).

2.5.5. Trends and concerns with leadership styles

Transformational, transactional, ethical, authentic, servant, and humble leadership are often referred to as positive leadership, and destructive leadership, especially abusive supervision, is often regarded as negative leadership. Studies have focused on exploring the positive outcomes of positive leadership and the negative outcomes of negative leadership (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023). Recently, as more nuanced mechanisms and conditions of leadership styles are considered, the negative effects of “positive” leadership and the positive effects of “negative” leadership have been explored. For example, Peng and colleagues (2023) found that servant leadership can negatively influence followers’ well-being by inducing impression management, and Yu and Duffy’s (2021) results revealed that employees’ organizational citizenship behaviors can be enhanced by abusive supervision when a performance

promotion attribution is made.

Much of today’s leadership research focuses on leadership styles, and many argue that too many styles have been introduced into the literature. Because many of these styles overlap considerably, a concern raised by multiple authors is the proliferation of leadership approaches (Banks et al., 2018). Although the problem of new names for old constructs has been a problem raised regarding organizational research in general (Dunnette, 1966), it has been especially problematic with leadership research. For example, Dinh and colleagues (2014), in their review of leadership research, uncovered 66 different leadership constructs, and since then more new styles have been introduced (e.g., Gao et al., 2024). Dinh et al. (2014) noted substantial overlap in the theoretical focus across leadership approaches. In addition to conceptualization issues, measurement also raises concerns, which will be discussed in detail in the next section.

3. Methodological considerations

So far, we have briefly introduced the dominant topics in leadership research, providing a foundation to understand leadership research theoretically. Next, we shift to the methods involved in empirical leadership studies. Concerns and criticism of measures and analyses will be discussed, and recommendations will be provided.

3.1. Survey-based leadership measures

Criticism of survey-based leadership measures has been raised with moral approaches to leadership, including transformational, ethical, authentic, and servant leadership receiving the most attention (Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Fischer et al., in press; van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) identified numerous problems with transformational leadership theory and measurement. They contended that these problems were so serious “that leadership research and practice are better off abandoning the construct of charismatic-transformational leadership” (p. 2).

Fischer and Sitkin (2023) extended the critique of transformational leadership to include an additional seven positive and two negative leadership styles, arguing that “conflation” affects all of the leadership style approaches. Conflation is thought to be present when measures include intentions, behaviors, and effects. These authors argue that relations between these leadership measures and outcomes are plagued by causal indeterminacy because it is not clear if intentions, behaviors, or effects are the main causal determinants. Fischer and Sitkin contend that only behaviors should be included in measures. Although this recommendation overlaps with Hansbrough and colleagues’ (2021) findings that episodic items generally performed better than semantic items in explaining outcomes, it may be difficult to identify behaviors that capture some components of a construct. For example, it is likely difficult to develop behavioral items that capture integrity that generalizes to all followers. In essence, respondents have not always been exposed to all behaviors making up the domain of a construct. This is where asking about intent can be useful. For example, Liden and Maslyn (1998) asked, “My manager *would* defend me in front of others (italics added),” instead of “My manager defends me in front of others,” because such a situation may not have occurred for all respondents. Good scales capture the full domain of the construct, meaning that items are needed to cover the entire domain. The domain is based on theory and, in especially well-designed scale development efforts, includes the collection of qualitative data. For example, critical incident interviews may be used to ascertain whether existing theory fully captures the domain of the construct (Liden & Maslyn, 1998).

The conflation problem is most likely to be serious when leadership and its outcomes are measured from the same source. Some meta-analysts, such as Dulebohn et al. (2012), have noted that population relationships tend to be higher with same source data (e.g., attitudinal outcomes) than with multiple source data, suggesting the strong

possibility of same source common method variance bias. However, when outcomes are assessed with objective data, such as financial performance, conflation is even less problematic, casting such strong recommendations, for example, that transformational leadership research be abandoned (van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013) or that positive leadership suffers from a “fatal” flaw (Fischer et al., *in press*) as extreme and inappropriate. This is because the critics ignore studies that have objective financial data as outcomes. For example, studies on transformational (Barling et al., 1996; Christensen-Salem et al., 2023) and servant leadership (Giolito et al., 2021; Peterson, 2012) revealed that these leadership styles are positively correlated with objective financial data. Given that the outcomes are not based on respondent perceptions, these findings are not due to general positive affect. So, even though the leadership measures may include items assessing intent and effects, the results demonstrate that these positive leadership styles relate to organizational financial performance.

In sum, critics of leadership styles theories and measures have addressed some important concerns. Certainly, measures should be based as much on behaviors as possible. There is also a need to better assess redundancy across leadership measures and to consider merging some approaches. An alternative to specific leadership styles is to identify profiles of behaviors that vary based on situations and follower needs. Ironically, this approach returns us to the behavioral approach to leadership developed at Ohio State during the 1950s and refined with the introduction of path-goal theory in the 1970s. We discuss the profiles of behavior approach in a section below.

