

Dynamics of Social Welfare, Disparity, and Distributive Equity.

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Abstract

This study provides a global synthesis of scientific production examining the structural intersections between social welfare, economic inequality, and distributive justice. Analyzing a corpus of 1,704 peer-reviewed articles indexed in the Scopus database from 1979 to 2026, we track the intellectual trajectory, macro-structural metrics, and thematic consolidation of this multidisciplinary domain. The literature exhibits strong growth at an annual rate of 12.46%, driven by extensive international co-authorship networks anchored primarily in Anglo-American institutions and rapidly expanding Asian research centers. Theoretical paradigms have evolved from early operational models of resource allocation toward sophisticated, multi-dimensional frameworks integrating empirical health equity, quality of life indicators, and computational modeling. This synthesis clarifies the structural evolution of welfare economics and offers key policy insights into sustainable social governance.

Keywords: Social welfare, Economic inequality, Distributive justice, Equity, Quality of life, Public policy

Introduction

Addressing structural inequalities while fostering collective social welfare remains a paramount challenge for contemporary governance and political economy. Over the past four decades, scholarly inquiry has increasingly sought to align normative concepts of equity and distributive fairness with empirical evaluations of quality of life and human well-being.

This paper investigates the intellectual architecture and dynamic evolution of global research situated at the nexus of social welfare, economic disparity, and distributive justice. It provides a comprehensive assessment of how knowledge in this multidisciplinary domain has been generated, structured, and disseminated over time.

The primary objective of this research is to evaluate the historical trajectory, structural metrics, and thematic consolidation of this scientific production across a 47-year horizon (1979–2026). By mapping performance metrics, national productivity patterns, and emerging computational paradigms, the study clarifies the structural evolution of welfare economics and offers key policy insights into sustainable social governance.

Methodologically, the study adopts a post-positivist epistemological stance anchored in a combined deductive-inductive reasoning logic. While established theoretical pillars of distributive justice guide the search parameters, computational science mapping techniques allow novel thematic clusters and algorithmic paradigms to emerge organically from the empirical Scopus dataset.

To achieve these aims, the article is structured into complementary sections. Following this introduction, Section 1 presents the theoretical foundations. Sections 2 and 3 describe the bibliographic data extraction parameters and computational mapping methods. Section 4 through Section 8 detail the empirical findings, network visualizations, and keyword co-occurrence maps, while the final sections discuss policy implications and avenues for future research.

1. Theoretical Foundations

1.1 Normative Theories of Distributive Justice

The conceptual anchor of social welfare research relies on normative theories of distributive fairness and equity. Philosophical formulations of justice as fairness emphasize institutional arrangements that protect basic liberties while prioritizing the welfare of disadvantaged populations (Rawls, 1971). Extending this framework to economic systems, ethical inquiries interrogate how public policy mechanisms balance market efficiency with egalitarian resource allocation (Sen, 1999; Sen, 2009). These foundational principles establish that societal economic progress cannot be evaluated solely through aggregate output, but must account for the moral distribution of resources and opportunities across demographic groups (Nussbaum, 2011; Atkinson, 2015).

1.2. Welfare Economics and Quality of Life Frameworks

Modern welfare economics has shifted from traditional utility-maximization metrics toward holistic quality of life and multi-dimensional well-being indicators. Early economic models focused heavily on monetary metrics, yet contemporary frameworks incorporate subjective well-being, capabilities, and multidimensional deprivation indices (Stiglitz et al., 2009; Fleurbaey, 2009). Scholars demonstrate that socio-economic security, personal safety, and social cohesion represent indispensable components of human welfare (Allardt, 1993; Oishi et al., 2011). Consequently, empirical evaluations of social programs increasingly deploy non-monetary outcome measures to assess the operational success of state interventions (Dasgupta, 2008).

1.3. Life-Course Disparities and Structural Inequalities

The persistence of social and economic inequality is increasingly examined through life-course trajectories and structural accumulation models. Cumulative disadvantage theory illustrates how initial socioeconomic vulnerabilities compound across individual lifespans, generating severe disparities in health, wealth, and social mobility over time (Ferraro & Shippee, 2009). Empirical investigations further confirm that early childhood environments, systemic discrimination, and unequal access to quality education continuously constrain long-term human well-being and life chances (Ainscow, 2020; Rosenthal, 2016).

Addressing these deeply entrenched disparities requires robust theoretical models capable of bridging individual experiences with broader systemic structures. In particular, effective frameworks must connect micro-level individual outcomes with macro-level institutional

arrangements and spatial accessibility dynamics (Weiss et al., 2018). By integrating individual life trajectories into these larger structural arrangements, researchers can better analyze how intergenerational disadvantage is continuously reproduced across diverse socio-economic environments.

1.4. Public Policy, Institutional Governance, and Health Equity

Translating theoretical distributive justice into actionable policy requires robust public administration and targeted welfare programs. In health policy and public administration, distributive equity mandates structural mechanisms that prioritize vulnerable populations and eliminate systematic health status disparities (Williams, 1997; Daw et al., 2011). Institutional governance structures determine how fiscal resources, public goods, and social safety nets are distributed across regions and socio-demographic strata (Lederer et al., 2021). Thus, contemporary policy research emphasizes adaptive, equitable governance paradigms to mitigate systemic social risks (Campbell et al., 2021).

1. Data and Methods

2.1. Database Selection and Rationale

To capture the intellectual dynamics of social welfare, inequality, and justice literature, Scopus was selected as the primary bibliographic data source. Scopus provides broad, multidisciplinary coverage across economics, social sciences, public health, and humanities, ensuring comprehensive capture of high-impact peer-reviewed studies (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016).

2.2. Query Formulation and Search Strategy

The precise search query was constructed using Boolean operators to intersect three core theoretical domains: inequality, justice/fairness, and welfare/well-being. The exact string deployed was: TITLE-ABS-KEY((inequal* OR "income inequality" OR "economic inequality" OR "social inequality" OR "wealth inequality") AND ("social justice" OR "distributive justice" OR fairness OR equity) AND ("social welfare" OR wellbeing OR "well-being" OR "quality of life" OR "welfare economics")) AND DOCTYPE(ar) AND LANGUAGE(english).

2.3. Document Selection and Screening

The retrieval process yielded a total corpus of 1,704 document units published between 1979 and 2026. Data extraction was restricted strictly to peer-reviewed journal articles written in English to

guarantee high methodological rigour and analytical consistency across the dataset (Moher et al., 2009).

2.4. Analytical Tools and Software

Quantitative data extraction, structural mapping, and computational network analyses were performed using R-based computational environments (bibliometrix / Biblioshiny) alongside VOSviewer for network visualization.

2. Methodology

3.1. Data Source and Search Strategy

This study adopts a post-positivist epistemological stance, recognizing that while objective patterns in scientific knowledge production can be empirically measured, their quantitative synthesis requires critical contextual interpretation. Methodologically, the research relies on a combined inductive-deductive reasoning framework. Deductively, established theoretical pillars of distributive justice and welfare economics (e.g., Rawlsian equity, capability approaches) guide the initial formulation of search queries and categorization schemas. Inductively, dynamic computational techniques—including bibliometric science mapping, non-linear growth modeling, and network co-occurrence algorithms—allow novel thematic clusters, structural shifts, and emerging paradigms (such as machine learning integration) to emerge organically from the empirical data. This dual logic ensures methodological transparency while preserving theoretical rigor.

3.2. Data Source and Search Strategy

The study utilizes the Scopus indexed database to establish an unskewed, multi-decade record of scholarly output. The search string targeted titles, abstracts, and keywords to identify contributions explicitly addressing the intersection of economic disparities, distributive equity, and welfare metrics (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017).

3.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Rigorous filtering parameters were applied during data acquisition. Inclusion was limited strictly to peer-reviewed scientific research articles (DOCTYPE(ar)) published in English (LANGUAGE(english)), while conference proceedings, book chapters, editorials, and non-English publications were excluded to maintain analytical quality (Donthu et al., 2021).

3.4. Data Processing and Refinement

Raw bibliographic records were imported and standardized. Missing metadata fields were verified, author keywords were cleaned and merged to eliminate synonymous variations, and institutional affiliations were harmonized to accurately record national scientific contributions (Cobos et al., 2015).

3.5. Analysis and Synthesis

The methodological framework combines performance analysis with structural network mapping. Analytical techniques encompass longitudinal growth modeling, corresponding author country distributions, citation impact calculations, keyword co-occurrence analysis, and Sankey three-field network visualizations (van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Chen, 2006).

