

Leadership and Empathy: A Bibliometric Review of Two Decades of Research

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Abstract: Empathy in leadership is a reflection of humanity. The more artificial intelligence is used in business and work environments, the greater the need to humanize leadership with empathy as a key emotional intelligence competency. Due to the multifaceted and multilevel effects of empathy in leadership, further research on this topic could contribute to both leadership theory and practice. Bibliometric reviews can advance a research field by providing objective and reproducible overviews of published research. This paper aimed to provide a bibliometric review of the research field of leadership and empathy and offer insights into its past, present, and future. Science mapping was conducted using three bibliometric techniques: co-citation analysis, bibliographic coupling, and co-word analysis. A systematic bibliometric review of two decades of research on leadership and empathy is provided based on articles from the Web of Science Core Collection database published from 2004 to 2024 in areas relevant to management and organizational behavior in a business context. The study includes co-word analyses conducted separately for the periods before and after the declaration of the pandemic, when there was a significant increase in the number and thematic scope of research on leadership and empathy. The findings indicate that the past of the research field was mostly concerned with the construct of emotional intelligence and the multifaceted effects of empathy in leadership. The present is focused on employee-level outcomes, crisis management and communication, and ethical, servant, transformational, responsible, and women's leadership. The future of the research field could be directed toward advancing knowledge on the effects of leader empathy on organizational-level outcomes, the impact of enhancing empathy through leadership development programs, and the role of empathy in inclusive and adaptive leadership. The findings of this study could also raise awareness among leadership practitioners that empathy is not only inherent to what is labeled as empathetic or compassionate leadership, but can also contribute to humanizing various leadership approaches.

Keywords: Leadership, Empathy, Bibliometric review, Science mapping

1. Introduction

Empathy in leadership is a reflection of humanity. The more artificial intelligence is used in business and work environments, the greater the need to humanize leadership with empathy. As an emotional intelligence competency, empathy can be reflected in leadership in its three forms: cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and empathic concern or compassion (Goleman et al., 2017). It refers to understanding the perspectives and emotions of others, as well as acting on an inclination to alleviate another person's distress. The multifaceted effects of empathy in leadership are reflected in various leadership approaches. In addition to being central to the constructs of empathetic and compassionate leadership (Kock et al., 2019; Ramachandran et al., 2024), empathy is recognized in the literature as an important aspect of ethical leadership (Li, 2024; Kalshoven, Den Hartog and De Hoogh, 2013; Mahsud, Yukl and Prussia, 2010), servant leadership (Jit, Sharma and Kawatra, 2017; Linuesa-Langreo, Ruiz-Palomino and Elche, 2016), transformational leadership (Hensel and Visser, 2018; Skinner and Spurgeon, 2005), responsible leadership (Voegtlin et al., 2020), and sustainability leadership (Hallin and Mantel, 2018). A systematic literature review of the impact of empathy on leadership effectiveness in the field of business management indicated that empathy enhances leadership effectiveness through its extensive effects on the level of the leader, followers, and organization (Zivkovic, 2022).

Due to the multifaceted and multilevel effects of empathy in leadership, further research on this topic could contribute to both leadership theory and practice. Bibliometric reviews can advance a research field by providing a systematic, objective, and reproducible overview of the scientific literature (Donthu et al., 2021). A search of available sources and databases showed that currently there is no bibliometric review of the research field of leadership and empathy.

To address this gap in the literature, this paper aims to provide a bibliometric review of the research field of leadership and empathy and offer insights into its past, present, and future. For this purpose, science mapping was conducted based on the triangulation of three bibliometric techniques: co-citation analysis, bibliographic coupling, and co-word analysis. The study covers the period from 2004 to 2024 and includes co-word analyses conducted separately for the periods before and after the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, when there was a significant increase in the number and thematic scope of research on leadership and empathy. The review did not include publications classified solely into nursing, health sciences, and education due to the focus on

research published in areas relevant to management and organizational behavior in a business context. Thus, this study presents a systematic bibliometric review of two decades of research on leadership and empathy.