3.2. Levels of analysis

By its nature, traditional leadership is a multi-level phenomenon involving interactions between an individual leader and multiple followers working in the same group, which, along with other work groups, is embedded within an organization (Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008). To ensure comprehensiveness and adequacy in leadership theories and research, it is crucial for researchers to consider and explicitly specify the appropriate level or levels (e.g., within-person, between-person, dyadic, group, or organization) relevant to their research questions. A fundamental consensus among leadership scholars is that the theory building (i.e., hypotheses, frameworks, or models) and testing (i.e., measurement, data analysis, and inference drawing) must maintain consistency in terms of levels of analysis (e.g., Schriesheim et al., 2001; Yammarino et al., 2005; Yammarino & Dansereau, 2008). By reviewing the extant literature on leadership, we found that levels of analysis, ranked from most to least frequent, are between-person, group, organization, dyad, and within-person (Kelemen et al., 2020; Yammarino et al., 2005). Each of them will be briefly described in the following sections.

3.2.1. Between-person level

Leadership in organizations can be conceptualized and tested at the between-person level in which the focus is on an individual leader or follower. The example research questions include how leaders' personal traits or experiences are related to their leadership behaviors or effectiveness (e.g., Martin et al., 2016; W. Wang et al., 2023) and how followers' work-related attitudes and performance are influenced by their leaders' personal traits or behaviors (e.g., Soral et al., 2022). General individual differences involved in the leadership process are of interest here. Recently, scholars have begun to investigate leadership at the between-person level from a more nuanced perspective: the inconsistency or variability of leadership behaviors. For instance, research has shown that leaders who display both positive and negative leadership behaviors can induce detrimental impacts on followers (Chénard-Poirier et al., 2022; Suurd Ralph & Barling, 2023). Furthermore, Matta et al. (2017) introduced the concept of justice variability representing between-person differences in the consistency of leader fairness treatment toward their employees over time. Findings from empirical studies

suggest that employees who are sometimes treated fairly and at other times unfairly by their leaders (i.e., high justice variability) experience more distress than those who are consistently treated unfairly (Matta et al., 2017, 2020).

To advance this research area, future studies can consider investigating the effects of inconsistency in different leadership styles, such as empowering or ethical leadership. While dominant between-person leadership research investigates leaders' general pattern of behaviors with an implicit assumption that leaders tend to behave consistently across various situations, the emerging within-person approach to leadership challenges this view by highlighting the dynamics and variability of leadership behaviors over time (e.g., Breevaart et al., 2014; Z. Liao et al., 2021; Song et al., 2023). This perspective lays the theoretical foundation for investigating the between-person differences in the consistency or variability of certain leadership behaviors over time.

3.2.2. Group level

Leadership is frequently theorized and tested at the group level. Traditional formal work groups generally consist of a formally assigned leader and multiple direct reports who are interdependent. Research questions, in this case, generally are about how the leader impacts the work group as a whole. For example, how and why specific leadership approaches influence team innovation and creativity (e.g., Dionne et al., 2010; Hu et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2023). At the group level, there are two unique perspectives distinct from mainstream research: differentiated leadership and shared leadership. Differentiated leadership refers to a situation where leaders exhibit varying leadership behaviors toward individuals within a group (Henderson et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2010). The most frequently studied topic in this literature is leader-member exchange differentiation (e.g., Han et al., 2021; Seo et al., 2018), and findings are mixed in terms of whether LMX differentiation is beneficial or detrimental to group performance (Yu et al., 2018).

Shared leadership, capitalizing on the nature of contemporary organizational structure, embraces the idea that leadership is an emergent and dynamic team phenomenon in which multiple team members are allowed to take on leadership roles to satisfy the group's needs (Morgeson et al., 2010). Research has illustrated the positive impact of shared leadership within teams, demonstrating that it can lead to better team outcomes compared to the traditional hierarchical leadership structures (for a review, see Wang et al., 2014). We will provide more elaboration on these two perspectives in the section of future research directions.

3.2.3. Organizational level

Many studies investigate leadership at the organizational level, specifically looking at how organizational outcomes are impacted by leadership influence from higher management ranks. The focus, in this case, is on the collective of individuals who are interdependent based on shared work environments and organizational goals (Yammarino et al., 2005). Given the common work situation (e.g., the leadership style of the CEO), employees working in the same organization are likely to show some similarities in their attitudes and behaviors, which can collectively impact organizational outcomes. For instance, research has demonstrated the positive effects of CEO transformational leadership (Chen et al., 2019) and servant leadership (Peterson et al., 2012) on organizational performance. Research has also appeared on the negative effects of CEO abusive leadership (Yin et al., *in press*).

3.2.4. Dyadic level

Some studies investigate leadership by focusing on leader–follower dyads or interpersonal relationships, independent of the broader work group context (e.g., Markham et al., 2010; Maslyn & Uhl-Bien, 2001). This aligns with the core principles of LMX theory discussed in the previous section, which posits that LMX captures the vertical dyadic relationship between an individual leader and an individual follower (Dansereau et al., 1975; Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen & Scandura,

Table 1
Future Research Directions in Leadership.