3. Analysis and Overview

4.1. Macro-Structural Performance and Descriptive Metrics

The macro-structural metrics extracted from the Scopus database reveal a highly dynamic, collaborative, and rapidly expanding academic field consisting of 1,704 articles published between 1979 and 2026. Demonstrating an impressive annual growth rate of 12.46%, this domain reflects burgeoning global research interest supported by a diverse knowledge base spread across 990 distinct publishing sources. The field is characterized by strong collaborative practices, evidenced by an average of 4.06 co-authors per document, 6,235 unique authors, and a high proportion of international co-authorships standing at 28.29%, whereas single-authored publications account for only 19.5% of the total output.

Figure N°1: Summary Information



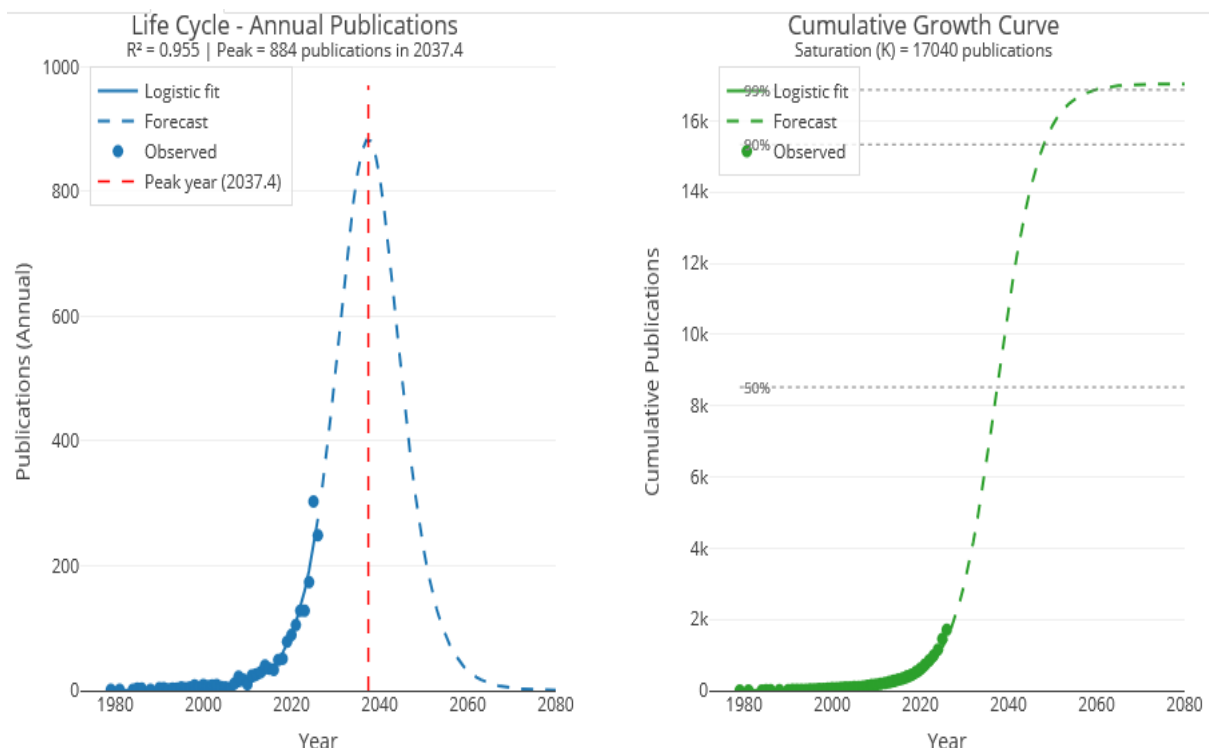
Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

In terms of scholarly impact and conceptual diversity, the corpus exhibits remarkable authority and thematic richness across its long-term evolutionary trajectory. With an average document age of 6.02 years, the literature achieves a robust citation footprint averaging 21.07 citations per article, signaling rapid knowledge integration and widespread academic recognition across social science disciplines. Furthermore, the presence of 4,678 author keywords and 5,246 Keywords Plus highlights an extraordinarily varied conceptual framework, reflecting complex sub-themes and multidisciplinary approaches. Overall, these foundational metrics demonstrate a highly influential, globally connected, and structurally mature research domain poised for deeper thematic and structural analysis.

4.2. Life Cycle of Scientific Production and Growth Dynamics

The historical evolution of scientific output within this corpus exhibits the classic features of an S-shaped logistic growth trajectory, confirming a highly active and rapidly accelerating research domain. Beginning with a prolonged emergence phase from the late 1980s through the early 2000s characterized by sporadic foundational contributions, the field transitioned into a robust expansion phase marked by steep annual growth in literature production. Non-linear modeling demonstrates an exceptional fit to the empirical publication data (R-squared of 0.9546 and Root Mean Square Error of 14.048), indicating that deterministic logistic dynamics accurately capture the underlying structural momentum of this intellectual field without exhibiting systematic deviations.

Figure N°2: Life Cycle of Scientific Production



Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

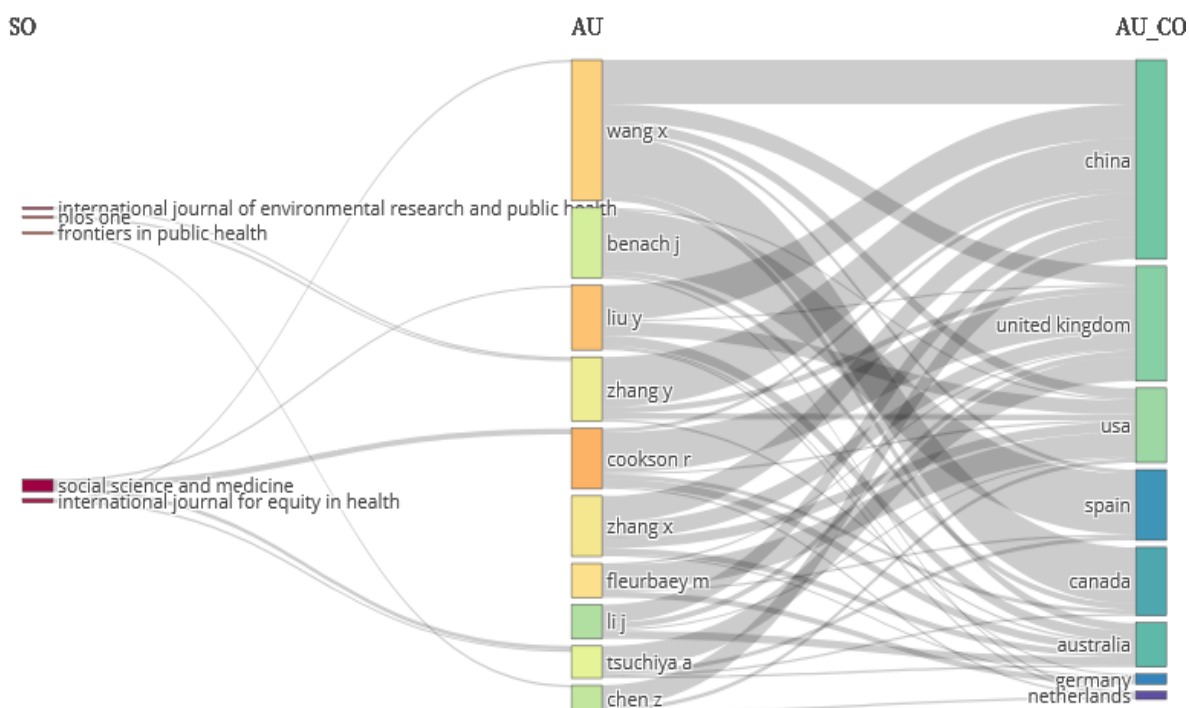
Parametric estimation reveals an intrinsic peak growth rate of approximately 18.9% per year, with a estimated duration parameter of 21.18 years governing the transition across the core growth cycle. The empirical model projects an inflection point in mid-2037 ($t_0 = 2037.4$), representing the precise year when annual scientific output will reach its maximum velocity before experiencing a gradual deceleration toward a long-term carrying capacity of 17,040 cumulative publications. Because current annual publication levels remain well below this projected inflection threshold, the domain is unequivocally positioned within a highly productive growth phase. This prolonged expansion reflects expanding interdisciplinary interest, increasing policy relevance, and sustained scholarly activity that will continue to yield substantial theoretical and empirical developments over the next decade.