2. Methods

Bibliometric reviews can contribute to the advancement of a research field by providing a systematic, objective, and reproducible overview of the literature based on a quantitative approach, and by generating ideas for future research and applications (Donthu et al., 2021). In this study, a bibliometric review was focused on science mapping, which is used to examine the intellectual and conceptual structure, as well as the development of a particular line of research (Zupic and Cater, 2015). Science mapping was conducted using three bibliometric techniques: co-citation analysis, bibliographic coupling, and co-word analysis. Co-citation analysis derives thematic clusters based on cited publications "to construct measures of similarity between documents, authors or journals" (Zupic and Cater, 2015, p. 3). Bibliographic coupling "uses the number of references shared by two documents as a measure of the similarity between them" (Zupic and Cater, 2015, p. 5), and thematic clusters are based on the citing publications. Co-word analysis "uses the words in documents to establish relationships and build a conceptual structure of the domain" (Zupic and Cater, 2015, p. 6). The triangulation of these three bibliometric techniques can contribute to revealing the past, present, and future of the research field by uncovering foundational, periodical, and emerging themes (Donthu et al., 2021; Lamovšek and Černe, 2023).

The search of publications included in this bibliometric review was conducted in the Web of Science Core Collection database on August 28, 2024. The searched terms were "leadership" AND "empathy" included in the title, abstract, and/or keywords. The search included journal articles in English only. It was limited to the period from 2004 to 2024 to present a systematic overview of the literature on leadership and empathy in the last two decades. To focus on research relevant to management and organizational behavior in a business context, the search was limited to the following research fields (with the resulting number of publications): Business Economics (317), Psychology (188), Social Sciences Other Topics (88), and Behavioral Sciences (8). The total number of articles found and included in this bibliometric review amounts to 503. VOSviewer software (version 1.6.18), developed by Van Eck and Waltman (2010), was used to conduct bibliometric analyses and create visualizations of bibliometric maps.

3. Results

3.1 Co-Citation Analysis

The unit of analysis was cited references, and the minimum number of citations of a cited reference was set to 15. The full counting method was applied. Of the 28,508 cited references, 33 items met the threshold. After removing one item marked as "anonymous, thesis", the total strength of the co-citation links with other cited references was calculated for each of the 32 items. The items "anonymous, 1985, leadership and performance beyond expectations" and "anonymous, 2006, working with emotional intelligence" were not removed since they represent seminal works in the fields of transformational leadership (Bass, 1985) and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006). Figure 1 illustrates the resulting co-citation map.

Cluster 1: Individual differences in empathy, ethical leadership and transformational leadership. Cluster 1 marked in red includes 13 items. The themes of the most influential cited publications refer to the individual differences in empathy (Davis, 1980, 1983) and ethical leadership (Brown, Trevino and Harrison, 2005; Brown and Trevino, 2006). This cluster also includes publications of Bass (1985), Burns (1978), and Bass and Steidlmeier (1999), which are related to transformational leadership.

Cluster 2: Emotional intelligence in leadership and multifaceted effects of empathy. Cluster 2 marked in green includes 10 items. It encompasses publications that represent the knowledge base related to the construct of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 2006, 2020; Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Other cited publications in this cluster examine the role of emotional intelligence and empathy in leadership (George, 2000; Holt and Marques, 2012), as well as the effects of empathy on the emergence of leaders (Kellet et al., 2006), leader and follower attitudes and performance (Kellet et al., 2002; Wong and Law, 2017), and leader-member exchange quality (Mahsud, Yuki and Prussia, 2010).

Cluster 3: Methods. Cluster 3 marked in blue includes 9 items. The cited publications in this cluster describe various methods related to structural equation modeling, mitigation of biases, and moderation and mediation analysis.