| Perspectives | Descriptions | Example research questions |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Leadership and Authority/Power | This perspective explores the interplay between positional and personal power in leadership, highlighting the need for comprehensive understanding of how different power dynamics affect leadership effectiveness. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does the combined use of positional and personal power influence leader effectiveness in different organizational contexts? • How can leaders balance positional and personal power to enhance employees' and organizational outcomes? • What are the effects of power dynamics on leader-follower relationships in various hierarchical levels? |
| Profiles of leadership behaviors | Focuses on integrating various behavioral approaches to leadership, proposing a merger of existing frameworks to better understand and categorize leader behaviors and their effects on followers. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the implications of integrating different leadership behaviors for follower outcomes? • How do behavioral profiles from different leadership styles impact employee motivation and performance? • How do leaders alter the profiles they use for different followers and changing situations? • What are the benefits of using a behavior-based approach compared to traditional leadership styles? |
| Follower-centered approaches | Emphasizes the role of followers as active participants in leadership, examining how followers impact leaders and shape leadership outcomes. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under what conditions are followers more likely to influence leaders' behaviors and decisions effectively? • What are the mechanisms through which followers' behaviors impact leaders' emotional, cognitive states, and behavioral decisions? • How can leaders leverage follower feedback to enhance their own leadership effectiveness? |
| Shared leadership | Investigates when leadership roles are distributed among team members, highlighting their impact on team performance and the theoretical that explain this impact. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do different configurations of shared leadership within teams impact team performance and member satisfaction? • What are the effects of shared leadership on individual employees' and dyads' outcomes? • What factors contribute to the successful implementation of shared leadership in diverse organizational contexts? |
| <i>Continue</i> | | |
| Leader-centric approach | Examines the impact of leadership on leaders themselves, including their well-being, performance, and the effects of personal life on their leadership outcomes. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do positive and negative leadership behaviors affect leaders' well-being and performance over time? • What are the spillover effects of leaders' personal life experiences on their work-related outcomes, leadership style and effectiveness? • How can organizations support leaders to mitigate the negative impacts of leadership stress? |
| Leadership differentiation | Explores the varying degrees of leadership behavior displayed by leaders toward different followers, including the implications of LMX differentiation and other forms of leadership differentiation. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How does differentiation in leadership behaviors, such as servant leadership and i-deals differentiation, affect followers with different needs and competencies? • How does leader differentiation in behaviors influence team dynamics and overall performance via LMX differentiation? • What are the long-term effects of leadership differentiation on follower engagement and satisfaction? |
| Leadership in the digital age | Focuses on the impact of new technologies and digital transformations on leadership theories and practices in terms of leader emergence, effectiveness, and well-being. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do new technologies and hybrid work models affect leadership effectiveness and team dynamics via leader-follower communication and relationship-building? • What are the most effective combination of leader traits and behaviors for leading virtual teams? • What are the implications of artificial intelligence on leadership and followership in both the short and long run? |

1987). However, the LMX literature has been criticized for being “fundamentally uninformative about the LMX process” due to a scarcity of studies employing a dyadic level of analysis approach (Gooty et al., 2012; Schriesheim et al., 2001, p. 525). A significant obstacle in conducting dyadic level analysis is the challenge of collecting data from both leaders and followers. Nevertheless, future research should aim to overcome these practical issues and ensure that theory construction and testing are well-aligned in leadership studies.

3.2.5. Within-person level

In recent years, a notable trend in leadership literature involves investigating leadership at the within-person level (i.e., daily leadership behaviors, Kelemen et al., 2020). This research suggests that leadership is a dynamic phenomenon that can vary from day to day within the same leader—for instance, a leader might exhibit more abusive supervisory behaviors on some days than others (e.g., Vogel & Mitchell, 2017). This challenges the traditional view that focuses on leaders' general behavioral patterns across different individuals (e.g., some leaders generally enact more abusive supervision behaviors than others; Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007). Employing experience sampling methods (Gabriel et al., 2019), within-person leadership studies examine how leadership is impacted by daily factors (e.g., leaders' sleep; Barnes et al., 2015) and

affects followers' daily experiences, such as emotions (Lennard et al., 2022) and job satisfaction (A.-C. Wang et al., 2023). This approach advances the leadership field by complementing the nomological framework of various leadership behaviors with state-like components and providing a deeper look into the short-term processes of leadership (McCormick et al., 2020).

While our discussion has focused on single-level studies of leadership, many researchers have expanded their analysis to include the examination of multi-level or cross-level effects. Although we do not provide a detailed analysis of multi-level leadership research here, we recommend that interested readers consult Kozlowski and Klein (2000) for an in-depth discussion on multilevel modeling. Further, reviews by DeChurch et al., (2010), Dionne et al. (2014), and Yammarino et al. (2005) offer comprehensive insights into the complexities of levels of analysis within leadership literature. This knowledge is crucial for enhancing both theory building and testing across all aspects of the leadership field. We encourage future research to continue advancing leadership literature by incorporating multiple levels of analysis and ensuring alignment among theory formulation, measurement, data analysis, and inference drawing.