4.3. Structural Mapping of the Intellectual Pipeline via Three-Field Plot

The structural mapping of the intellectual pipeline via a Sankey three-field plot reveals the tripartite relational network connecting dominant publication outlets, prolific authors, and institutional country affiliations. The network topology demonstrates a concentrated knowledge flow driven by

a prominent cluster of high-yield Chinese scholars, including Wang X, Zhang Y, Liu Y, Zhang X, Li J, and Chen Z. These researchers maintain strong structural linkages with open-access and multidisciplinary public health journals, specifically the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *PLOS ONE*, and *Frontiers in Public Health*, highlighting a significant Asian contribution to environmental, social, and population-level health equity research.

Figure N°3: Three-Field Plot



Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

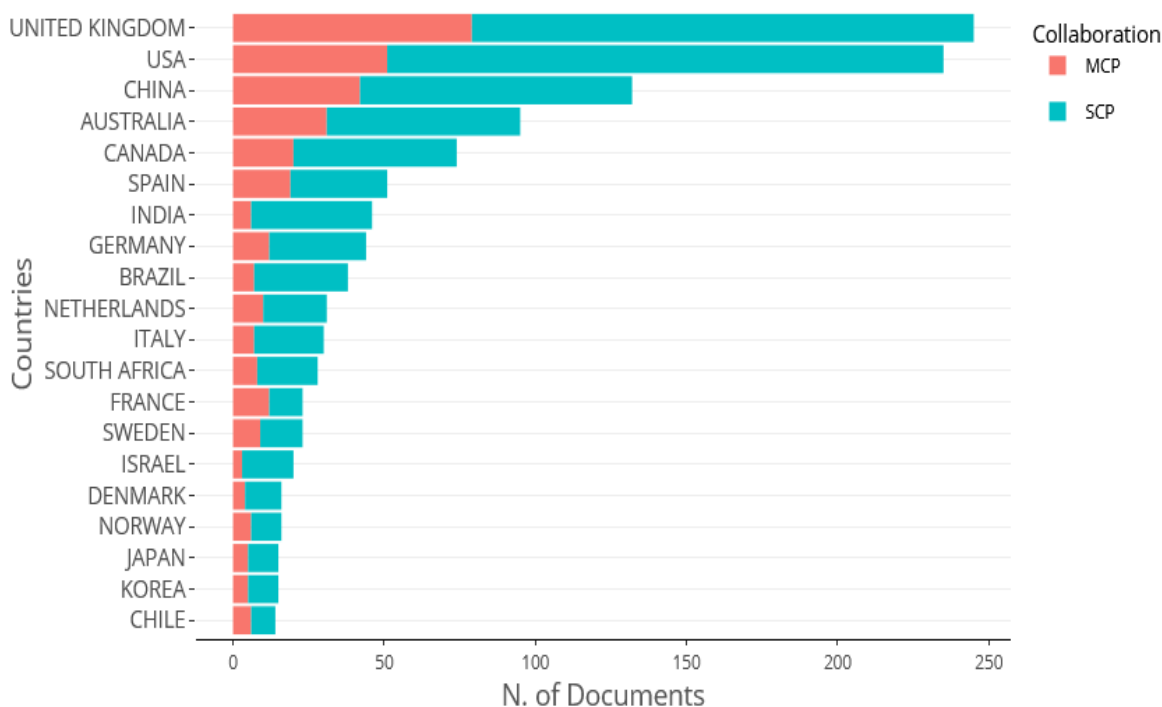
Concurrently, a distinct Western European and North American academic axis operates across traditional social science and health policy literature. Established scholars such as Cookson R (United Kingdom), Benach J (Spain), Fleurbaey M (United States and Canada), and Tsuchiya A (Germany and Netherlands) anchor this secondary cluster, directing their contributions toward high-impact specialized journals including *Social Science & Medicine* and the *International Journal for Equity in Health*. This structural bifurcation illustrates a clear geographical specialization within the intellectual pipeline, contrasting broad public health and environmental interventions led by Asian research hubs with foundational socio-economic, philosophical, and distributive justice frameworks advanced by Western institutions.

4. Bibliometric Analysis by Country

5.1. Corresponding Author Country Analysis

The corresponding author country distribution highlights Anglo-American academic dominance alongside significant European, Asian, and emerging Latin American participation. The United Kingdom leads total production with 245 articles (14.4%), characterized by a strong international collaboration rate (MCP ratio) of 32.2% with 79 multiple country publications, followed closely by the United States with 235 articles (13.8%) and a higher emphasis on single country output (184 SCP, 21.7% MCP). China ranks third with 132 articles (7.7%) and a substantial international collaboration rate of 31.8%, while Australia (95 articles, 32.6% MCP) and Canada (74 articles, 27.0% MCP) solidify the prominent standing of English-speaking nations in driving global research on social welfare, equity, and distributive justice.

Figure N°4: Affiliation Productivity Over Time



Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

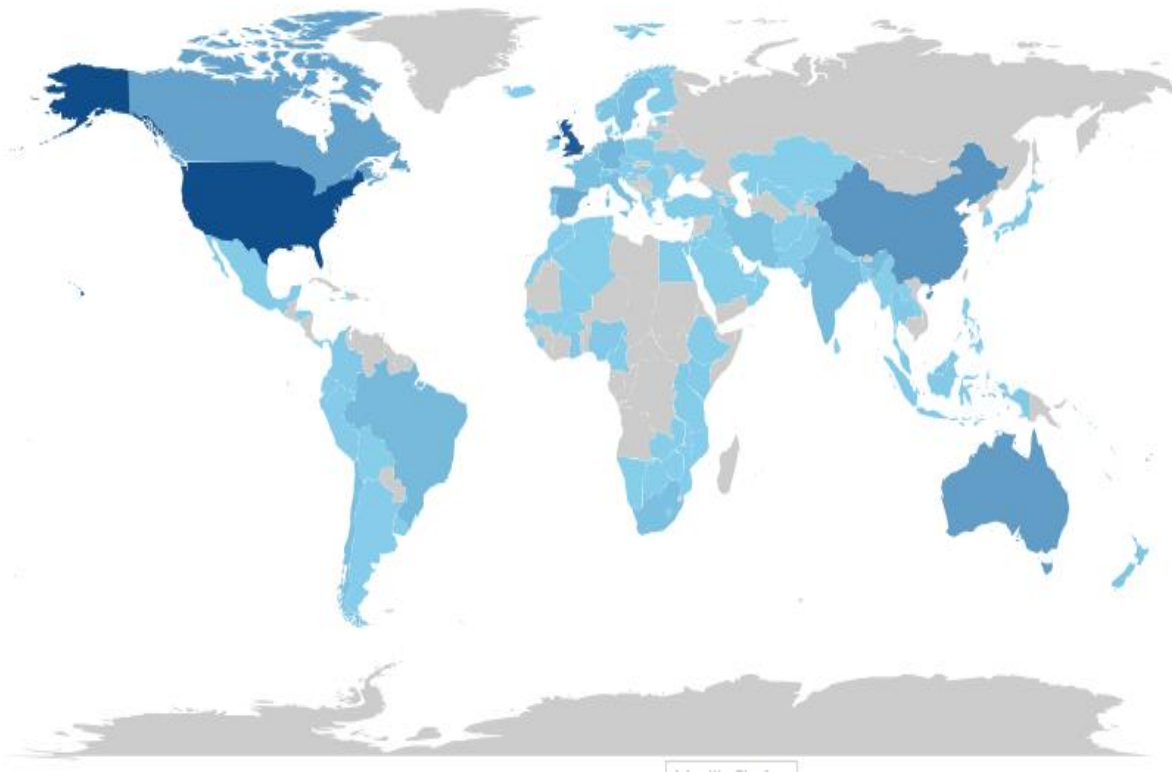
In Continental Europe and emerging research hubs, varied collaboration dynamics govern scientific output. Spain demonstrates the highest internationalization intensity among top producers with a 37.3% MCP ratio (19 out of 51 articles), followed by the Netherlands (32.3% MCP) and Germany (27.3% MCP). Conversely, emerging economies exhibit a predominantly domestic focus; India

produces 46 articles (2.7%) with a low international collaboration rate of 13.0%, and Brazil contributes 38 articles (2.2%) with an 18.4% MCP ratio. These metrics illustrate a dual-structure global research landscape: highly networked Western and East Asian academic systems driving cross-border knowledge co-creation, contrasted with large developing nations focusing primarily on localized research agendas.

