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Servant Leadership in the Last Decade: A Systematic Review

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Abstract

As the world grapples with the effects of the Corona Virus pandemic, the importance of leadership at all levels of an organization has been brought into the sharp focus. Servant leadership is a philosophy that advocates that the primary focus of leaders is to serve their followers, and such a philosophy in theory could be important during these troubling times. Using the Systematic Quantitative Assessment Technique, this study conducted a systematic review of 179 servant leadership (SL) articles published over the last decade (2010–2019) to provide insight as to the efficacy of this leadership style in inspiring followers to give their best efforts. Besides this primary objective, this review also sought to understand the time distribution, geographic distribution, types and data collection methods of these SL articles. Review of empirical evidence revealed that SL was very effective in inspiring followers to go above and beyond in helping to achieve an organization's objectives. The review also revealed that over the last decade, interest in SL has grown from year to year, with most of the research in Asia and North America. Furthermore, most SL research has been empirical in nature, with surveys being the favoured means of data collection. There has been a dearth of qualitative studies in extant SL scholarship, and this represents a significant gap which future researchers should endeavour to address.

Keywords: servant leadership, Systematic Quantitative Assessment Technique, review.

1. Introduction

The year 2020 will forever be remembered as the year of the global Corona Virus pandemic. The virus has brought into the sharp focus the importance of leadership at all levels of an organization, be it micro, meso or macro, particularly regarding how heads of families, business organizations and even countries have chosen to deal with this pandemic. Some leaders have been ultra-cautious (King Salman of Saudi Arabia closed all its borders as early as in March to limit the spread of the virus within the Kingdom [Sorace, 2020]), others have been *laissez-faire* (Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro dismissed the virus as a “little flu” encouraging businesses to open despite the fact that Brazil has one of the highest rates of infections worldwide [Walsh et al., 2020]), whilst the reaction of others has fallen somewhere between these two extreme positions. Regardless of the approach taken, the universal lesson has been the reinforcement of the notion that leadership style is absolutely critical if an organization is to achieve its aim and objectives.

This paper posits that servant leadership is the ideal leadership style to deal with all organizational problems, be they as monumental as the current Corona Virus pandemic or as mundane as ensuring employees are comfortable with the work environment in terms of having ergonomic furniture and sufficient lighting. The reason for this premise is because of what servant leadership stands for, service to all stakeholders. In the words of Robert K. Greenleaf, the founder of the modern servant leadership movement, “the servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (Robert K. Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership, 2016). The servant-leader’s primary objective is to ensure that all people under his or her stewardship are given the best chance to grow, thrive, prosper and achieve their highest potential (Afsar et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2020; Luu et al., 2020; Tuan, 2020).

An important question to consider is ‘Why does one identify a servant leader?’ A review of extant literature revealed that a servant leader is expected to display several attributes, five of the most prominent of which are discussed as follows: (1) Empathy: Servant leaders seek to understand the underlying needs and motivations of their followers so as to create the necessary environment for them to prosper and thrive (Allen et al., 2018; Lumpkin and Achen, 2018;

Joseph and Gandolfi, 2020), (2) Self awareness: Servant leaders are to reflect deeply and analyze their own value systems in order to identify areas where they can improve as leaders (Arain et al., 2019; Frémeaux and Pavageau, 2020; Giambatista et al., 2020), (3) Persuasion: Servant leaders do not coerce their followers to perform certain actions. Rather they convince them to do certain actions by clearly showing them the benefits of those actions (Lee et al., 2020; Megheirkouni, 2020), (4) Stewardship: Servant leaders take responsibility for the actions of their followers, rather than blame them if things go wrong (Andersen, 2018; Luu, 2020; Tuan, 2020) and (5) Commitment to the growth of people: Servant leaders are focused on ensuring that their followers achieve their ambitions and fulfil their potential (Harris et al., 2020; Upadyaya and Salmela-Aro, 2020).