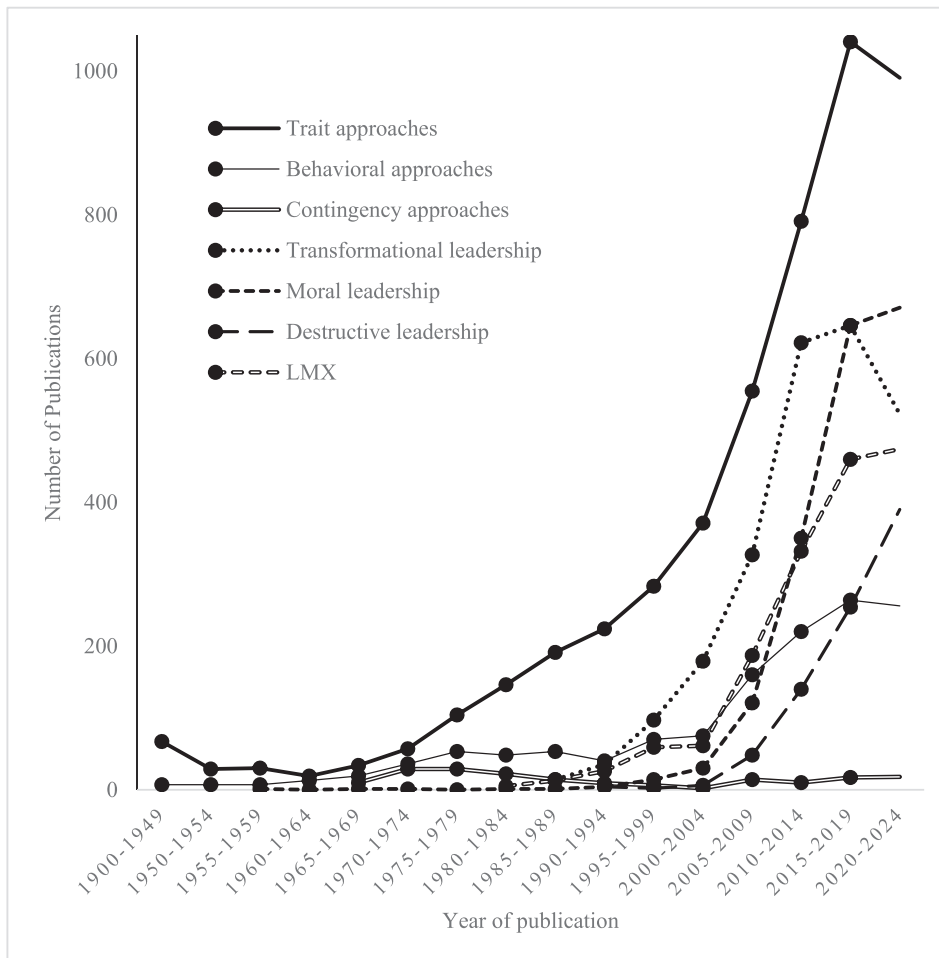


Fig. 1. Trend of publications on dominant leadership approaches.

4. Future directions of leadership research

Our focus in the following section is the introduction of the trends emergent in recent years and promising future research directions, which are summarized in Table 1. Some of these directions, such as profiles of behaviors and a focus on followers/followership address criticisms leveled against extant leadership research (e.g., Fischer & Sitkin, 2023; Haslam et al., 2024). To what extent, though, will researchers actively work to correct the problems raised versus ignoring the advice and perpetuating the status quo? For example, although van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013) advocated the abandonment of transformational leadership, we show in Fig. 1 that although the exponential increase in transformational leadership has subsided, there have still been hundreds of articles on transformational leadership published since 2014. And since Dunnette (1966) identified the problem of introducing new names for existing constructs to be counter to the principle of parsimony in scientific research, construct proliferation has become an increasingly serious problem. To what extent will researchers be willing to face the challenge of developing approaches to studying leadership that address criticism as opposed to clinging to approaches with which they are comfortable despite questionable scientific progress that can be made doing so?

4.1. Leadership and authority/power

Power is an essential component of leadership and leaders influence their followers through either positional power, personal power, or a combination of both (Hollander & Offermann, 1990; Pierro et al., 2013). Therefore, understanding how leaders utilize power is crucial for a comprehensive grasp of leadership dynamics. However, the comprehensive exploration of power dynamics has been somewhat neglected in leadership literature, leading to gaps in understanding various leadership approaches. For instance, some constructive leadership approaches have been criticized for potentially diminishing employee performance because followers might feel overly entitled when continuously treated nicely by their leaders (e.g., humble leadership; Qin et al., 2020). This issue may be mitigated when leaders effectively leverage their legitimate authority or position power. To the other extreme, the detrimental effects of abusive supervisors, who overuse their position power, may be lessened if these leaders also demonstrate expert power or personal charisma (Fischer et al., 2021). Indeed, recent research in organization management by Bernacchio and Foss (2024) suggests that the combined use of position and personal powers can significantly enhance management effectiveness. Through this discussion, we aim to inspire future leadership studies to consider the joint effects of position and personal power, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of how

different power dynamics influence leadership effectiveness.

4.2. Profiles of behaviors

One way to address the deficiencies of survey-based leadership measures is to focus on leader behaviors. Looking back at the behavioral approaches, Yukl's (2012) four leadership behavior dimensions, including task, relationship, change, and external behaviors, provide a good starting framework for behavior-focused leadership study.

We contend that some of the behaviors included in approaches that followed the Ohio State research can be integrated within Yukl's framework. Specifically, many of the behaviors included in transformational, ethical, authentic, and servant leadership fit into the categories identified by Yukl (2012). The idea is to identify groupings of behaviors appropriate for different situations and at the same time tailored to the specific needs of each follower. Such an approach extends beyond the more limited profiles examined by Poetz and Volmer (2024), who included only transformational and transactional behaviors in the profiles that they examined in a daily diary study.