5.2. Scientific Output Analysis by Country

An analysis of total scientific output by author country affiliation reinforces the global leadership of Anglo-American institutions, with the United States generating 909 total publication occurrences and the United Kingdom accounting for 819. China secures the third position with 382 occurrences, reflecting its substantial scientific expansion and active contribution to global debates on welfare economics, social justice, and equity. Commonwealth nations maintain high levels of scholarly production, led by Australia with 328 occurrences and Canada with 292, confirming the persistent influence of English-speaking academic networks in shaping the intellectual contours of this domain.

Figure N°5: Scientific Output by Country



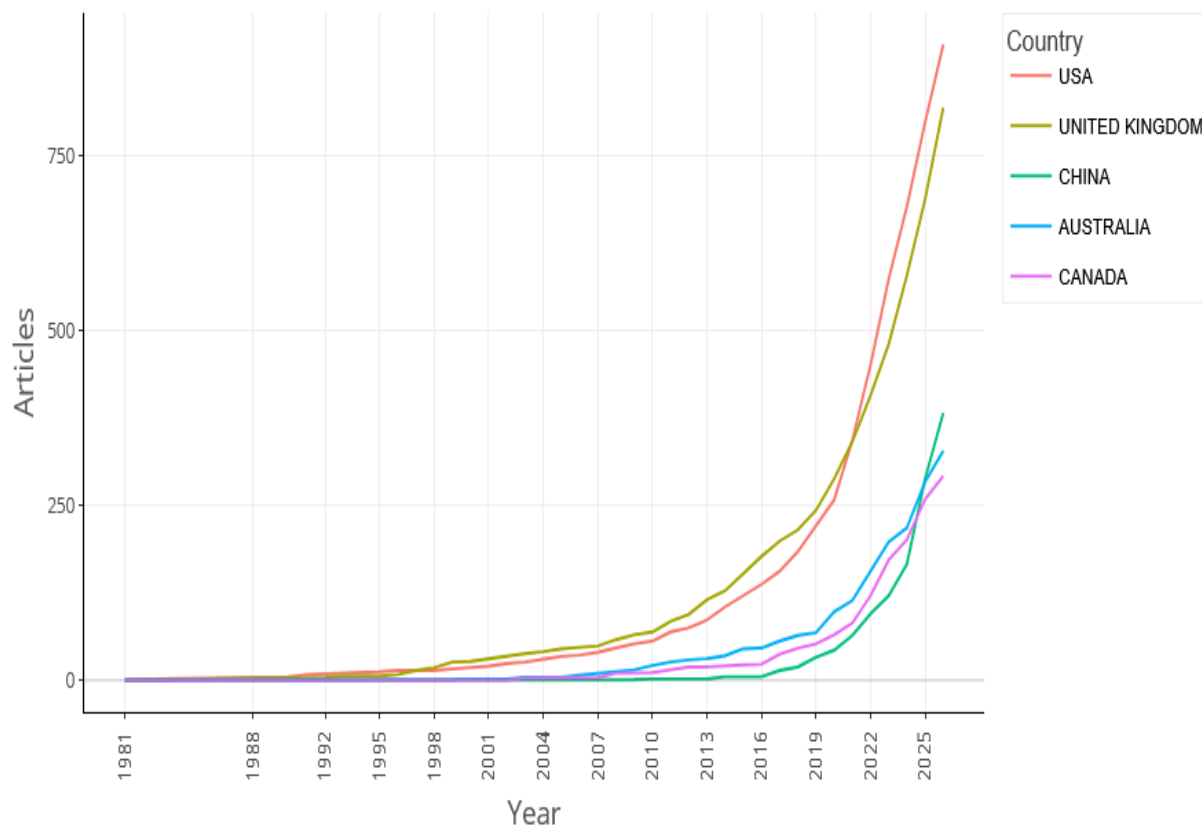
Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

European and major emerging economies constitute the remaining core of global scientific output in this research field. Continental Europe is represented by Spain (231 occurrences), Germany (146 occurrences), and the Netherlands (115 occurrences), demonstrating sustained academic engagement with distributive justice and social welfare policies across European research centers. Among key emerging economies, Brazil (136 occurrences) and India (118 occurrences) show considerable research activity, highlighting the growing analytical focus on social inequalities, economic fairness, and quality of life indicators within the Global South.

1. 5.3. Longitudinal Analysis of National Scientific Production

The longitudinal trajectory of national scientific production illustrates a clear evolution from early Anglo-American dominance toward a rapidly diversifying, highly globalized research landscape. In the initial emergence phase spanning the 1980s and 1990s, the United States and the United Kingdom anchored the intellectual domain, establishing steady baseline growth while major nations like Australia, Canada, and China recorded negligible contribution levels. From the mid-2000s onward, both the USA and the UK entered an exponential growth trajectory, expanding from 30 and 41 publications in 2004 to cumulative totals of 909 and 819 articles by 2026, respectively, reflecting sustained systemic investment in research on social welfare, economic inequality, and distributive justice.

Figure N°6: Countries' Production over Time



Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

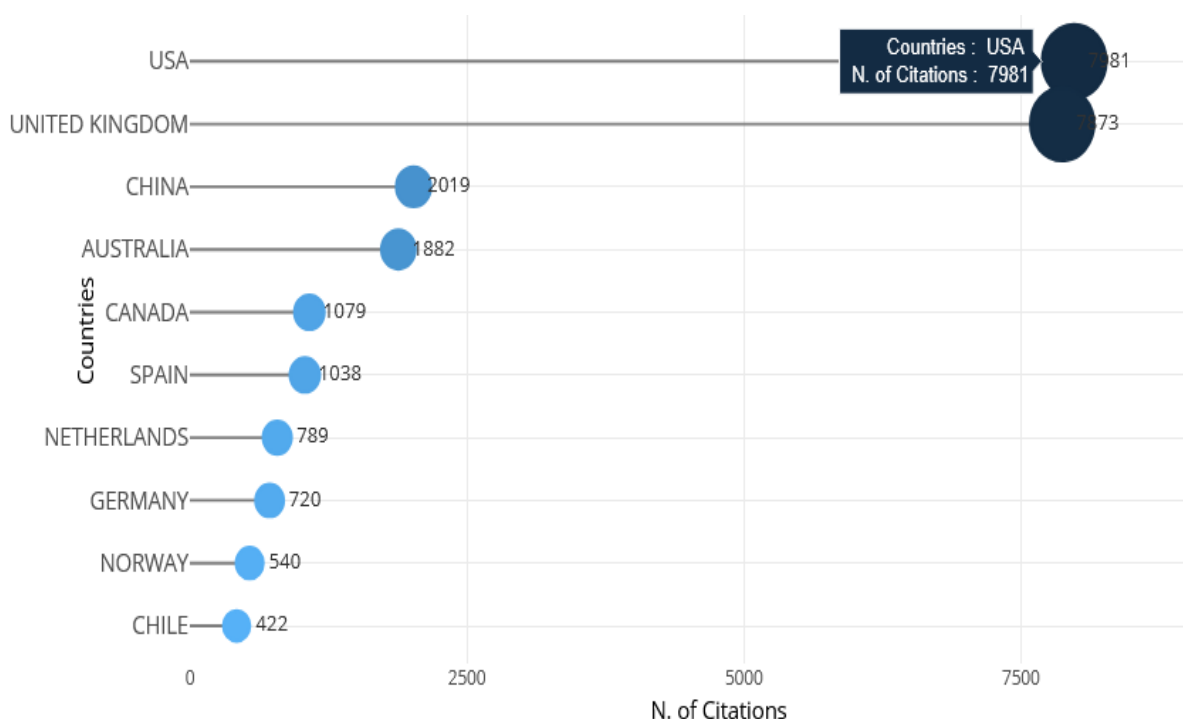
Concurrently, the rapid late-stage acceleration of Chinese scientific output marks a structural realignment in global knowledge production within this discipline. Appearing in the database only in 2007 with a single article, China maintained minimal volume until a sharp inflection point occurred around 2017, surging from 14 publications that year to 382 by 2026 and outpacing established research hubs like Australia (328) and Canada (292). Australia and Canada experienced steady, parallel growth trajectories throughout the 2010s and 2020s, yet China's steep upward trajectory represents the most dynamic expansion phase among major nations, underscoring the growing influence of Asian institutions in shaping contemporary scholarly discourses on equity and social justice.

5.4. Citation Impact and Academic Influence by Country

National citation performance reveals distinct patterns of academic influence and research footprint across major contributing nations. The United States and the United Kingdom lead total citation counts by a substantial margin, accumulating 7,981 and 7,873 citations respectively, while

maintaining exceptionally high average document impact metrics of 34.00 and 32.10 citations per article. Highly cited contributions are also evident in smaller or mid-sized European and Latin American academic systems; Norway achieves an average citation impact of 33.80 per document (540 total citations), Chile records 30.10 citations per article (422 total citations), and the Netherlands generates 25.50 citations per article (789 total citations), highlighting the substantial global resonance of their focused scholarly output.