There is no denying that cynics might consider the servant leadership philosophy as idealistic and unrealistic, particularly in a world where leadership seems to be motivated by a desire for the accumulation and exercise of power, control and influence. Can leaders truly exist whose only concern is the welfare of their people? However, the fact that over the last decade there have been thousands (Google Scholar found 17,000 articles published between 2010 and 2019 that mentioned servant leadership) of scholarly research conducted on servant leadership serves as evidence that there are scholars who are curious to determine whether this philosophy can exist in organizations.

As the world begins what has been a challenging new decade so far, the objective of this paper was to conduct a systematic review of the last decade (2010–2019) of servant leadership scholarship in order to understand the rate of publication of SL articles over the last decade, the geographic distribution of these articles, the types of articles being published (conceptual versus empirical), the data collection methods utilized by these articles, and the various themes explored by these articles. Of particular interest was determining the efficacy of SL in helping organizations of all types in achieving their objectives.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows: First, a methodology section is presented explaining how studies for this paper were acquired and analyzed. Second, the findings of the review are presented, along with suggestions for future research avenues, and third, a concluding section is presented.

2. Methodology

In conducting a systematic review of the last decade of SL scholarship, this study adopted the Systematic Quantitative Assessment Technique (SQAT) developed by Australian researchers, Pickering and Byrne in 2014. SQAT is systematic in the way articles are assessed to determine their inclusion or exclusion in the review process, and the focus is on peer-reviewed original journal publications so as to maintain a high quality of articles (Pickering and Byrne, 2014). SQAT enables the researcher to identify “important geographic, scalar, theoretical and methodological gaps in the literature” (Pickering and Byrne, 2014, p. 534). SQAT is logical, simple to use, and easily replicated, which are all important components of a systematic review.

SQAT recommends five important steps in conducting an effective systematic review. Each step and how it was applied in this study is described in Table 1.

Table 1. Description and application of SQAT

S/N	Step	Application in current study
1.	Define topic	Servant Leadership (SL) articles published between 2010 and 2019
2.	Formulate research questions	Five research questions: 1. What is the time distribution of SL articles? 2. In which countries were these articles written? 3. What kinds of SL articles were published? (Conceptual vs. Empirical) 4. What methods were used to collect data? 5. What are the specific themes these articles explored, and what were the major findings in each theme?
3.	Identify key words	“Servant Leadership”
4.	Identify and search databases	1. 6 databases utilized: Emerald, Elsevier, Sage, Springer, Taylor and Francis, Wiley 2. “All in title search” using the phrase “Servant Leadership”
5.	Read and assess publications	1. Abstracts of articles found were read to ensure that they were dealing with Servant Leadership. 2. Literature reviews, book chapters and conference proceedings were not included; only peer-reviewed conceptual and empirical articles.

Source: Author’s review.

A total of 179 peer-reviewed SL articles met the selection criteria from six prominent academic journal publishers. Table 2 presents the SL article breakdown by publisher.

Table 2. SL articles reviewed by publisher (2010–2019)

S/N	Publisher	Number of SL articles
1.	Emerald	51
2.	Elsevier	20
3.	Sage	36
4.	Springer	27
5.	Taylor and Francis	27
6.	Wiley	18
Total		179

Source: Author’s review.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Time distribution of SL articles

Figure 1 presents the time distribution of the 179 SL articles reviewed for this study over the last decade, 2010–2019.

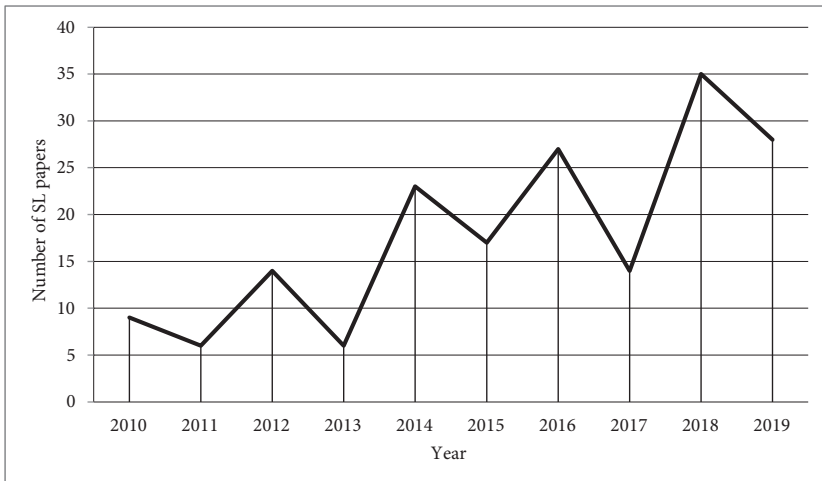


Figure 1. Time distribution of SL articles

Source: Author’s review.