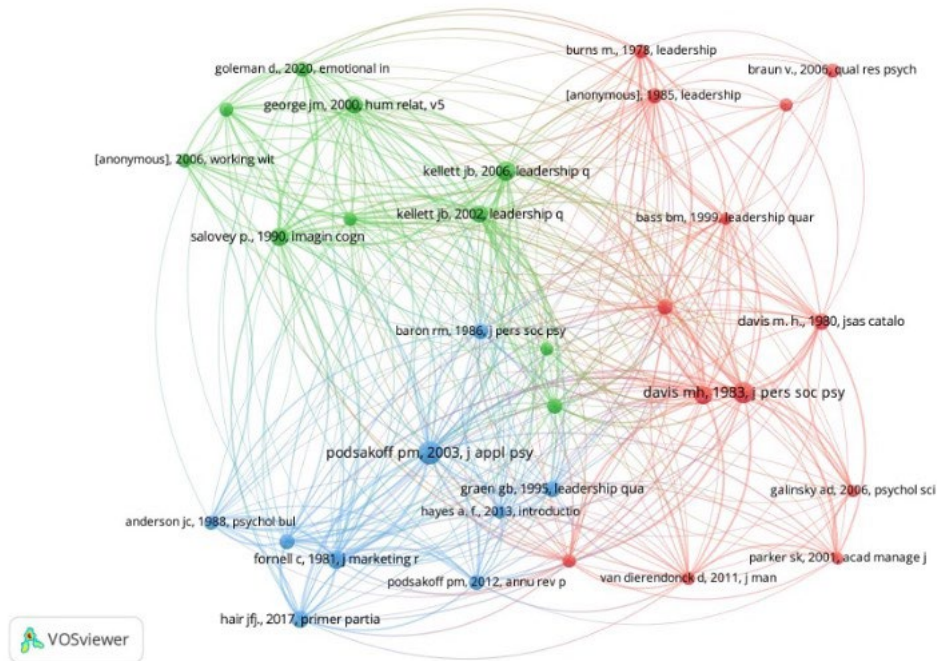


Figure 1: Co-citation map

3.2 Bibliographic Coupling

The unit of analysis was documents, and the minimum number of citations of a document was set to 35. The full counting method was applied. Of the 503 articles documents, 73 items met the threshold for which the total strength of the bibliographic coupling links with other documents was calculated. Given that 4 items were not connected to others, the bibliographic coupling map was created for 69 items (Figure 2).

Cluster 1: Perspective-taking, ethical leadership, employee attitudes and behaviors. Cluster 1 marked in red includes 33 items. The most influential citing publications examine the role of empathy in perspective-taking (Ku, Wang and Galinsky, 2015; Longmire and Harrison, 2018), ethical leadership (Kalshoven, Den Hartog and De Hoogh, 2013; Mahsud, Yukl and Prussia, 2010; Tumasjan, Strobel and Welpel, 2011), and follower performance (Kock et al., 2019). The publications in this cluster, published in a more recent period (2020-2024), explore the influence of a leader's expression of empathy through empathetic language and compassion on various employee attitudes and behaviors, such as work engagement (Rabiul and Yean, 2021), workplace bullying (Ahmad et al., 2022), trust (Men, Qin and Jin, 2022), organizational identification (Yue, Men and Ferguson, 2021), and voluntary pro-environmental behavior (Raza et al., 2021).

Cluster 2: Emotional intelligence, leadership emergence, performance and approaches. Cluster 2 marked in green includes 14 items. The most influential citing publications explore the role of emotional intelligence and empathy in leadership emergence (Cote et al., 2010; Kellet et al., 2006) and the performance of both leaders (Sadri, Weber and Gentry, 2011) and followers (Miao, Humphrey and Qian, 2018). Other publications in this cluster mainly discuss the role of emotional intelligence in organizations (Cote, 2014) and in various leadership approaches (Maamari and Majdalani, 2017), particularly transformational leadership (Barbuto and Burbach, 2006; Clarke, 2010), ethical leadership and servant leadership (Lumpkin and Achen, 2018).

Cluster 3: Crisis management and communication, responsible leadership, and women's leadership. Cluster 3 marked in blue includes 12 items. The citing publications in this cluster published mostly in a more recent period focus on the three key themes: crisis management and communication (Gartzia et al., 2012; Konig et al., 2020; McGuire et al., 2020), responsible leadership (Stahl and Sully de Luque, 2014; Voegtlin et al., 2020) and women's leadership (Gartzia et al., 2012; Javidan, Bullough and Dibble, 2016; Pullen and Vachhani, 2021; Sergent and Stajkovic, 2020).

Cluster 4: Narcissism, leader traits, behaviors and outcomes. Cluster 4 marked in yellow includes 10 items. Empathy in leadership is not the central theme of the citing publications in this cluster. One stream of research examines the impact of narcissistic leaders and managers described as those who lack empathy (Ackerman et al., 2011; Ong et al., 2016; O'Reilly et al., 2014). Other publications explore empathy or empathic concern in the

context of various leader traits, behaviors, and outcomes (Jiang et al., 2019; Ogunfowora et al., 2022; Sosik et al., 2019).