Figure N°7: Most Cited Countries



Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

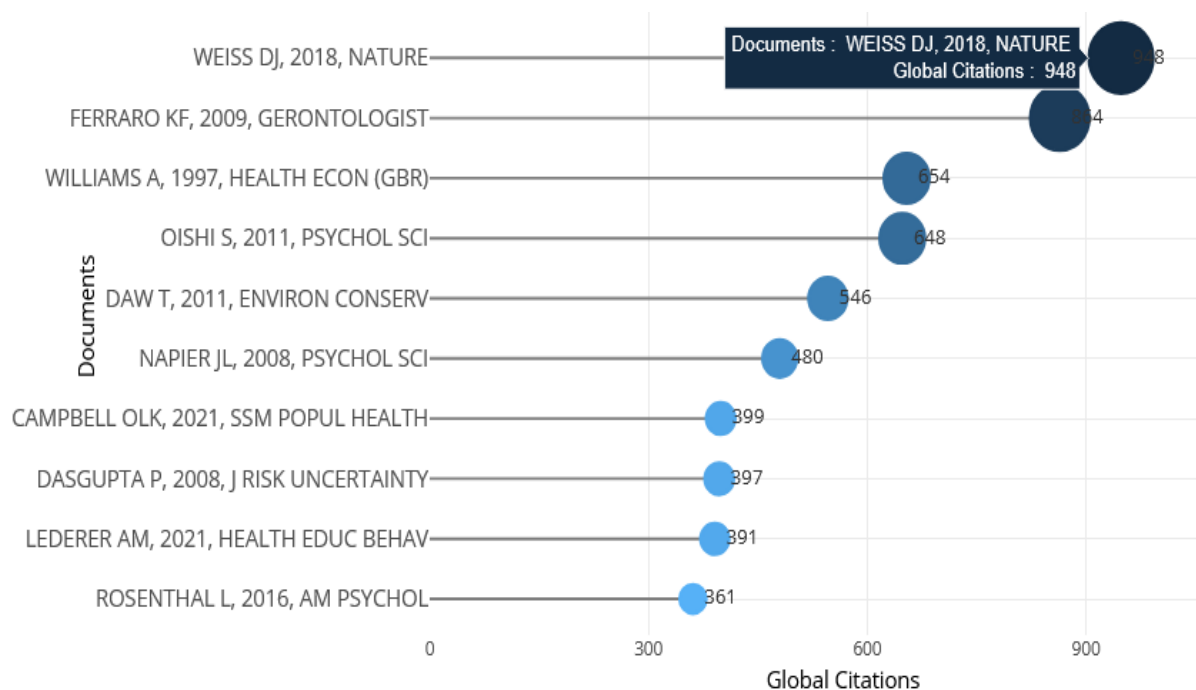
In contrast, nations with large publication volumes demonstrate varying degrees of citation efficiency. Australia registers a strong influence with 1,882 total citations and an average of 19.80 citations per document, followed by Spain with 1,038 total citations (20.40 average impact). Meanwhile, China, despite its rapid expansion in publication volume, registers 2,019 total citations with an average impact of 15.30 per article, closely mirroring Canada (1,079 total citations; 14.60 average impact) and Germany (720 total citations; 16.40 average impact). These metrics underline a clear distinction between volume-driven output and high-density citation influence, where Anglo-American hubs and specialized European nations continue to command the highest rates of academic recognition in social welfare and equity studies.

6. Document-Level Bibliometric Analysis

6.1. Analysis of Most Globally Cited Documents and Intellectual Core

An analysis of global citation counts highlights the seminal papers that form the intellectual core of this research domain, led by Weiss DJ et al. (2018, *Nature*) with 948 total citations and an exceptional annual impact of 105.30 citations per year. Major foundational contributions in life-course inequalities, healthcare economics, and subjective well-being are established by Ferraro KF (2009, *Gerontologist*, 864 citations), Williams A (1997, *Health Economics*, 654 citations), and Oishi S et al. (2011, *Psychological Science*, 648 citations), alongside socio-ecological and ethical frameworks advanced by Daw T et al. (2011, *Environmental Conservation*, 546 citations) and Napier JL et al. (2008, *Psychological Science*, 480 citations).

Figure N°8: Most Global Cited Documents



Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

Recent contributions demonstrate high citation velocity and immediate scientific influence, particularly in public health and systemic well-being. Campbell OLK et al. (2021, *SSM - Population Health*) and Lederer AM et al. (2021, *Health Education & Behavior*) accumulate 399 and 391 total citations with normalized citation rates above 12, reflecting strong current relevance. Coupled with interdisciplinary perspectives on economic risk, social ethics, and institutional stigma

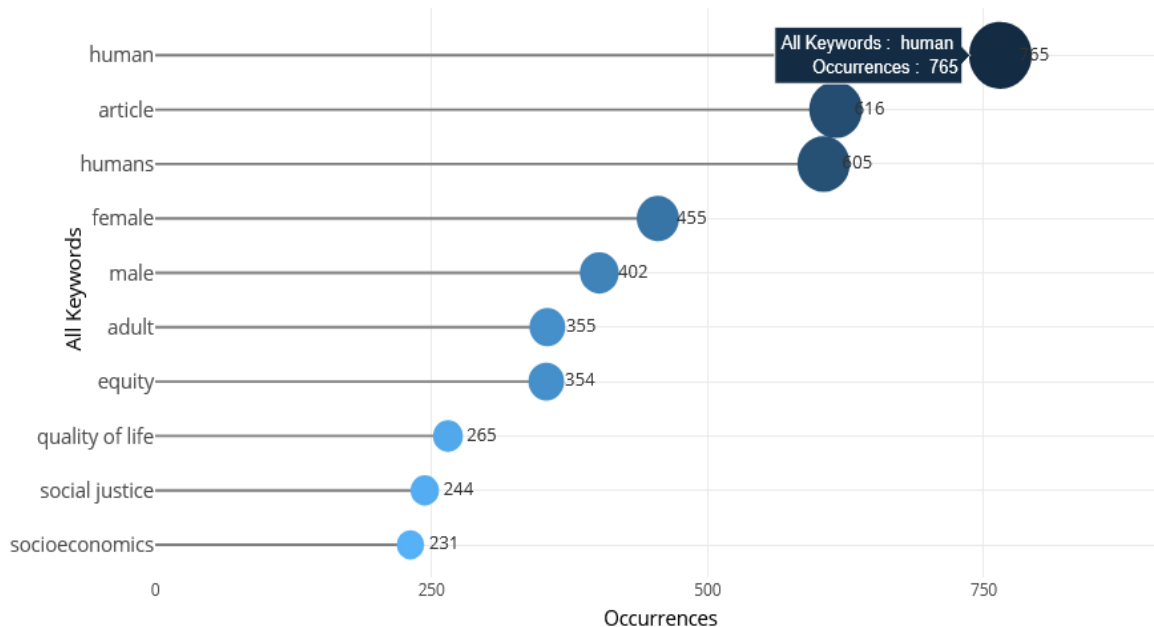
provided by Dasgupta P (2008, *Journal of Risk and Uncertainty*, 397 citations) and Rosenthal L (2016, *American Psychologist*, 361 citations), these core documents illustrate how multi-faceted economic, psychological, and environmental perspectives unite to structure contemporary social welfare and equity literature.

7. Bibliometric Analysis by Keywords

7.1. Lexical Density and Most Frequent Keywords

The lexical density and keyword frequency metrics reflect a strong empirical focus on demographic, socio-economic, and distributive dimensions within the analyzed literature. Methodological descriptors and demographic identifiers dominate the top positions, led by "human" with 765 occurrences, "article" with 616 occurrences, and "humans" with 605 occurrences. The frequent representation of demographic variables—evidenced by "female" (455 occurrences), "male" (402 occurrences), and "adult" (355 occurrences)—underscores the primacy of disaggregated, empirical analysis across gender and age cohorts in evaluating economic, health, and structural inequalities.

Figure N°9: Most Frequent Words.



Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

Beyond demographic indicators, the core conceptual and theoretical dimensions of the domain are captured by prominent thematic keywords. "Equity" serves as the primary conceptual pillar with 354 occurrences, followed closely by multidimensional outcome measures such as "quality of life"

(265 occurrences) and normative policy frameworks like "social justice" (244 occurrences). Furthermore, "socioeconomics" (231 occurrences) grounds these normative and evaluative concepts in structural economic analysis. Together, these high-frequency terms illustrate a research tradition that integrates empirical demographic profiling with theoretical constructs of distributive fairness, social welfare, and individual well-being.