It can be observed that the number of SL articles published increased as the decade wore on, with 2011 and 2013 being the least productive years with six articles each, and 2018 being the most productive year with 35 SL articles published. It can also be observed that SL articles were published in each of the ten years covered by this review.

3.2. Geographic distribution of SL articles

A review of the 179 SL journal articles revealed that 45 countries were represented, and Figure 2 presents the top three countries from which these articles originated from over the last decade, 2010–2019.

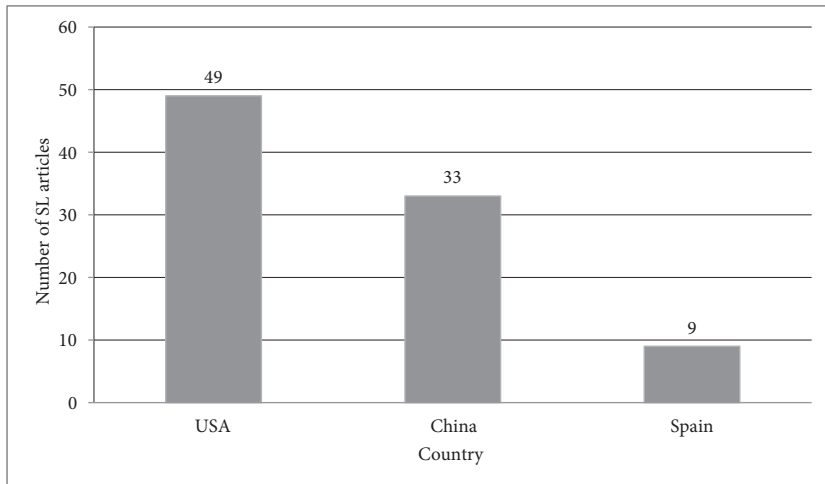


Figure 2. Countries with the most SL articles

Source: Author's review.

The United States of America had by far the most number of SL articles with 49, followed by China with 33, and then Spain a distant third with nine. The remaining 42 countries and the number of SL articles associated with them are presented in Table 3.

In order to provide an additional perspective of the geographic distribution of SL articles published in the last decade, Figure 3 provides a breakdown of the 179 articles based on the continent they originated from. It can be observed that Asia had the largest number of SL articles published (63), followed closely by North America (55), and then Europe (44). On the other hand, Australasia only had nine SL

Table 3. 42 remaining countries and the SL articles associated with them

S/N	Country	Number of articles	S/N	Country	Number of articles
1.	Indonesia	8	22.	Bahrain	1
2.	Canada	7	23.	Belgium	1
4.	Pakistan	7	24.	Colombia	1
3.	Turkey	7	25.	Cyprus	1
5.	Australia	6	26.	Dominican Republic	1
6.	India	5	27.	Egypt	1
7.	Netherlands	5	28.	Fiji	1
8.	United Kingdom	5	29.	France	1
9.	South Korea	4	30.	Greece	1
10.	Vietnam	4	31.	Lebanon	1
11.	Germany	3	32.	Lithuania	1
12.	Kuwait	3	33.	Nigeria	1
13.	South Africa	3	34.	Norway	1
14.	Iceland	2	35.	Qatar	1
15.	Italy	2	36.	Romania	1
16.	Malaysia	2	37.	Russia	1
17.	New Zealand	2	38.	Singapore	1
18.	Oman	2	39.	Sweden	1
19.	Portugal	2	40.	Syria	1
20.	Saudi Arabia	2	41.	Taiwan	1
21.	United Arab Emirates	2	42.	Ukraine	1

Source: Author’s review

articles, Africa had five, and South America had only one representative (Contreras, 2016).