Furthermore, we contend that path-goal theory can be merged with DeRue et al.'s (2011) and Yukl's (2012) taxonomies of leader behaviors. We further advocate that behaviors from other leadership approaches, such as servant and ethical, can be included in leaders' repertoire of behaviors that can be used in guiding followers. Rather than practicing one specific leadership style, leaders tailor their treatment of each follower by selectively choosing appropriate behaviors. For example, one follower might respond best to high levels of structure and control whereas empowerment may be best for another follower.

Although LMX research also operates at a dyadic level and also involves differentiation between followers, it is assumed that all high and all low LMX relationships are essentially the same. We reason that there are many forms that a high-quality relationship might take. Similarly, as suggested by Liden and colleagues (1997), there are many types of low quality LMX relationships. Some are relatively benign in that the leader simply does not fulfill the needs of the follower. However, other low quality LMX relationships may be hostile and involve the leader and follower engaging in behaviors designed to sabotage the best interests of the other. We recommend research that explores the wide range of ways in which LMX relationships can be low or high in quality and to assess the implications for outcomes.

4.3. Calling back the role of followers in leadership

Nearly four decades ago, Meindl and colleagues (1985) in their classic article on the "romance of leadership" discussed the obsession with the importance of leaders in determining important outcomes. Yet, despite the attention that this article has received (over 3000 Google Scholar citations), leadership research continues to focus on the leader and the leader's characteristics and behaviors, at the expense of viewing leadership as a "group process" that is "grounded in relationships and connections" and the critical role that followers play in accomplishing objectives (Haslam et al., 2024, p. 10). Haslam and colleagues remind us of two fundamental aspects that are inherent in the definition of leadership: (1) leadership is rooted in the social interactions and relationships between leaders and their followers; (2) the effectiveness of leadership is not demonstrated by the leaders' traits or behaviors, but by the actions or changes of their followers. Indeed, Bass (1990) emphasized that the legitimacy of leadership depends on whether followers perceive and accept corresponding influence. Put simply, leadership cannot exist without followership (Baker, 2007; Bastardo & Van Vugt, 2019). However, the vast majority of the existing research on leadership portrays leaders as the primary influencers and followers as passive,

obedient, and deferential recipients (Haslam et al., 2024; Oc & Bashshur, 2013; Uhl-Bien et al., 2014). At most, some studies view followers as moderators of leader influence, investigating how follower factors can facilitate or neutralize the effectiveness of leadership (e.g., Grant et al., 2011; Matthews et al., 2021). This is in accordance with leadership perspectives such as substitutes for leadership (Kerr & Jermier, 1978) and implicit leadership theories (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). Nevertheless, these approaches do not recognize followers as active actors in the leadership process. It is evident that the role of followers has been underappreciated in leadership literature to date. As Haslam et al. (2024) have pointed out, the notion that "leadership is all about leaders" remains a prevalent "zombie leadership" (i.e., outdated and debunked, yet stubbornly persistent idea, p. 2). They asserted that "leadership is proved by followership and necessarily requires us to study and understand followers" (p. 2). This is important because overlooking or undermining the role of followers in leadership may lead us to pursue universal and rigid approaches of leadership and prevent us from learning the dynamics and complexities inherent in the leadership process (Oc et al., 2023). To enhance the understanding of followers' roles in leadership, below we address follower-centered approaches to leadership (i.e., where followers are seen as the causal agents for leadership outcomes) and shared leadership (i.e., where followers themselves take the leadership role).

4.3.1. Follower-centered approaches to leadership

Follower-centered approaches to leadership reverse traditional causality in leader-follower behavioral relationships by emphasizing how followers, serving as partners and co-leaders in the leadership construction process (Uhl-Bien et al., 2014), impact leaders and shape leadership outcomes (Dinh et al., 2014). This shift towards focusing on followers has inspired a wave of research dedicated to exploring the relation between follower-related factors and leadership outcomes (Jiang et al., 2021; Oc & Bashshur, 2013; for a review, see Oc et al., 2023).

Specifically, a qualitative study conducted by Gesang and Süß (2021) that included interviews with 21 leaders, demonstrated that followers' behavior impacts leaders' emotions, attitudes, and behaviors, as well as their occupational efforts. Moreover, this finding has been confirmed by quantitative empirical studies. For instance, research on destructive leadership has shown that followers' personal characteristics and performance are related to leaders' affect and destructive leadership behaviors (Gauglitz & Schyns, 2024; Güntner et al., 2021; Mackey, 2021; Shen et al., 2021; Tepper et al., 2011). In the realm of constructive leadership, Van Dierendonck and Dijkstra (2012) revealed that followers' self-determination is positively related to empowering leadership, suggesting that leaders are more likely to delegate power to followers who demonstrate initiative and self-regulation. Likewise, Tee and colleagues (2013) identified a positive relationship between followers' positive affect and leaders' positive affect, which in turn, positively influenced leaders' task performance, suggesting the notion that happy followers lead to happy leaders. To further emphasize followers' initiatives in leadership, Gajendran et al. (2022) introduced a new concept of "managing your boss" described as "employees taking the initiative to understand their managers' goals, needs, and working styles and adapt their job priorities and actions accordingly" (p. 1).