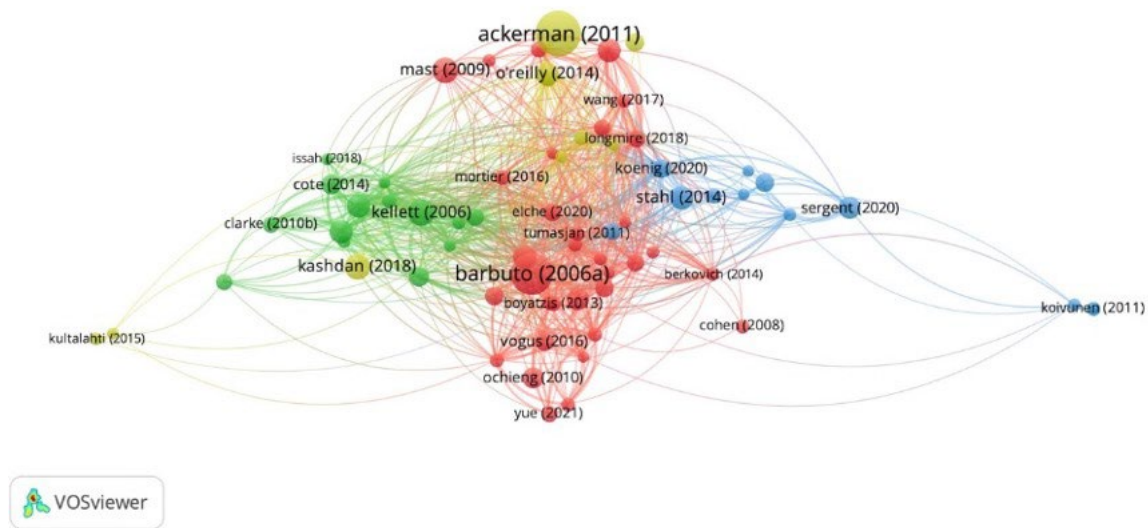


Figure 2: Bibliographic coupling map

3.3 Co-Word Analysis

To offer insight into the conceptual structure and the development of research on leadership and empathy before and after the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, the co-word analysis of published research is divided into two periods: 2004-2019 and 2020-2024.

For the period 2004-2019, the co-word analysis encompassed 243 articles. The minimum number of occurrences of an author keyword was set to 3. Of the 788 keywords, 37 met the threshold for which the total strength of the co-occurrence links with other keywords was calculated. The keyword "meta-analysis" was removed before forming the co-word map. Given that 2 items were not connected to others, the co-word map for the period 2004-2019 was created for 34 items (Figure 3).

Cluster 1: Transformational and authentic leadership. Cluster 1 marked in red includes 14 keywords. Most of the keywords with the highest link strength in the period 2004-2019 are included in this cluster: "transformational leadership", "intelligence", "emotion", "mindfulness", "authentic leadership", "perspective taking", "social intelligence", "compassion", and "empathic concern". Except for transformational and authentic leadership, these keywords are used to define and describe the construct of empathy. The emerging themes in this cluster are "ethical leadership", "coaching", and "well-being".

Cluster 2: Ethics and applications. Cluster 2 marked in green includes 13 keywords. Both "leadership" and "empathy" as the searched terms in this bibliometric study are included in this cluster, as well as "gender". The other keywords are mainly related to ethics ("ethics", "responsibility", "ethics of care", "justice") and areas of application of empathy in leadership ("higher education", "communication", "entrepreneurship", "nursing").

Cluster 3: Emotional intelligence, narcissism and servant leadership. Cluster 3 marked in blue includes 7 keywords. Its main keywords are "emotional intelligence", "servant leadership", "cross-culture", and "narcissism". The emerging keywords in this cluster are "motivation", "human resource management", and "service quality".