Servant leadership is a normative leadership philosophy which advocates that leaders use their position to serve their followers by identifying their needs, harnessing the necessary resources and creating an enabling environment to ensure that these needs are fulfilled (Bao et al., 2018;). From a country governance perspective, African and South American countries are perhaps most in need of such leaders, as these countries have been plagued with leaders interested in utilizing country

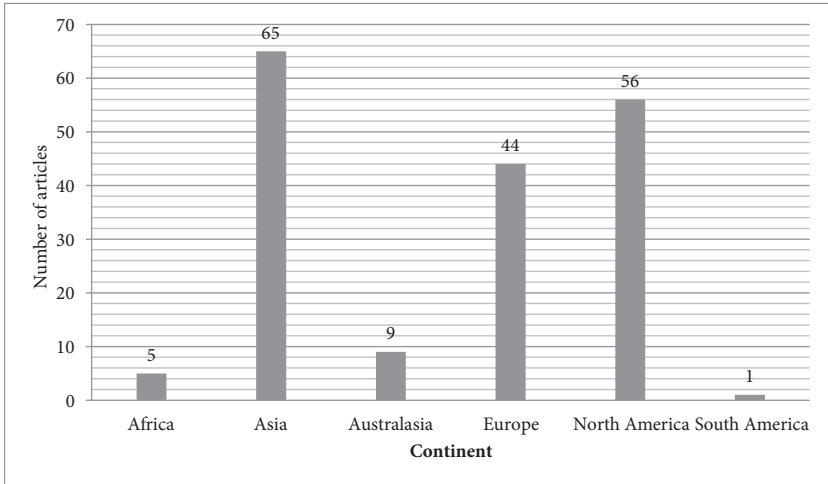


Figure 3. SL articles by continent

Source: Author’s review.

resources for personal gain at the expense of citizen’s welfare for decades (Arminen and Menegaki 2019; Sovacool and Walter 2019; Windsor 2019). This is evidenced by the fact that over the years Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index has consistently ranked countries from these two continents as being the most corrupt (Akbari et al., 2019; Boldbaatar et al., 2019; Suárez-Alemán et al., 2019). Servant Leadership researchers thus have an advocacy role to play in these two continents by conducting studies that will provide empirical evidences of the positive effects of servant leadership at micro, meso and macro levels. Perhaps such studies will help in introducing future leaders in these two continents to the concept of servant leadership and the role it can play in improving the lives of the citizenry.

3.3. Article type

Figure 4 presents a categorization of the 179 SL articles reviewed based on whether they were empirical or conceptual in nature. It can be observed that a vast majority of the articles reviewed were empirical in nature (154 out of 179), while only 25 were conceptual in nature.

Whilst empirical research is very important to validate or disprove existing SL theories or models, Figure 4 shows that SL researchers of the last decade have focused almost exclusively on this side of

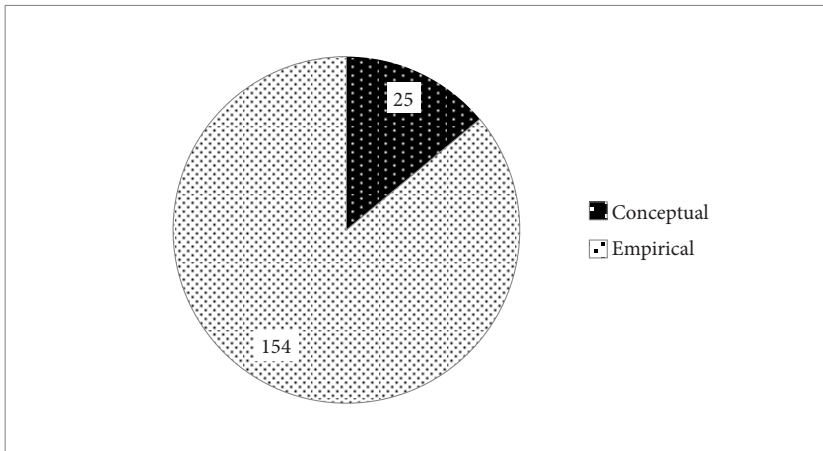


Figure 4. SL Article Types

Source: Author’s review.

the research. Conceptual research forms the building blocks of SL research and will establish the research agenda for the next decade of SL research. For this reason, it is important that future SL researchers focus on conceptual SL research to try to address the current imbalance between conceptual and empirical SL research.