While this research greatly enhances our understanding of the crucial role of followers in leadership, we believe that further investigation into this area could be highly beneficial, particularly by examining the boundary conditions of the followership effects. For instance, it would be insightful to explore under what conditions (e.g., leaders' and followers' personal characteristics and contextual factors) followers are more or less likely to influence leaders successfully.

4.3.2. Shared leadership

A situation that particularly emphasizes the importance of followers' roles is shared leadership,³ defined as "an emergent and dynamic team phenomenon whereby leadership roles and influence are distributed among team members" (D'Innocenzo et al., 2016, p. 1968). Because leadership behaviors are not confined to individuals in managerial positions, they can also be enacted by non-managerial employees (Morgeson et al., 2010). In a work group that adopts shared leadership, followers themselves assume leadership roles and influence each other according to the needs of their group. Specifically, individuals who take on leadership roles provide direction, motivation, and support to their coworkers, whereas "follower" roles are typically seen as members who receive this influence (DeRue, 2011).

Over the years, numerous studies have shown the positive effects of implementing shared leadership, indicating that it leads to greater team-level performance benefits compared to traditional hierarchical leadership structures (e.g., Carson et al., 2007; Ensley et al., 2006; Gupta et al., 2010; see D'Innocenzo et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2014 for reviews). It should be noted that the operationalization of shared leadership in empirical research varies across studies, depending on the theoretical perspectives adopted. Specifically, most empirical studies employ aggregation theories and rationale in developing hypotheses (e.g., Ensley et al., 2006; Gupta et al., 2010). These theories shift the focus of leadership from a single external individual (i.e., the formally assigned leader) to the collective group of members as an undifferentiated whole. In contrast, based on earlier conceptual work (e.g., Seibert et al., 2003), several studies utilize social network approaches to study shared leadership (e.g., Carson et al., 2007; Chamberlin et al., 2024), modeling features such as the density (Mathieu et al., 2015) or centralization (Small & Rentsch, 2010) of the network of leadership influence among interconnected team members. This approach offers a more nuanced perspective on shared leadership by incorporating the reciprocal and recursive influence processes that occur among multiple team members.

Given the growing popularity of flatter organizational structures and self-managing organizations in contemporary businesses (Maurer et al., 2023), shared leadership deserves more attention from academic researchers. We encourage future research to conduct more comprehensive studies to further enrich the literature on shared leadership. For example, future investigations could examine how shared leadership impacts individual employees and dyads by integrating multi-level modeling with social network approaches. Additionally, because shared leadership is inherently a team-level phenomenon, examining the effects of various shared leadership configurations within teams (i.e., how leadership roles are distributed among team members) can offer a more detailed understanding of how shared leadership functions (Chamberlin et al., 2024).

4.4. Leader-centric approaches to leadership

Emerging literature adopting a leader-centric perspective emphasizes the importance of considering how leaders themselves are influenced in the process of leadership. This perspective can be explored through two lenses. The first lens is looking at how leadership, as an antecedent, impacts leaders themselves regarding their well-being and performance. For instance, researchers have observed that certain positive leadership behaviors (e.g., transformational, ethical, fair, and servant leadership), while beneficial to followers, can exact a toll on leaders' well-being (e.g., increased psychological strain and turnover intentions) and deteriorate their subsequent leadership performance (e.

³ In the literature, several terms such as distributed leadership, collective leadership, team leadership, and informal leadership are often used interchangeably with shared leadership. All of them describe the phenomenon where leadership emerges from and is distributed among team members (D'Innocenzo et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2014).

g., increased laissez-faire behavior) because engaging in such behaviors deplete leaders' emotional and cognitive resources and elicit role conflicts (Jia et al., 2024; Johnson et al., 2014; Li et al., 2023; C. Liao et al., 2021; Lin et al., 2016). Furthermore, research on abusive supervision has demonstrated that such behavior is sometimes followed by subsequent positive leadership behaviors. This effect can emerge as leaders feel guilty or recognize their moral deficiencies after engaging in abusive behaviors (Liao et al., 2018; McClean et al., 2021), or as a strategy to conserve their personal resources (Qin et al., 2018). This research allows for a more comprehensive understanding of leadership effects by complementing studies that focus solely on followers' or work units' outcomes.

Another lens investigating leadership from a leader-centric perspective is studying how leadership, as an outcome, is impacted by leaders' personal lives outside of work. Interest in this lens is increasing and recent studies have demonstrated that leaders' private life experiences have substantial impacts on their leadership outcomes (Lin et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2024; Ogbonnaya et al., 2024; Van Doorn et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2024). Drawing from a more nuanced perspective, Hu and colleagues (in press) found that leaders who receive gratitude from their family members at home are more likely to help and empower their followers at work. This research echoes the upcoming special issue in the *Journal of Business Research*—Life Events of Strategic Leaders: Spillovers in the Professional Domain—calling for impactful research on how leaders' experiences in life impact their leadership outcomes at work.