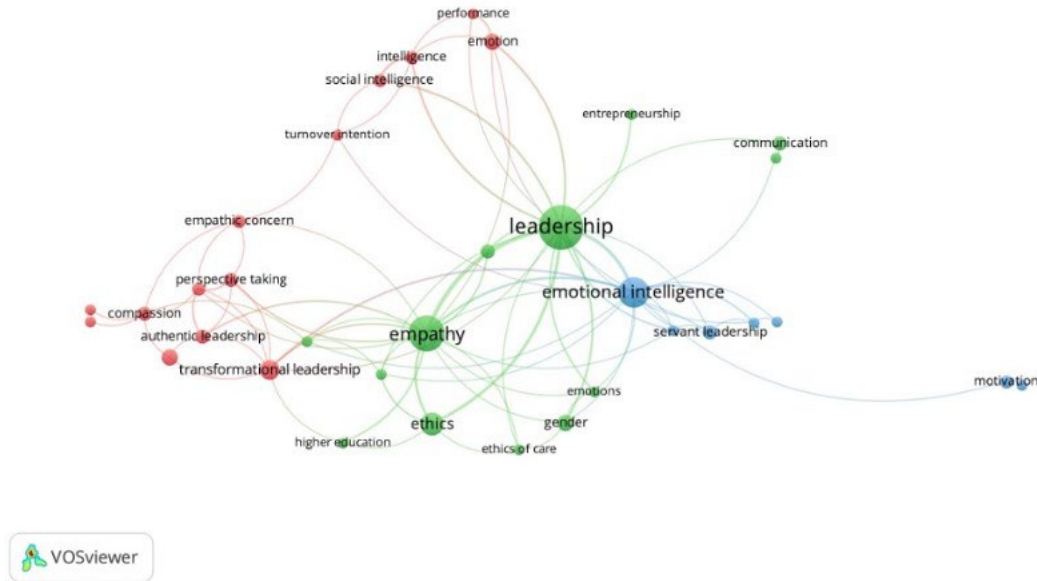


Figure 3: Co-word map, 2004-2019

For the period 2020-2024, the co-word analysis encompassed 260 articles. The minimum number of occurrences of an author keyword was set to 3. Of the 996 keywords, 55 met the threshold. Given that the keywords "india" and "qualitative" were removed, the co-word map for the period 2020-2024 was created for 53 items (Figure 4).

Cluster 1: Servant, inclusive, compassionate and transformational leadership. Cluster 1 marked in red includes 16 keywords. This cluster focuses on research on the influence and role of empathy and compassion in various leadership approaches, such as "servant leadership", "inclusive leadership", "compassionate leadership", and "transformational leadership". It also includes the keywords "diversity", "collaboration", "motivating language", "perspective-taking", and "work engagement", which can be considered related to these leadership approaches.

Cluster 2: Mindfulness, resilience and gender. Cluster 2 marked in green includes 14 keywords. The keywords included in this cluster mainly refer to topics related to mindfulness ("mindfulness", "emotional intelligence", "self-awareness") and resilience ("resilience", "emotions", "stress", "self-regulation", "personality"). This cluster also includes the keywords "leadership" and "gender" as key research themes, as well as "coaching" as an emerging theme.

Cluster 3: Crisis, trust and communication. Cluster 3 marked in blue includes 12 keywords. The keywords with the highest link strength are "COVID-19" and "trust". The other keywords related to both of these themes are "crisis", "pandemic", "leadership communication", "crisis communication", and "internal communications". The emerging keywords in this cluster are "ethical leadership" and "adaptive leadership".

Cluster 4: Responsibility, performance, well-being and empathetic leadership. Cluster 4 marked in yellow includes 11 keywords. It refers to the themes related to an organization's responsibility ("corporate social responsibility"), performance ("job performance", "performance", "innovative behavior"), well-being ("well-being", "job satisfaction", "affective commitment", "work-life balance"), and empathetic leadership.