3.4. Data collection methods

Figure 5 presents the nine different data collection methods utilized by the 154 empirical SL articles reviewed for this study. It can be observed that about 84% of the articles (129 out of 154) utilized surveys to collect data; this was by far the most utilized method (e.g., Chughtai, 2016; Chiniara and Bentein, 2018; Ye et al., 2019; Zhu and Zhang, 2019; Zoghbi-Manrique-De-Lara and Ruiz-Palomino, 2019). Interviews were the next most common data collection method (17 out of 154) (e.g., Samuel et al., 2018; Slack et al., 2019; Song, 2019), followed by observation (7 out of 154) (e.g., Terosky and Reitano, 2016; Crippen, 2017; Slack et al., 2019) and then documentary analysis (6 out of 154) (e.g., Andre and Lantu, 2015; Carter and Baghurst, 2014; Crippen, 2017). Five studies collected data from secondary sources (e.g., Carter and Baghurst, 2014; Grisaffe et al., 2016; Alazzani et al., 2019) while three articles organized focus groups (Ebener and O’Connell, 2010; Parris and Peachey, 2013; Carter and Baghurst, 2014).

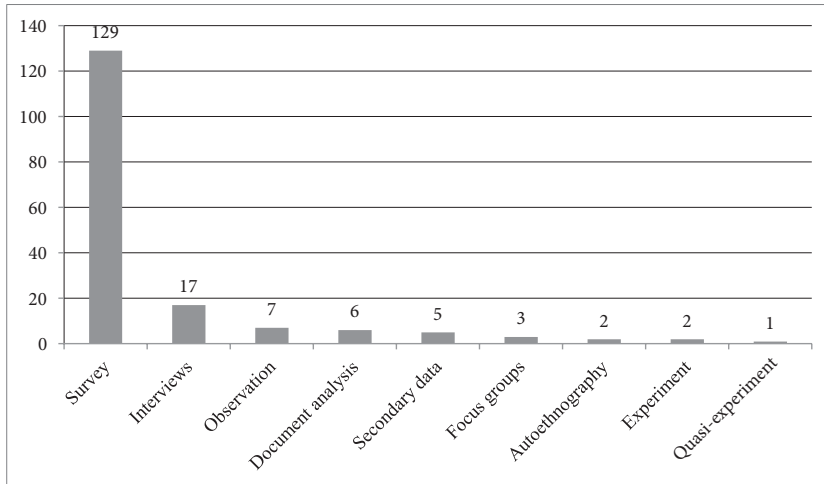


Figure 5. SL Data Collection Methods

Source: Author's review.

Two articles (Meixner, 2010; Fulton and Shannonhouse, 2014) utilized an interesting data collection method called Autoethnography, which involved the authors reflecting deeply on their personal experiences with servant leadership. Two other articles conducted experiments (Gillet et al., 2011; van Dierendonck et al., 2013), while one article collected data via a quasi-experiment (Stewart, 2012).

Figure 5 revealed an obvious quantitative bias in the way empirical data was collected by SL studies in the last decade. Surveys allow the researchers to collect data from large samples which make the findings more representative of the target population. However, the almost exclusive use of surveys means that rich and in-depth perspectives of SL that would be obtained via qualitative methods have not been fully explored. It is thus incumbent on future SL researchers to adopt more qualitative data collection methods to provide different insights into the SL phenomenon.

3.5. SL themes

An analysis of the 179 SL articles reviewed for this study revealed that they explored eight distinct themes which are presented in Figure 6.