Taken together, leadership research from the leader-centric perspective suggests (1) that the beneficial effects of positive leadership and detrimental effects of destructive leadership may not extend uniformly across followers and leaders, and (2) that it is important to consider the bidirectional causality relationship between leaders' experiences in non-work domain and performance in work domain because leaders are complete individuals with both non-work and work lives. To further extend this literature, future research can pay more attention to the spillover effects of leadership on leaders' non-work outcomes (e.g., Lanaj et al., 2021; Song et al., 2023). For example, how are leadership behaviors associated with leaders' work-family enrichment, work-family conflict, sleep quality, eating or drinking behaviors? It is also promising to track how leaders' leadership styles evolve in response to significant life changes (e.g., marriage, parenthood, bereavement, breakup, employment gaps, or immigration) through a longitudinal approach (e.g., Den Hartog & De Hoogh, 2024; Epitropaki & Avramidis, 2024).

4.5. Leadership differentiation

Another emerging yet understudied area in leadership research is leadership differentiation, which refers to situations when a leader displays varying degrees of leadership behavior toward different group members (Wu et al., 2010). For example, leaders establish differential relationships among their followers, developing high quality exchange relationships with some employees and low-quality relationships with others (i.e., LMX differentiation; Henderson et al., 2009). Given that the LMX model was originally developed to explain how leaders' differential treatment of various subordinates within a work group affects group dynamics (Dienesch & Liden, 1986; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), numerous studies have explored the consequences of LMX differentiation (e.g., Buengeler et al., 2021; Liden et al., 2006; Martin et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2022) and the literature demonstrates both beneficial and detrimental effects (Yu et al., 2018). To explain these mixed effects, researchers have explored the boundary conditions, including the bases of LMX differentiation, or the extent to which a leader develops differential exchange relationships with followers based on followers' performance or personal liking (Chen et al., 2018; Han et al., 2021; Matta & Van Dyne, 2020), and the configuration of LMX differentiation within the group (Seo et al., 2018). Additionally, a few studies have investigated the differentiation of some specific leadership behaviors including

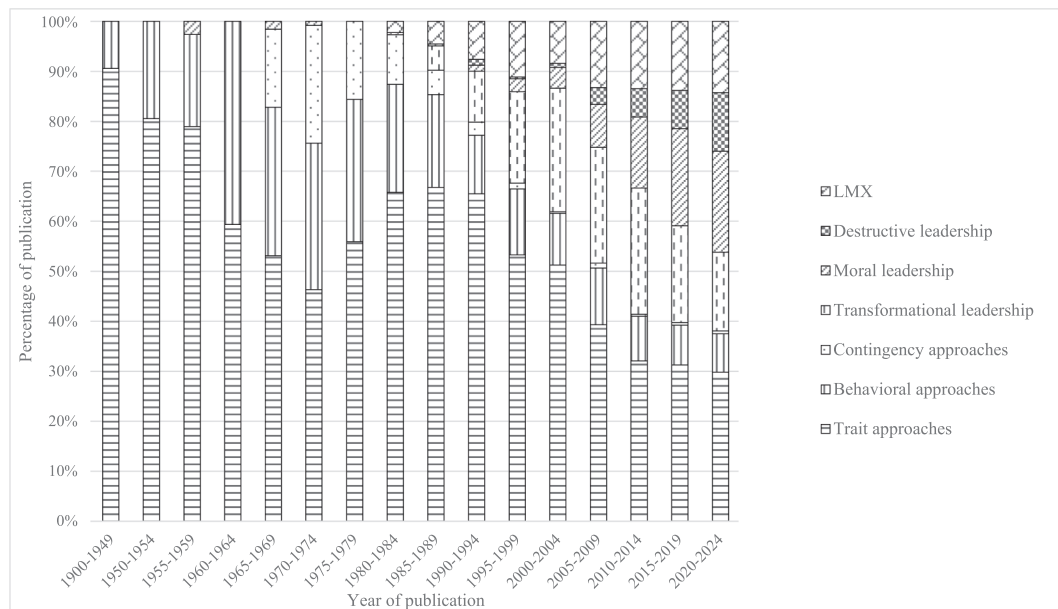


Fig. 2. Percentages of publications on dominant leadership approaches during different time periods.

transformational leadership (Bormann & Diebig, 2021; Wu et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2015), interactional justice (He et al., 2017), authoritarian leadership (Karakitapoğlu-Aygün et al., 2023), and abusive supervision (Ogunfowora et al., 2021).

Future research can further enrich the literature by exploring differentiation in other leadership behaviors beyond those already mentioned, such as differentiation in servant leadership. Given the core principle of servant leadership, which emphasizes prioritizing the needs and growth of followers (Greenleaf, 1977), it is plausible that servant leaders may tailor their behaviors to accommodate the varying needs, competencies, and career goals of different followers. For instance, leaders might pay more attention and provide greater support to followers who are less competent or have more ambitious career goals. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, followers' personal characteristics and behaviors can influence how leaders behave. This suggests that leaders might display varying levels of leadership behavior in response to the diverse attributes and behaviors among followers. In summary, exploring other forms of leadership differentiation that have not yet been studied holds promise and could yield meaningful insights into the literature on leadership differentiation.