7.2. Conceptual Mapping and Word Cloud Topography

Conceptual mapping and word cloud topography illustrate the intellectual landscape where core theoretical themes intersect with empirical population parameters. Dominant clusters centered on "human" (765 occurrences), "humans" (605 occurrences), and "article" (616 occurrences) form the structural backbone of the research corpus, highlighting a robust, empirical literature grounded in observational and field-based studies. The substantial presence of demographic terms such as "female" (455 occurrences), "male" (402 occurrences), and "adult" (355 occurrences) reveals that scholarly inquiry consistently evaluates policy interventions and welfare outcomes through disaggregated population lenses.

Figure N°10: WordCloud



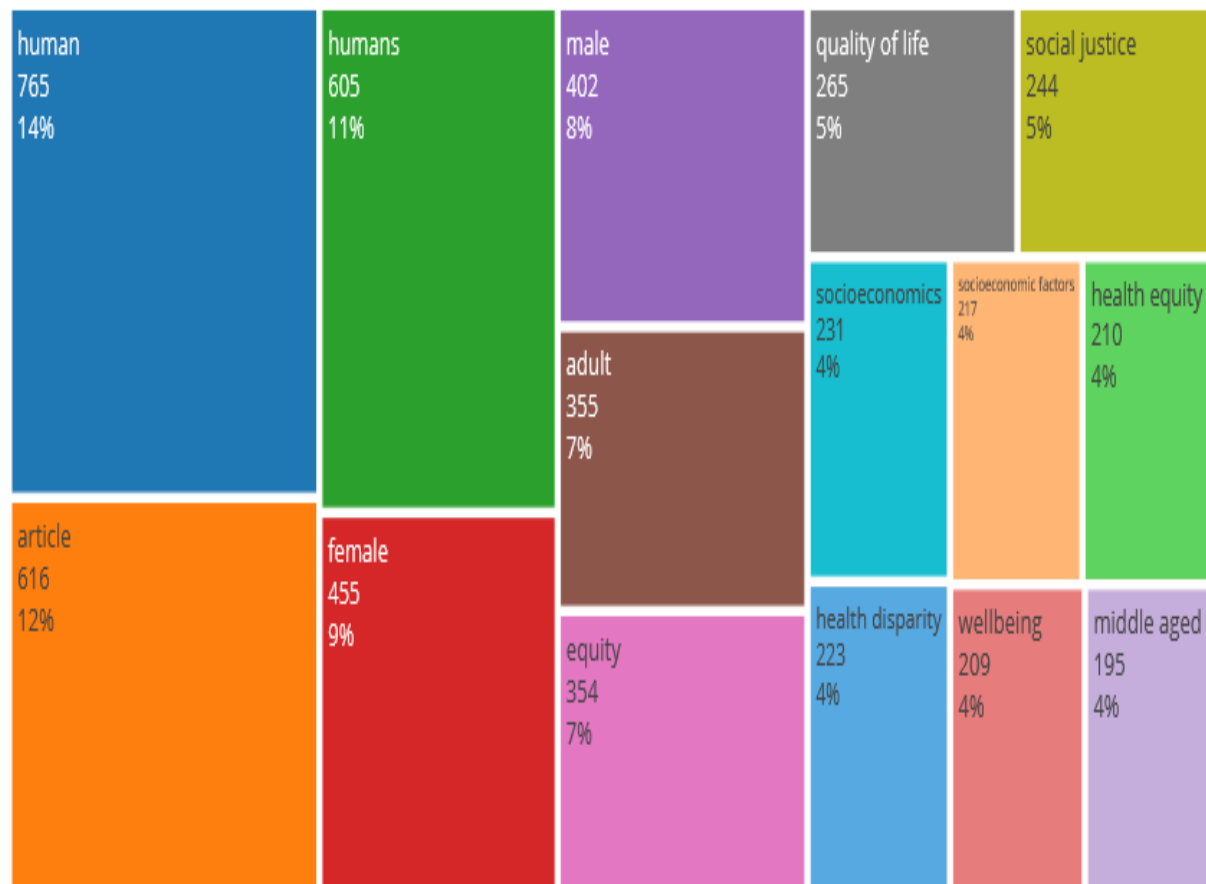
Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

Surrounding these demographic foundations, key conceptual constructs define the normative and analytical focus of the field. "Equity" (354 occurrences) anchors the word cloud topography as the central evaluative benchmark, closely flanked by "quality of life" (265 occurrences) and "social justice" (244 occurrences), which represent primary well-being indicators and socio-political objectives. Furthermore, "socioeconomics" (231 occurrences) acts as a bridging concept, linking micro-level human health and quality-of-life outcomes to macro-level structural disparities and distributive economic mechanisms.

7.3. TreeMap Analysis

TreeMap analysis provides a hierarchical visual breakdown of the lexical proportions and thematic concentration within the research database. Methodological and demographic terms occupy the largest structural blocks, led by general population descriptors such as "human" (765 occurrences) and "humans" (605 occurrences), alongside publication markers like "article" (616 occurrences). Substantial proportions are also allocated to gender and age classifications, represented by "female" (455 occurrences), "male" (402 occurrences), and "adult" (355 occurrences), demonstrating that empirical segregation by population subgroup forms a major foundational partition of the literature.

Figure N°11: WordCloud



Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

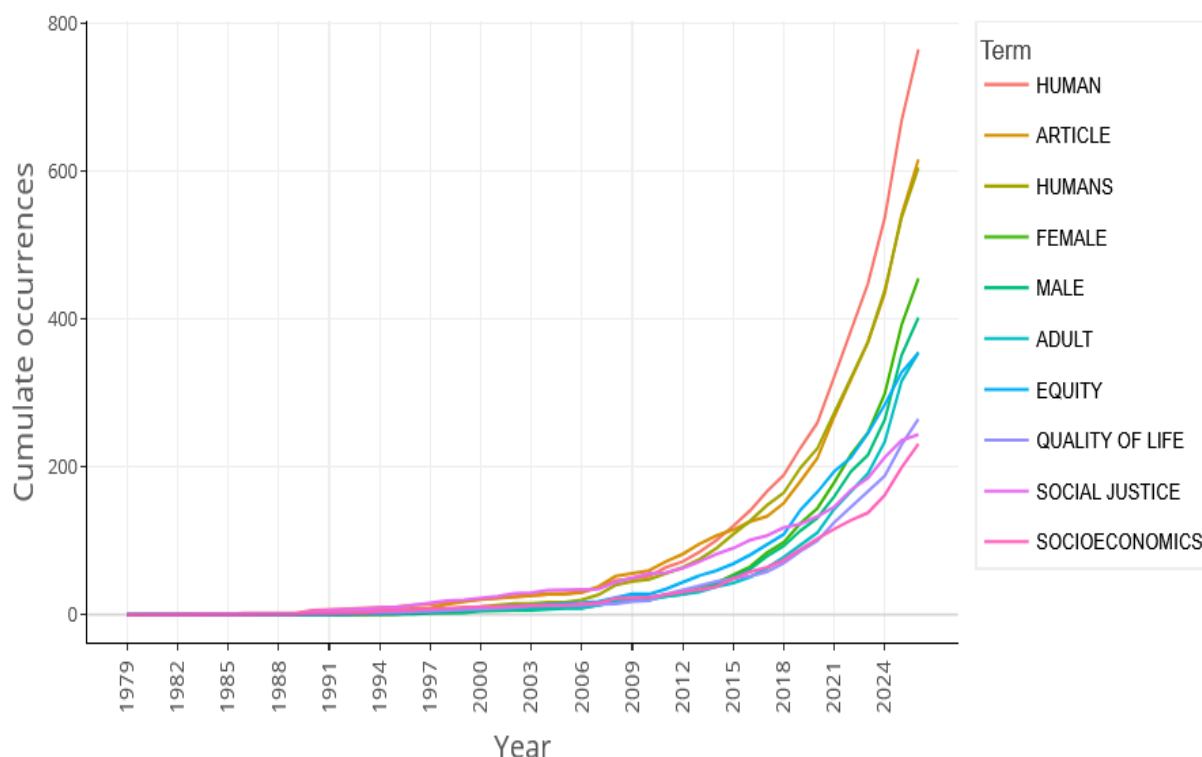
Within the thematic and normative blocks of the TreeMap, conceptual keywords occupy critical analytical space. "Equity" (354 occurrences) represents the primary conceptual tile, reflecting its dominant role across social welfare and policy evaluations. Adjacent tiles dedicated to outcome metrics and ethical frameworks are anchored by "quality of life" (265 occurrences) and "social justice" (244 occurrences), while structural economic dimensions are captured by "socioeconomics" (231 occurrences). This hierarchical distribution confirms that the literature systematically balances broad demographic categorization with normative frameworks of fairness, distributive justice, and economic well-being.