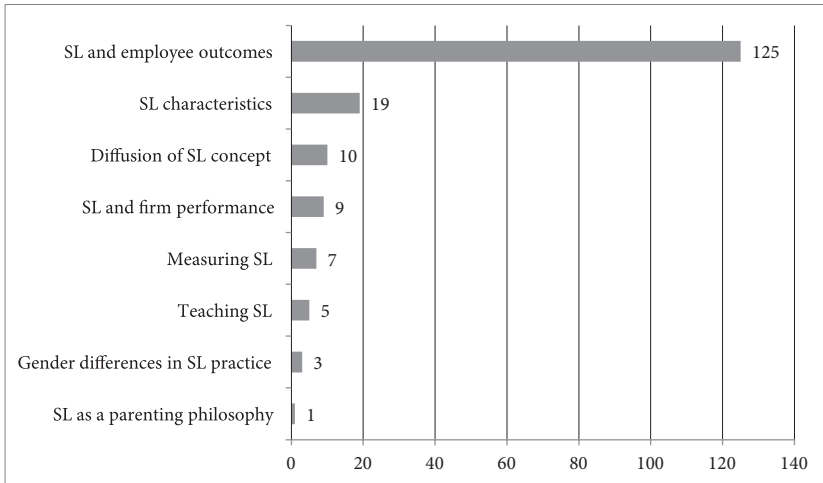


Figure 6. SL Themes

Source: Author’s review.

It can be observed that the vast majority of SL articles reviewed (125 out of 179) explored the effect of servant leadership on a broad range of positive and negative employee outcomes. The positive employee outcomes included employee commitment (e.g., Cerit, 2010; Bobbio et al., 2012; Harwiki, 2016; Newman et al., 2018; Erdurmazli, 2019), employee motivation (e.g., Schwarz et al., 2016; Tuan, 2016; Shim and Park, 2018), organizational citizenship behaviour (e.g., Abu Bakar and McCann, 2016; Bavik et al., 2017; Linuesa-Langreo et al., 2018; Ragnarsson et al., 2018; Zhu and Zhang, 2019), employee well-being (Chen et al., 2011; Chughtai, 2018; Yang et al., 2018; Chughtai, 2019; Mustard, 2019), job satisfaction (Al-Mahdy et al., 2016; Abu Bakar and McCann, 2018; Farrington and Lillah, 2018; Megheirkouni, 2018; Al-Asadi et al., 2019), proactive behaviour (Bauer et al., 2019) and trust in leader (Chan and Mak, 2014). The negative employee outcomes included employee burnout (Babakus et al., 2010; Rivkin et al., 2014) and turnover intentions ((Babakus et al., 2010; Kashyap and Ragnekar, 2014; Brohi et al., 2018). What was most striking about the results of the articles in this theme is that 97% of them found that SL had a significant effect on the various employee outcomes, providing very strong evidence of the efficacy of SL in inspiring employees to give organizations their best efforts. Only a few articles found that SL had no

significant impact on employee outcomes (Bande et al., 2016; Newman et al., 2018; Sihombing et al., 2018; Slack et al., 2019), with Slack et al. (2019) arguing that the practice of SL alone was not sufficient to guarantee positive employee outcomes.

The next most common theme explored was identifying the characteristics of servant leaders, with 19 out of the 179 SL articles pursuing this task. Characteristics identified included having prosocial personalities (Gillet et al., 2011; Politis and Politis, 2018), possessing emotional intelligence (Barbuto et al., 2014; Lee, 2018), being trustworthy and altruistic (Brown et al., 2012; Beck, 2014; Duhé, 2014; Samuel et al., 2018), being compassionate (Davenport, 2014; Jenkins, 2014; van Dierendonck and Patterson, 2015; Jit et al., 2017) and being humble (Krumrei-Mancuso, 2018). Besides possessing these characteristics, servant leaders are expected to be incredibly self-aware (Flynn et al., 2015; Song, 2019) and possess the mindfulness to be able to identify and meet the needs of their followers (Burton and Peachey, 2013; Chiniara and Bentein, 2016; Verdorfer, 2016; Amah, 2018). VanMeter et al. (2016) argued that all the previously identified characteristics were not unique to servant leaders, but were shared by other ethical leadership styles; they argued that only ‘unconditional love’ was unique to servant leaders.