4.6. Leadership in the digital age

The large body of leadership theories and studies is positioned in the traditional organizational context with traditional work styles, where leaders have frequent in-person interactions with followers. However, the world has changed considerably, especially after the pandemic. With the development of advanced and new technologies (e.g., video conference, machine learning, big data, and artificial intelligence), the wide application of hybrid and remote work styles, and the spreading of the gig economy and E-business, leaders are facing more complex, special, flexible, and non-traditional situations when performing their leadership roles. In the digital world, the leader–follower interactions are not necessarily face-to-face; the needs of employees differ; there are more tools and technologies that leaders can use to influence followers and facilitate teamwork; and new skills, knowledge, and innovative

strategies are needed to be a good leader (op't Roodt et al., 2024). The change in the workplace and business brings many new questions to the leadership domain, and it is unsure whether traditional leadership theories and studies can explain and provide insights into the leadership challenges in the digital era.

The discussion of leadership in virtual teams emerged in 2000 when Avolio and his colleagues raised the construct of e-leadership, which refers to leaders influencing followers through advanced information technologies (e.g., e-mail systems, knowledge management systems, and collaborative customer relationship systems; Avolio et al., 2000). The mutual effects of communication technologies and leadership and the effects of traditional leadership styles in virtual contexts have been explored (Purvanova & Bono, 2009). However, e-leadership has not gained much attention. Recently, digital leadership was proposed to include various topics of leadership in the digital era, such as the use of social media in leadership, leadership in virtual contexts, applications of technologies in leadership, and new methodologies of studying leadership (Banks et al., 2022). Future studies are expected to provide more comprehensive and reliable answers to the following questions. What are the significant changes in the workplace that require examination in leadership research? Can traditional leadership concepts and theories apply to leadership in the digital age? What are the most effective combinations of leadership traits and behaviors in virtual and hybrid teams? How to effectively influence, motivate, organize, and control remote and hybrid employees and teams? How do new technologies (e.g., artificial intelligence) improve or impede leader effectiveness in the short and long terms? What are the impacts of technologies on leaders' well-being? In addition, how can technologies facilitate leaders' selection, training, and assessment? In the digital age, both leadership practitioners and researchers need to understand the world and recognize the challenges and opportunities it presents.

5. Conclusion

We summarized the key topics in leadership research over the past century, including trait, behavioral, contingency, and relational

approaches, and leadership styles. To illustrate trends in leadership research, we created Fig. 1, which is based on our search of publications on the PsycINFO database from 1900 to 2024⁴. In Fig. 2 we present the relative “market share” of these dominant approaches to leadership in each 5-year period. While the figures do not capture all topics and perspectives existing in leadership literature, the overall trend of leadership research is clear, especially over the past two decades—a rapidly growing body of research and increasing diversity in topics. In terms of methods, concerns regarding measurement and levels of analysis were discussed. Finally, we recommended that, in addition to expanding upon the historically dominant approaches, future leadership studies should pay more attention to the role of power, profiles of behaviors, the role of followers, leader-centric perspectives, leadership differentiation, and digital leadership. We hope our article can inspire future leadership research that embraces both the wisdom from the past and innovative insights facing the future.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Robert C. Liden: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Xing Wang:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Yue Wang:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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⁴ For publications on trait approaches, we searched (“trait” OR “attributes” OR “personality” OR “gender” OR “sex” OR “implicit theory” OR “implicit leadership theory” OR “implicit theories” OR “attribution theory” OR “Dispositional theories” OR “trait theories” OR “leadership skills” OR “leadership competence” OR “leader motive profile theory”) in abstract and title AND (Leadership OR leader OR supervisor OR manager) in title. For publications on behavioral approaches, we searched (“initiating structure” OR consideration OR “employee-centered behaviors” OR “production-centered behaviors” OR “behavioral approach” OR “task oriented leading behavior” OR “task oriented behavior” OR “task behaviors” OR “task oriented leadership” OR “relation oriented leading behavior” OR “relation oriented leadership” OR “relationship behaviors” OR “relationship leading behaviors” OR “change oriented leading behavior” OR “change oriented leading” OR “change oriented leadership” OR “passive leading behavior” OR “passive leadership” OR “passive behavior” OR “external behavior” OR “external leading behavior”) in abstract and title AND (Leadership OR leader OR supervisor OR manager) in title. For publications on contingency approaches, we searched (“Fiedler’s contingency” OR “contingency theory” OR “contingency model” OR “path-goal theory”) in title and abstract AND (leadership OR leader OR supervisor OR manager) in title. For publications on transformational leadership, we searched “transformational leadership” in title and abstract. For publications on Moral leadership, we searched (“Servant leadership” OR “ethical leadership” OR “authentic leadership” OR “moral leadership”) in title and abstract. For publications on destructive leadership, we searched (“Destructive Leadership” OR “unethical leadership” OR “Abusive Supervision” OR “aversive leadership” OR “corrupt leadership” OR “toxic leadership” OR “derailed leadership” OR “despotic leadership” OR “evil leadership” OR “exploitative leadership” OR “insincere leadership” OR “insular leadership” OR “leader bullying” OR “leader exclusion” OR “leader incivility” OR “leader undermining” OR “negative leadership” OR “petty tyranny” OR “tyrannical leadership” OR “Pseudo-Transformational Leadership” OR “Personalized Charismatic Leadership”) in title and abstract. For publications in LMX, we searched (LMX OR “leader-member exchange”) in title and abstract.

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