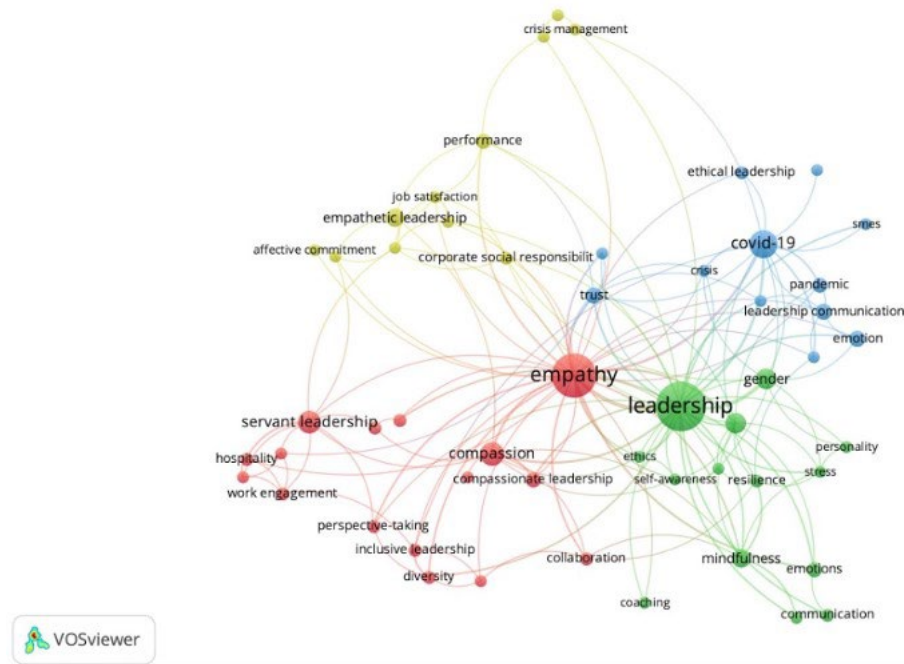


Figure 4: Co-word map, 2020-2024

4. Discussion

In this bibliometric study, the content of the most influential publications identified through co-citation analysis and bibliographic coupling was reviewed to determine the main themes of clusters, and the co-word analysis was conducted separately for two periods. Such a comprehensive approach to examining the research field was applied to allow for a greater understanding of its structure and development. The analyses showed significant developments after the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of an increased number of publications and research themes, which indicates the particular importance of empathy in leadership in times of crisis, uncertainty, and change. Insights into the past, present, and future of the research field of leadership and empathy could contribute to its further advancement.

Past of the research field. The co-citation analysis indicated that the development of the research field of leadership and empathy started by gaining an understanding of the construct of emotional intelligence, individual differences in empathy, and the effects of empathy on the emergence of leaders, leader and follower attitudes and performance, and leader-member exchange quality. The findings also showed that the themes of early research in the field included ethical leadership and transformational leadership. Although empathy is not explicitly mentioned as a dimension of these leadership constructs, it can be considered relevant for moral conduct in ethical leadership and individualized consideration in transformational leadership. Following the above, it can be concluded that the past of the research field was mostly concerned with the construct of emotional intelligence and the multifaceted effects of empathy in leadership.

Present of the research field. Bibliographic coupling showed that researchers continued to examine the effects of empathy in leadership with an emphasis on employee-level outcomes. Cluster 1 most closely reflects the present of the research field, considering that it encompasses research on employee attitudes and behaviors published in a more recent period (2020-2024), including themes such as trust, work engagement, organizational identification, and voluntary pro-environmental behavior. In addition, one of the key themes of more recent citing publications is crisis management and communication, which is mostly related to research on the impact of leader empathy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The bibliographic coupling also indicated that the current research highlights the role of empathy in various leadership approaches. The findings of the co-word analysis for the period 2020-2024 are consistent with the main current research themes identified through the bibliographic coupling. Thus, the present of the research field of leadership and empathy is focused on employee-level outcomes, crisis management and communication, and ethical, servant, transformational, responsible, and women's leadership.

Future of the research field. The co-word analysis indicated that the key themes of research on leadership and empathy in the period 2004-2019 were more general, referring mostly to emotional intelligence, ethics, and a

few leadership approaches (transformational, authentic, and servant). After the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic, the research themes in the period 2020-2024 have become more specific and diverse. While the effects of empathy have been explored on the level of a leader and employees, the outcomes on the level of an organization have been under-researched. Since empathy can be considered a prerequisite for a leader's caring attitude toward wider society and the environment, it can influence organizational effectiveness in meeting the demands of various organizational stakeholders. Even though "corporate social responsibility" was one of the keywords with the highest total link strength in the period 2020-2024, it would be useful to explore how leader empathy contributes to building the organizational culture of care and creating positive social and environmental outcomes. Furthermore, the co-word analysis showed that "coaching" is one of the emerging themes and that leadership development was not among the key research themes. Future research could examine the impact of leadership development programs focused on enhancing the leadership capability to express empathy on the outcomes on the level of the leader, employees, and organization. One of the emerging keywords is also "adaptive leadership," which is increasingly important in continuously and rapidly changing environments, while further research on the importance of empathy in inclusive leadership could be expected due to the growing diversity of business and work environments. Therefore, the future of the research field could be directed toward advancing knowledge on the effects of leader empathy on organizational-level outcomes, the impact of enhancing empathy through leadership development programs, and the role of empathy in inclusive and adaptive leadership.

5. Conclusion

This study contributes to the leadership literature by providing a systematic bibliometric review of two decades of research on leadership and empathy in areas relevant to management and organizational behavior in a business context. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first bibliometric review of the research field of leadership and empathy. Its main limitation is that it is based exclusively on articles from the Web of Science Core Collection database. Science mapping based on the triangulation of three bibliometric techniques offered insights into the past and present of the research field and provided ideas in which direction it could develop in the future. The findings of this study could also raise awareness among leadership practitioners that empathy is not only inherent to what is labeled as empathetic or compassionate leadership, but can also contribute to humanizing various leadership approaches.

Ethics declaration: Ethical clearance was not required for the research.

AI declaration: AI tools were not used in the creation of the paper.

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