7.4. Longitudinal Word Frequency and Evolutionary Trajectories

The longitudinal tracking of keyword frequencies from 1979 to 2026 demonstrates the structural maturation and exponential expansion of scholarly production across social welfare, equity, and distributive justice research. In the initial emergence phase spanning 1979 through the late 1990s,

keyword accumulation remained modest and highly sporadic, with foundational constructs like "equity" and "social justice" appearing in single-digit frequencies (e.g., "equity" reaching just 9 occurrences and "social justice" reaching 22 occurrences by the year 2000). A distinct inflection occurred around 2008–2010, initiating a sustained growth phase wherein normative theoretical concepts began integrating rapidly with empirical demographic parameters across global social science literature.

Figure N°12: Keyword Frequency Over Time



Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

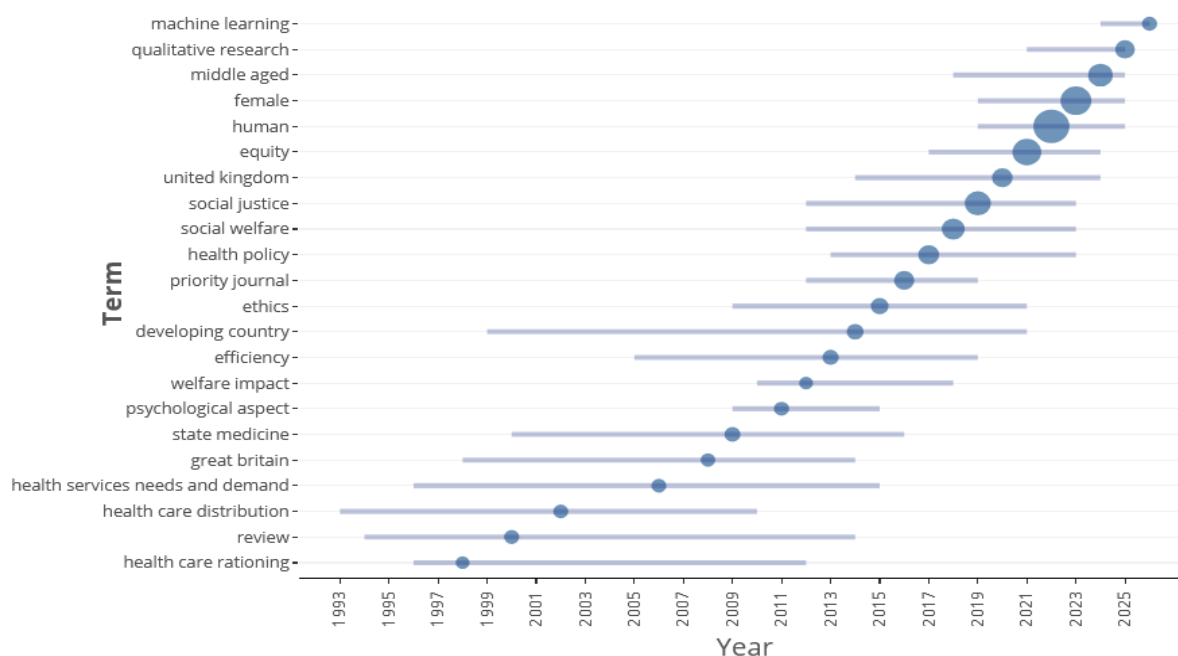
From 2015 to 2026, the dataset experienced hyper-exponential growth across all primary descriptors, reflecting intense scientific mobilization around structural inequalities and human well-being. Empirical demographic classifications surged dramatically, with "human" expanding from 120 occurrences in 2015 to 765 in 2026, alongside sharp rises in gender-specific markers such as "female" (54 to 455) and "male" (51 to 402), confirming a disciplined academic transition toward micro-level, disaggregated quantitative analyses. Concurrently, core evaluative frameworks scaled into dominant research pillars, as "equity" rose from 69 to 354 occurrences, "quality of life" grew from 49 to 265, and "socioeconomics" advanced from 49 to 231. This long-term evolutionary

trajectory highlights a shifting intellectual paradigm—transitioning from isolated conceptual discussions in the late 20th century to a highly sophisticated, data-driven, and demographically nuanced body of modern literature.

7.5. Emerging Frontiers and Thematic Evolution

The thematic evolution of the research landscape illustrates a profound transition from micro-level institutional concerns to macro-level social imperatives and advanced computational frameworks. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, scholarly production was primarily anchored in structural healthcare administration, focusing on foundational mechanics such as resource rationing, healthcare distribution, and baseline service demand. Throughout the 2010s, this operational focus expanded into systemic determinants of well-being, incorporating ethical governance, global development disparities, and policy evaluation. This mid-period maturation established the conceptual bridge between institutional resource allocation and broad socio-economic equity.

Figure N°13: Trending Topics



Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

In recent years, the intellectual frontier has shifted decisively toward human-centric social justice and cutting-edge technological integration. Contemporary literature is heavily dominated by high-frequency constructs including equity, social welfare, and disaggregated demographic analyses targeting specific population cohorts. Most notably, the rapid emergence of machine learning and

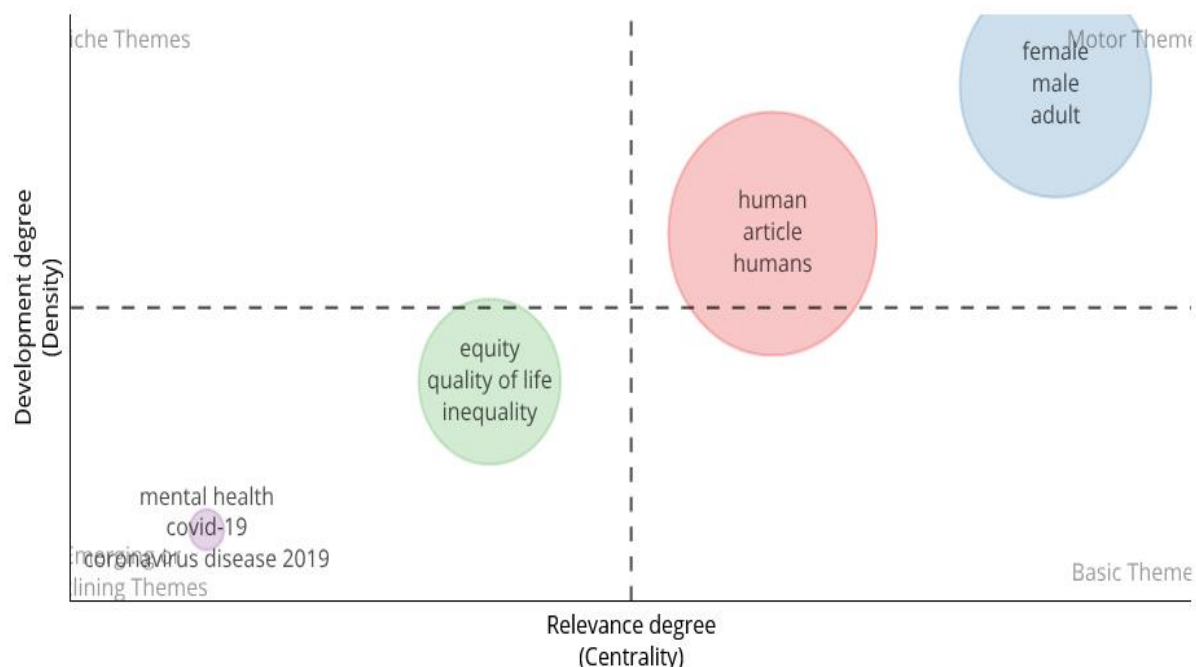
artificial intelligence between 2024 and 2025 represents the single largest trend spike across the entire temporal series. This computational turn signifies a major paradigm shift, where quantitative machine learning algorithms and advanced predictive modeling are increasingly deployed to analyze complex structural inequalities, optimize distributive justice mechanisms, and inform evidence-based social policy.