The third most explored theme (10 out of 179 articles) was trying to understand to what extent the SL phenomenon had diffused across cultures and contexts, and to investigate whether the meaning of SL remained consistent across these different cultures. Han et al. (2010), Oner (2012), Ruwhiu and Elkin (2016), Crippen (2017) found that SL existed in China, Turkey, New Zealand and Canada respectively, and that the meaning of SL in these countries was the same as the original meaning explained by its postulator, Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s. Pekerti and Sendjaya (2010) also found that SL was evident in Australia and Indonesia, but the actual practice of it was moderated by the culture of both countries.

The next set of studies in this third theme investigated the presence of SL in educational institutions in different countries with mixed results. Zhang et al. (2012) found that SL was the preferred leadership style among school leaders in Singapore, while Harris et al. (2017) found that it was the preferred leadership style among school counsellors in the United States of America. On the other hand, Stoten (2013) found that SL was not prevalent among colleges in the United Kingdom. Finally,

Mittal and Dorfman (2012) adopted a much broader approach by investigating which dimensions of SL were more prevalent in European and Asian countries. They found that “the dimensions of Egalitarianism and Empowering were endorsed more strongly in Nordic/European cultures but less so in Asian and similar cultures. On the other hand, servant leadership dimensions of Empathy and Humility were more strongly endorsed in Asian cultures than European cultures” (Mittal and Dorfman, 2012, p. 562).

Nine studies formed the fourth SL theme in this review by investigating the relationship between SL and firm performance. SL was found to be positively associated with financial performance in terms of increase in return of assets (Peterson et al., 2012) and profitability (Huang et al., 2016; Eva et al., 2018). SL was also found to be positively associated with non-financial firm performances such as organizational learning (Choudhary et al., 2013), customer satisfaction (Hwang et al., 2014), service quality (Koyuncu et al., 2014; Hsiao et al., 2015) and CSR reporting (Alazzani et al., 2019).

Correctly measuring SL is important for quality research on the phenomenon to be carried out, and the objective of the seven articles making up the fifth SL theme was to develop and validate instruments to measure SL. Five different SL measures were developed and validated as follows: (1) Executive Servant Leadership Scale [ESLS] (Reed et al., 2011), (2) Six-factor Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale [SLBS] (Sendjaya and Cooper, 2011), (3) Eight-factor Servant Leadership Survey (van Dierendonck and Nuijten, 2011), (4) 7-item measure of Global Servant Leadership [SL-7] (Liden et al., 2015) and (5) 10-item measure of Servant Leadership (Winston and Fields, 2015). Future researchers thus have a choice of instruments to select from when measuring SL.

In the context of leadership, there has always been a popular refrain, ‘Are leaders born or made?’ The five SL articles that make up the sixth theme sought to determine whether enough people could be taught to become servant leaders. All five articles concluded that servant leadership could indeed be taught to people across different contexts, be it universities (Meixner, 2010; Popa, 2012), teacher colleges (Stewart, 2012), school counselling training programs (Fulton and Shannonhouse, 2014) and non-governmental organizations (Parris and Peachey, 2013). These findings are comforting to passionate educators who desire to produce future servant leaders who will hopefully make positive impacts on the world around them.

There is a popular saying that ‘what a man can do, a woman can do better’; the three SL articles investigated whether this saying was true in the case of the practice of servant leadership. In a survey of K-12 principals in the United States, Xu et al. (2015) found that female principals exhibited more dimensions of servant leadership than their male counterparts. Similarly, a survey of college students presented with the portrait of an ideal male and female leader with the same SL attributes revealed that the students had greater expectations that the female leader would exhibit more servant leadership behaviour in the future compared to the male leader. Finally, Lemoine and Blum (2019) found that female leaders practicing SL had a greater impact on employee performances than their male counterparts. The findings of three studies are too small a sample size to make sweeping generalizations; however, they do present intriguing recruitment questions for organizations interested in having servant leaders as managers: If women practice servant leadership better than men, do such organizations prioritize qualified women over qualified men? Would that be considered gender discrimination? These are questions for recruitment officers to grapple with when more empirical evidence is provided to support the notion that female servant leaders are more impactful than male servant leaders.