8. Network Approach

8.1. Strategic Mapping and Thematic Coherence

Strategic mapping and thematic coherence metrics reveal the structural network centrality of core concepts within Cluster 1, anchored by "human" (765 occurrences) and "article" (616 occurrences). Network centrality measures highlight high betweenness values for major policy constructs such as "health status disparities" (10.853), "social welfare" (9.560), and "public health" (6.113), alongside "social justice" (5.802). These metrics demonstrate that normative welfare concepts and health disparity frameworks function as critical intellectual bridges, connecting empirical population data to broader socioeconomic policy discussions across the literature.

Figure N°14: Thematic Map



Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

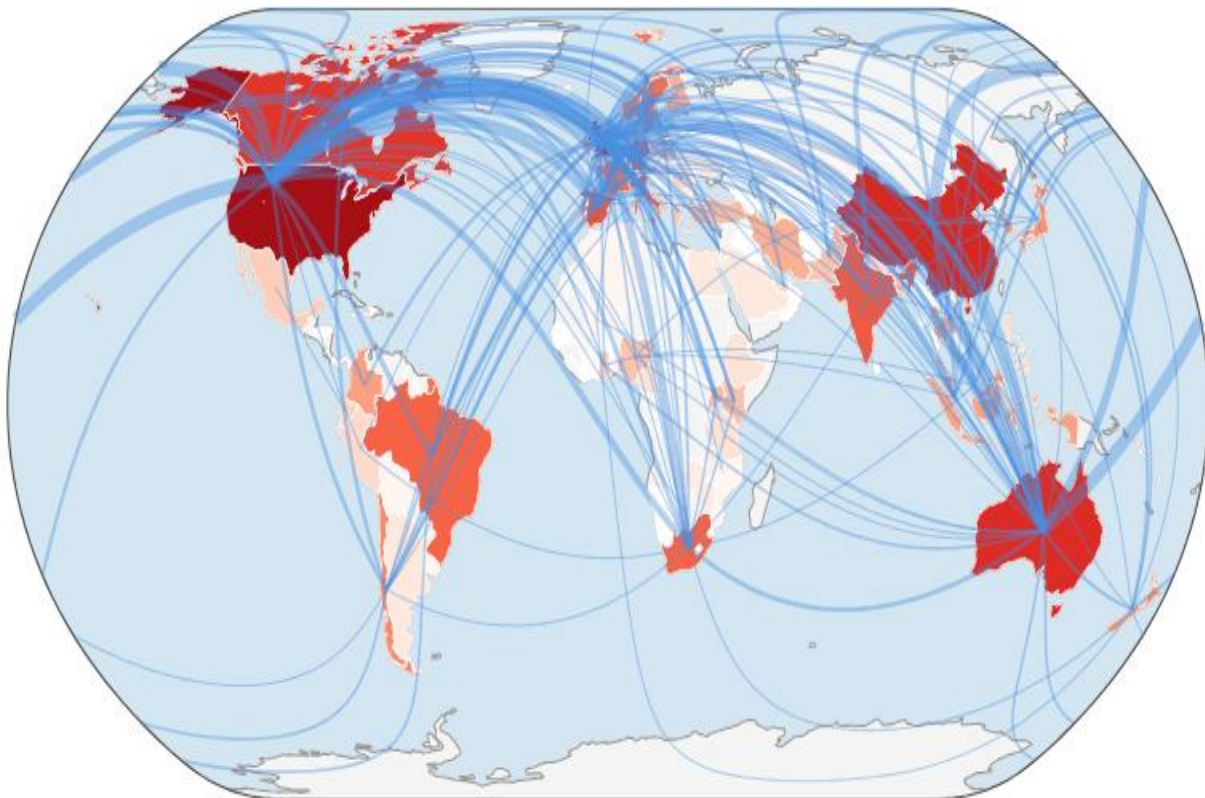
Additional core concepts within the network, including "health equity" (210 occurrences; betweenness 2.709), "wellbeing" (209 occurrences; betweenness 2.593), and "health disparity"

(223 occurrences; betweenness 0.452), maintain strong cohesion and closeness parameters (ranging from 0.008 to 0.014). This internal structural alignment demonstrates that public health interventions, subjective well-being measures, and distributive fairness serve as the conceptual core of Cluster 1. Consequently, these interconnected terms form a stable analytical matrix that links micro-level empirical findings on population health directly to macro-level institutional policy evaluation.

Countries' Collaboration World Map

The global collaboration world map illustrates a highly interconnected, multipolar scientific network anchored by traditional academic powerhouses and rapidly expanding emerging hubs. The United States functions as the central global nexus, maintaining extensive cross-border co-authorship ties with Canada, Western Europe, Australia, and key Asian nations. Concurrently, a dense intra-European research network—led by the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Spain, and the Netherlands—reflects deep regional scientific integration, while trans-Commonwealth linkages continue to foster robust collaboration among the UK, Canada, Australia, India, and South Africa.

Figure N°15: World map of countries collaboration



Source: Generated by the author(s) using R-Bibliometrix software based on Scopus data

Emerging research systems in the Global South and East Asia exhibit distinct integration dynamics within this global landscape. China and India anchor a significant Asian collaborative axis, establishing strong co-authorship channels with North American and European institutions while expanding regional partnerships across Asia-Pacific networks. In South America and Africa, Brazil and South Africa serve as primary continental gateways, driving regional knowledge exchange and connecting local research agendas to global scientific networks. Despite persistent structural disparities in connectivity across lower-income regions, these collaboration patterns confirm a small-world network architecture that bridges geographical divides to advance international research on social welfare, equity, and distributive justice.

Discussion

The structural analysis of the 1,704 Scopus documents reveals a profound trajectory from isolated philosophical deliberations toward a data-rich, interdisciplinary research domain. Early academic contributions focused predominantly on operational healthcare allocation and normative principles of distributive justice. Over time, the scope expanded to encompass broader socioeconomic determinants, lifetime accumulation of advantage, and multi-dimensional health equity.

Global distribution metrics confirm a persistent concentration of scientific production within Western institutions, led by the United States and the United Kingdom. However, the rapid acceleration of output from Asian research centers, particularly China, underscores an important geographic realignment in global knowledge creation. This shifting landscape fosters broader cross-border collaborations while introducing distinct regional policy perspectives into the literature.

Methodologically, the field has transitioned toward disaggregated, empirical evaluations of specific demographic cohorts. High keyword frequencies for terms such as female, adult, and socioeconomics indicate that modern scholarship prioritizes nuanced analyses of structural disparities across gender, age, and economic brackets. This empirical rigor bridges theoretical models of distributive justice with concrete empirical outcomes.

Furthermore, the thematic evolution underscores an emerging computational turn within social welfare research. The rapid spike in machine learning and algorithmic modeling observed in recent years reflects a shift toward advanced predictive analytics. Researchers are increasingly deploying

complex computational tools to evaluate social safety nets, model economic mobility, and optimize resource distribution.

Despite these advancements, persistent challenges remain regarding global research equity and policy translation. While international co-authorship networks have expanded, developing economies in the Global South remain relatively underrepresented in top-tier literature. Bridging these geographic and institutional gaps is essential for constructing universal, context-sensitive frameworks of social welfare.

Conclusion

This study offers a systematic synthesis of scientific production examining social welfare, economic inequality, and distributive justice across a 47-year time horizon. By analyzing 1,704 peer-reviewed articles, the investigation maps the intellectual maturation of a discipline that has grown at a robust annual rate of 12.46%. The findings demonstrate a vibrant, collaborative, and highly influential body of literature.

The theoretical trajectory of the field highlights a successful integration of normative ethics with rigorous empirical methodologies. Theoretical foundations established by seminal economic and social theories now inform complex life-course and health equity research. This structural alignment allows scholars to address both the philosophical imperatives of justice and the practical realities of resource constraints.

Geographically, the domain exhibits a multi-polar expansion anchored by traditional Anglo-American powerhouses alongside rapidly growing research hubs in Asia and Europe. High rates of international collaboration reflect a global recognition that structural inequality and social welfare represent shared international challenges requiring cross-border scholarly cooperation and collective knowledge generation.

Looking forward, the integration of computational tools and predictive modeling represents a promising frontier for welfare economics and policy design. Machine learning techniques offer novel capabilities to analyze complex dataset interactions, identify systemic vulnerabilities, and evaluate policy interventions in real time. Scholars must leverage these technological advancements while maintaining a firm groundedness in ethical principles.

In conclusion, advancing social welfare and achieving distributive equity requires sustained interdisciplinary commitment, balanced geographic participation, and continuous translation of research into policy. Future scholarly efforts must focus on deepening empirical investigations in underrepresented regions while refining policy instruments to foster inclusive, resilient, and equitable societies worldwide.

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