Veas and Veas (2018) constitute the eighth and final theme of SL articles reviewed in this study, and they advocate SL as an ideal parenting philosophy “to nourish a supportive ecosystem within the home and community context for children” (Veas and Veas, 2018, p. 390). Intuitively, their arguments make sense in theory; if all parents acted as servant leaders to their children by seeking to understand and fulfil their needs, the bonds between parents and children would strengthen and children would grow up filling loved and cherished. These kids would grow up to become servant leaders to their own children thus ensuring generations of loving humans whose primary goal is to help support and develop their children. The world will probably never achieve such a golden age, but it is an ideal worth pursuing in every society.

Table 4 presents the key findings of this systematic review of 179 SL articles published in the last decade (2010–2019).

Table 4. Summary of findings of review of 179 SL articles

S/N	Heading	Key Findings	Implications
1	Time distribution (2010–2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– SL articles were published every year from 2010 to 2019.– 2018 was the most productive year with 35 articles published.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Interest in SL has increased over the last decade.
2	Geographic distribution	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– 45 countries had at least one SL article.– USA had the largest number of SL articles (49) among contributing countries.– Asia had the largest number of SL articles (65) among contributing continents, while South America had the least (1).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– There is need for more SL research in South America and Africa as they were the least represented by articles reviewed.
3.	Article type	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– The vast majority of the articles reviewed were empirical in nature (154 out of 179), while only 25 were conceptual in nature.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– There is a need for more conceptual SL research to form the research agenda for the next decade of SL scholarship.
4.	Data collection methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Nine different data collection methods were identified.– Survey was the most common method used (129).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Future SL researchers to adopt more qualitative data collection methods to provide different insights into the SL phenomenon.
5.	SL Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Eight distinct SL themes identified.– About 70% of the articles investigated the relationship between SL and various employee outcomes.– 97% of articles that examined the SL-employee outcome relationship found that SL had a significant effect on these outcomes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– SL is very effective in inspiring employees to give organizations their best efforts.

Source: Author's review.

4. Conclusion

The importance of servant leadership has never been more evident than during this global COVID-19 pandemic of that has drastically changed how people live and interact all around the world. Economies have suffered tremendously and global unemployment rates are at all time high. More importantly, almost 400,000 people have died from the virus, with 6.4 million confirmed cases globally. Leaders globally are tasked with the tremendously responsibility of helping their followers get through these troubling times and to help return them to some sort of normality once the effects of the pandemic start to decline hopefully in the near future. It was against this backdrop that this paper conducted a systematic review of servant leadership scholarship over the last decade (2010–2019). 179 SL articles were reviewed across five headings: time distribution, geographic distribution, article type, data collection methods and SL themes, with key findings and their implications for knowledge and practice discussed for each heading.

Perhaps the most important finding of this review was the fact that significant empirical evidences exist regarding the positive impact that service leadership has on followers. It inspires followers to develop deep levels of trust in their leaders, which in turn encourages them to give their best efforts in ensuring that servant leaders are able to continue to help identify and fulfil the needs of the followers. The major implication of this finding for leaders today, whether public or private, is that servant leadership is indeed a philosophy worth learning about and adopting to ensure that organizations and countries alike can achieve their stated objectives.

This review had certain limitations which future researchers can address. First, it only relied on journal articles published by six of the most popular academic publishers: Emerald, Elsevier, Sage, Springer, Taylor and Francis and Wiley. Although this was done to ensure the quality of articles reviewed, it means that other valuable SL articles not published by these publishers have been excluded. Future researchers can widen the article selection criteria to increase the robustness of the review. A second limitation is the fact that only articles with the phrase “Servant Leadership” in their titles were included for selection; some SL articles might not have included that phrase in their titles and thus are not captured by this review.

What makes servant leadership so appealing is the promise it holds of a better world if it gains widespread acceptance amongst leaders globally. It promises a more just and tolerant world where the entire purpose of leadership shifts away from the quest for power and authority to the understanding and fulfilling of the needs of followers; a tall order, no doubt, but an ideal worth pursuing.

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